

## Gospel Triumph: Strengthened to Face Opposition – Acts 14:1-28

It's been a little over a month since I got back from my teaching trip to Nepal and of course, the trip and the men I taught are still on my mind. There's one man who used to attend the training times with us 10 years ago and now is unable to because he's in prison. The local Hindu leadership in his village didn't like him or his message and so they came up with some false accusations and had him thrown into prison.

While prison is unusual, there's increasing pressure on Christians in Nepal. Nepal is bordered on three sides by India and because of its size and economy, India has massive influence in Nepal. The current Prime Minister of India, Modi, is a strong Hindu and studied at a temple in Nepal when he was younger. He knows he can't make India a fully Hindu country, so he uses his influence in Nepal to make things more difficult for Christians there.

While all of this is true and the believers in Nepal don't live easy lives to begin with, they respond to opposition and pressure quite well. They adjust where they can and continue to press forward with the gospel. They respond well because they expect opposition and are strengthened and prepared for it.

So far in the book of Acts we've seen opposition to the Gospel and even outright persecution of those who proclaim it. But as Paul and Barnabas are on their first missionary journey and we come to Acts 14 the level of opposition and persecution increases. This theme dominates this chapter, and it even brings Paul to take this message to the churches. "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God."

That phrase could be placed as a heading for this chapter and here's what we will learn from Acts 14:1-28. **4 Truths to Guide Us as We Encounter Opposition.**

### **1. Division Demands Courageous Wisdom (vv. 1-7)**

In Acts 13 we saw Paul and Barnabas cross the Mediterranean Sea from Cyprus to modern day Turkey and begin preaching the gospel in different cities. After Luke records a sermon from Paul in a synagogue, the entire city comes together the next Sabbath to hear from Paul again. Look at 13:44. Certain Jews oppose Paul

and Barnabas as the Gospel spread among the Gentiles like wildfire. The opposition gets to the point where they leave Antioch. Look at 13:50-52.

As chapter 14 begins we find them in Iconium and following the same pattern of ministry. Look at 14:1. While Paul and Barnabas just said in chapter 13:46 that they were turning to the Gentiles, this doesn't mean that they will no longer preach to Jews. Clearly Jews and Gentiles are now on equal footing, and both need the Gospel and in Iconium many receive the Gospel. And once again a certain segment of the Jews gets quite upset. Look at verse 2.

What's amazing here is that the opposition doesn't immediately drive Paul and Barnabas away. In fact, verse 3 makes it sound like they specifically stayed in Iconium because of the opposition to build up the new believers. Look at verse 3. They continued to speak out boldly, despite the false accusations and opposition. And as they stayed God confirmed the message through signs and wonders. But the opposition continued. Look at verse 4. Opposition brings division and division ends up getting violent. Look at verses 5-6.

Paul and Barnabas are bold with the gospel and face division with courage. But when the division and opposition take on a violent form and comes from the city leadership, they make the wise decision to move on. This in no way indicates they compromisers or fair-weather Christians. They move on to the next city, Lystra, and pick up where they left off in Iconium according to verse 7. And in this city, they face an entirely different sort of situation.

## **2. Confusion Calls for Clarity (vv. 8-18)**

When we join the story in Lystra we find a situation quite similar to what we read about in Acts 3 with Peter and John. Look at verses 8-10. Paul is used by the Lord to heal this man, just as Peter was, indicating that Paul has an authority and importance like Peter. While the miracle is similar, the context is quite different. We don't read about Paul and Barnabas starting in a synagogue in Lystra. This city was the most Gentile and pagan of any city they had been to this far. And because of the different context, the reaction is shockingly different from when Peter healed the crippled man in the temple in Jerusalem. Look at verses 11-12.

Now, notice that the people are shouting in Lycaonian, so Paul and Barnabas don't know exactly what they are saying to start. Why do the people react this way?

Well, there was a legend in this area recorded by a Latin poet named Ovid that said that the gods Jupiter (Latin name of Zeus) and Mercury (Latin name of Hermes) had come to this region in human form. When they visited, they went to a thousand different homes searching for a place to rest and only one home had offered them hospitality. The humble dwelling of an elderly couple. The gods had rewarded the couple and punished those who didn't receive them.

Now you have Paul and Barnabas clearly healing a man, and the people want to offer hospitality to the gods who have come again in human form. Look at verse 13. This is the point where Paul and Barnabas start to realize what's going on. Look at verse 14. Their response is quite different from Herod's response in Acts 12 when the people proclaim him a god. They ultimately respond by preaching the truth into this cultural confusion. Listen to verses 15-17.

Since this is the most pagan context Paul and Barnabas have been in, their starting point for preaching the Gospel has to be quite different. They were in a Synagogue in chapter 13 and so showing Jesus as the fulfillment of the OT was exactly what they needed to do. But here they start in a different spot with people who have no biblical background. Notice the main points of emphasis they make.

There is one living and true God and these people need to turn from worthless idols to this God. This true God has made everything, all that you see and has left a witness to Himself in the beauty and goodness of creation and even in the joy and gladness you experience in life. Paul is saying, there is one true God, your idols are not Him, and you are accountable to Him because of what you see around you. So turn to Him!

