

“Reception and Opposition”
(Acts 14:1-7)

I. Introduction.

A. Orientation.

1. Last time we considered the importance of perseverance in the work the Lord has given us to do as His church – His body.
 - a. Because there will be times when we feel like giving up:
 - (i) Like John Mark who abandoned Paul and Barnabas and returned to Jerusalem.
 - (ii) There will be times when we feel like throwing in the towel, when we feel like we’ve had enough opposition, enough hatred, enough of the enemy’s attacks, when we’ve carried enough of the battle.
 - b. But when that happens, there’s something we need to remember:
 - (i) Jesus told us that we shouldn’t expect anything different:
 - (a) “These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation” (John 16:33).
 - (b) Half the battle is being prepared: we need to know *that* we’re going to face opposition and where it’s going to come from.
 - (ii) But He also told us He would give us success: “But take courage; I have overcome the world” (John 6:33).
 - (a) We need to believe that He has fought the good fight and overcome for us.
 - (b) Remember what He endured: He lived the perfect life, spoke the truth, and yet was hated more than any other.
 - (c) He suffered far more than we ever will and *didn’t turn aside*.
 - (d) The author to the Hebrews tells us we should set our eyes on Him, knowing this will happen to us in some measure, and push forward.
2. We have this same example in the Book of Acts.
 - a. Consider Paul and Barnabas.
 - b. They didn’t have an easy road either, but they continued to persevere.
 - c. And because they persevered, they saw results:
 - (i) Yes, there were people who hated them.
 - (ii) The kingdom of darkness pushes back when the kingdom of light moves forward.
 - (iii) But there were also those by God’s grace whom the Spirit of God worked in to convict, convince and draw to Jesus, from both the Jews and Gentiles.
 - (iv) This is what made it all worth it.

B. Preview.

1. We see this perseverance again in our passage this evening:

- a. The persecution in Pisidian Antioch didn't slow their momentum.
 - (i) The Jews stirred up the prominent women and leading men against Paul and Barnabas who drove them out of that district.
 - (ii) But they didn't let that stop them – they continued to strive forward.
 - b. Next, they went to Iconium:
 - (i) Here they again entered the local synagogue and preached to the Jews and Gentiles.
 - (ii) God blessed their preaching so greatly that many were converted.
 - (iii) But right on the heels of that success, the enemy fought back: The Jews who didn't accept their message stirred the Gentiles up against them.
 - (iv) But Paul and Barnabas persevered; they trusted in the Lord, and the Lord blessed them:
 - (a) He gave them the power to speak boldly.
 - (b) And He granted many signs and wonders as a witness to His Word.
 - (c) They eventually had to run to Lystra and Derbe – but the Lord continued to bless His Word as they continued to preach.
2. What I would like for us to consider from this passage are two things:
- a. First, the reception of and the opposition to the Gospel in Iconium which reminds us that this happened wherever the apostles went.
 - b. But second – and in light of this morning's message – why Paul and Barnabas were willing to keep moving forward even though they met with opposition.

II. Sermon.

- A. First, Paul and Barnabas preached knowing there would be both reception and opposition.
 - 1. We see first that as they pressed forward, the Lord again blessed their labors with fruit. “In Iconium they entered the synagogue of the Jews together, and spoke in such a manner that a large number of people believed, both of Jews and of Greeks” (v. 1).
 - a. Iconium was the capital of ancient Lycaonia, a Roman province.
 - (i) They came there after being chased out of Pisidian Antioch.
 - (ii) The cities of Lystra and Derbe were also this province.
 - b. Again they entered the synagogue of that city – most likely on the Sabbath – and began to preach.
 - (i) They were again invited to preach, as they had been in Pisidian Antioch.
 - (ii) And again the Lord again blessed their efforts, giving them the power to preach the Word with boldness and great conviction.
 - (a) The Spirit accompanied the Word enlightening the minds and hearts of many who heard.
 - (b) The result was that many Jews and God-fearing Greeks (those attached to the synagogue) believed.
 - (c) Here are the blessings, the fruits, that one who sows the seed hopes to see: many converted to Christ.