This is masterful because it begins by understanding these people and where they are and bringing clarity during confusion. Paul and Barnabas get to the heart of the issue with this approach. This is such a model for us as people in our culture have less of a biblical background. Start with their cultural idols, their beliefs

about life, their experience of goodness and joy, and how none of that will ultimately satisfy.

Now, in Acts 14 I don't think Paul and Barnabas were done. This isn't a complete Gospel presentation, and I think they would have brought these people to the point of the work of Jesus. But they are interrupted. Look at verse 18. And this turns into something much worse.

### **3. Persecution Necessitates Persistence (vv. 19-20)**

Look at the first part of verse 19. Antioch in Pisidia is where Paul preached the Synagogue sermon and where he and Barnabas left at the end of chapter 13 and shook the dust off their feet. Antioch is over a hundred miles from Lystra. These Jews came from Antioch, probably stopped at Iconium, only 20 miles from Lystra and gathered a crowd there and proceeded to Lystra. They find the crowds gathered and close to offering sacrifices to Paul and Barnabas and manage to turn the crowds against them. Look at the rest of verse 19. They had planned this back in verse 5 and now they follow through on it.

Paul must have been hurt quite badly because they believe he's dead, even after dragging him out of the city. There must be something miraculous going on here because of verse 20. Whether God protected him from the stoning or whether God healed him after we don't know, but the lesson we draw out of this is Paul's persistence. He continues the next day to another city to preach the Gospel and make more disciples. Look at the beginning of verse 21.

Now, Paul and Barnabas have been wise throughout this chapter and haven't needlessly exposed themselves to harm. But even when they must change course or change direction and even after fierce opposition, they just continue with the mission God has given them. I think this is what we would find if we talked to Christians in Iran, or Afghanistan, or any other place where it's difficult to be a Christian. Persistence must be the response to persecution. And persistence is only enabled when we expect and prepare to face opposition. This is our last truth.

### **4. Expect & Prepare for Opposition (vv. 21-28)**

Notice what Paul and Barnabas do after they preach the Gospel at Derbe in verse 21. They went back to all the cities we've heard about in chapters 13-14. Why? Look at verses 22-23. Luke describes four tasks and all of them fit under the heading of preparing people for opposition. They strengthen their souls. Deep internal strength that prepares one for external opposition. They encourage or build them up so that they can continue in the faith. They proclaim the main theme of this chapter; through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom.

Now, this doesn't mean that you have to be stoned to get to heaven. Here's how one author explained this: *'The implication seems to be that the persecution of believers is to be understood as consistent with God's plan, not that it is an entrance requirement that believers must meet by virtue of their own conscious choice.'*

To expect opposition doesn't mean to live as if we expect to go to a prison camp next week because of the sinfulness of the surrounding culture. It means not to be surprised when unsaved people don't appreciate being told that they are worshiping vain and worthless idols.

But notice the last action Paul and Barnabas perform as they return to these churches. Verse 23. They appoint elders in every church. The church needs organized and qualified leadership if it is to remain faithful in a culture of opposition. The word elders here is plural, as it is in every instance in the NT when it talks about church leadership. This is why we have 5 elders here at WBC, all with equal say and authority within the church. Elders teach, lead, care for, and protect the church, and all of this prepares the church for opposition. This was certainly needed for these new believers in Asia Minor.

Paul and Barnabas continue their return journey to strengthen the churches and appoint leadership with Antioch in Syria as their ultimate destination. Look at verses 24-28. This is the place that had commissioned them for this mission and they report back after 3 years to encourage and strengthen these believers. Notice the focus of their report in verse 27. The focus here is on the work of God. This is what ultimately encourages and builds up believers. This is what strengthens us to grow and face opposition with boldness. This is why we look at Scripture and the

story of what God is doing and it's not always about us and our lives week in and week out. We are part of the work that God is doing. We join Him and that's exactly how Paul and Barnabas saw these three years of ministry.

So, while our situation is far different from the believers in Nepal, let's let the preparation the Lord does in us be the same. Let's God's work through the church grow you in courageous wisdom, the ability to speak the truth clearly into the culture, and persistence and let's not be surprised when we face opposition. But trust God to continue to do His work and let us be a part of it. Let's pray.

### Sermon Reflection Questions – 6/15/25

- What do you think the phrase “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” means?
- How do the events of chapter 14 relate to chapter 13?
- Paul and Barnabas were able to remain bold with the gospel while also exercising wisdom and knowing when to leave a difficult situation. How do we know when to stand firm and when to leave a difficult circumstance?
- What do we learn from the fact that the miracle in Acts 14 is quite similar to the miracle in Acts 3?
- How is the message that Paul shares in Acts 14:15-17 different from the one he shares in Acts 13? Why is it different?
- What do we learn about how to share the gospel from Paul’s words in Acts 14:15-17?
- What is the heart of Paul’s message here?
- How do we grow in our persistence in the face of opposition?
- Why do Paul and Barnabas travel back through the cities they have already visited?

- What are the key components of their time with the believers in these cities?
- Why do you think they appoint elders in every city? What role do elders play in strengthening a church to face opposition?