2. However, persecution came right behind this blessing. “But the Jews who disbelieved stirred up the minds of the Gentiles and embittered them against the brethren” (v. 2).
 - a. As fruit is brought forth for God’s kingdom, the kingdom of darkness fights back.
 - (i) The Jews – whose hearts were hardened by sin – wouldn’t sit still for this.
 - (ii) And they weren’t content to keep their unbelief to themselves: they also stirred up the Gentiles against them.
 - (iii) Darkness not only resists the light in the hearts of the unconverted, it does everything it can to bring opposition against it and to promote its own schemes.
 - (iv) That’s why those who practice sin aren’t content merely to have others tolerate it; they want everyone to accept it.
 - (v) They won’t broach the resistance that the light of God’s truth makes against it.
 - b. What were the results? At first, it simply made the apostles dig their heels in deeper: “Therefore they spent a long time *there* speaking boldly *with reliance* upon the Lord, who was testifying to the word of His grace, granting that signs and wonders be done by their hands” (v. 3).
 - (i) As long as they weren’t in any immanent danger, they stayed (not that they would leave at the first sign of danger).
 - (ii) And they stayed a long time in that hostile environment, speaking boldly with reliance on the Lord:
 - (a) This is the only way anyone can do this.
 - (b) Under the pressure of the enemy, we would quickly wither and fold apart from God’s grace by His Spirit.
 - (c) The more difficult things get, the more earnestly we must seek Him.
 - (d) This is what they did.
 - (iii) And the Lord answered them:
 - (a) He testified to the Word of His grace by giving them the ability to continue preaching with confidence.
 - (b) And He allowed them to perform signs and wonders to testify to His Word.
 - (c) The persecution didn’t make them retreat, but drove them to Christ to gain His help.
 - c. Things, however, continued to escalate: “But the people of the city were divided; and some sided with the Jews, and some with the apostles” (v. 4).
 - (i) As they continued to preach, it continued to divide the city.
 - (ii) Some supported the Jews and some the apostles.
 - (iii) The Gospel continually divides: it gathers the wheat into the barn, the sheep into the fold; but continues to stir opposition from the enemy’s kingdom.

(iv) Again, this is because of the two kingdoms at war: it's something we must expect.

d. It finally resulted in their having to leave: "And when an attempt was made by both the Gentiles and the Jews with their rulers, to mistreat and to stone them, they became aware of it and fled to the cities of Lycaonia, Lystra and Derbe, and the surrounding region" (vv. 5-6).

(i) As long as they could continue their work there, they did: They didn't let the persecution or division stop them.

(ii) But there did come a time when they could no longer safely minister; when to do so meant their death (they wanted to mistreat and stone them).

(iii) When they learned this was the case, they again did what Jesus told His disciples earlier: if they don't receive you or your words, don't be a martyr if it isn't necessary, flee to the next city.

(iv) And so they did.

e. But "there they continued to preach the gospel" (v. 7).

(i) They didn't let even this stop them.

(ii) They purposed in their hearts that they would continue.

(iii) They were men driven to get the Gospel out.

B. Secondly, let's consider why they continued to press forward in this work, even though they met with so much opposition: It was because Paul and Barnabas had a burden for the work.

1. Why? What was their motivation? What was this burden on their hearts?

a. We are creatures of motivation – we need a reason to do something.

b. We must be moved from within, by our hearts.

c. We must will to do something, and what we will is determined by our affections.

2. The Lord gave them at least two major affections to move them to do this work.

a. The first was love:

(i) Love for their Lord:

(a) Paul wrote, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me" (Gal. 2:20).

(b) Paul again writes, "For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; and He died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf" (2 Cor. 5:14-15).

(c) It was love for the One who laid down His life for them that compelled them to do the work.

(d) Love for Christ will give us a burden to do the Lord's will even when things get difficult.

(ii) It was also love for their neighbor:

- (a) This goes with the first. Jesus said the greatest commandment was to love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. “The second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’ (Matt. 22:39).
 - (b) If you don’t want to perish forever, neither should you want this for your neighbor.
 - (c) Paul wrote to Timothy, “For this reason I endure all things for the sake of those who are chosen, so that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus *and* with *it* eternal glory” (2 Tim. 2:10).
 - (d) Paul and Barnabas had a burden to serve the Lord out of love; but they were also burdened for the salvation of God’s elect.
 - (e) It’s love for the Lord and for our neighbor that will give us the desire to do the work even though we face opposition.
- b. But there is a second affection: that of fear.
- (i) Paul wrote, “For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for I am under compulsion; for woe is me if I do not preach the gospel. For if I do this voluntarily, I have a reward; but if against my will, I have a stewardship entrusted to me” (1 Cor. 9:16-17).
 - (ii) Certainly, every Christian will love God and desire to do His will. But during those times when our sin gets the best of us, and we find that we no longer feel like doing the Lord’s work or desire as strongly to do it, God’s gives us another affection to motivate us: fear (it will motivate us at other times as well, but much more here).
 - (a) We have been entrusted with our Lord’s talents: we can’t afford to bury them in the sand: if we actually do this and don’t profit Him by their use, He will cast us into the outer darkness (Matt. 25:14-30).
 - (b) Jesus said that if we abide in Him and He in us, we will bear much fruit: but if we don’t bear any, the Father will prune us off and cast us into the eternal fire (John 15:1-6).
 - (c) Jesus tells us that our works will be examined on the Day of Judgment to show what kind of tree we are: if we have done nothing good, the Lord will command us to depart from Him forever into the fire prepared for the devil and his angels (Matt. 25:31-46).
 - (d) Let the love of God and of Jesus Christ constrain your heart, to give you the burden weep, fast, pray, and rise to do the work God calls you to (Neh. 1:4).
 - (e) But for those times when grace is low and your love for Christ isn’t strong enough to move you in that direction, let the fear of God drive you back to Him, that you might be filled again with His Spirit and with His love, so that you can press forward. In this sense, fear is a gracious thing.
 - (f) May the Lord encourage us today in His work. Amen.