



# 2022 Weekly Devotions

Week of: August 22<sup>nd</sup> - 28<sup>th</sup>

Sermon: August 21<sup>st</sup>



SMYRNA BAPTIST CHURCH  
building community ◊ equipping believers ◊ serving Jesus



August 22

**Acts 14:23; 20:32**

Toward the end of Acts 14:23, Luke says that after leadership had been appointed in the church, Paul and Barnabas “commended” the people to the Lord. Folks, that is an important and necessary step to effective ministry. I know that there are believers who think the pastor should be there to hold their hand at every turn. Trust me, I agree there are plenty of times when a shepherd should be present to guide, encourage, and teach the sheep; however, it is equally true that a good pastor must know when to “let go” and commend his people to the care of the Lord. Think with me for a moment.

Paul and Barnabas had discipled them for a good while. They had exhorted them to live out the teaching of Scripture and to continue in the faith. They had just finished appointing leadership and now it was time to trust them into the hands of God. That can be difficult for both pastor and people, but it is necessary. At the end of the day dear ones, it is a matter of faith and confidence in the ministry of the Holy Spirit and Christ Jesus Himself. This “commending” disciples to Jesus was not an unusual step for Paul to take in his ministry. We find in Acts 20:32 the same process taking place.

Keep in mind that what Paul and Barnabas had been doing on this missionary journey was to strengthen the churches. They had revisited those which had been planted to build them up. In Acts 20, Paul made a visit to the Christians in Ephesus where he spent time doing the same thing with them. If you take a moment to read Acts 20:17-32 you will get the totality of his ministry and departure from Ephesus. I don’t want you to miss the fact that Paul knew that his departure would mean the believers would be exposed to dangerous influences of ungodliness (vv. 29-30). Think about how hard it is to leave your children in the classroom in a public school. To walk away knowing they will be in a far more dangerous place than the safety of your home is not easy. To leave them on a college campus can feel the same way; yet we do so trusting that God will watch over them.

This step in the process of helping others grow strong in the Lord is scary. A good shepherd who loves his people is going to want to constantly protect them, but he must know that the day comes when you “commend” them into the Lord’s hands. In Acts 20:32, right after Paul had described the frightening dangers that awaited his brothers and sisters in the Lord, it is written, “And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace.” (I will take that phrase up tomorrow). The only way you can walk away from people that you love in those moments is with a complete and absolute trust in the presence, goodness, love, and power of God. You must be completely convinced that God is actually there with your loved one and that He cares about them. You must believe that He can do a better job than you or I can in protecting and providing for them.

It is also imperative dear ones that you know that with His infinite knowledge and omnipresence, He can handle situations better than we can. You must be sure that He knows every circumstance that is taking place in their lives and can ward off dangers, guide their steps, comfort them in their times of fear, and bring them safely home. Trust God and learn to commend loved ones in your life to the precious and wonderful care of the Lord. When you know you’ve done everything that you are supposed to do as a parent or a pastor, you can honestly hand them over to Jesus and say, “You got it now.” He does and the truth is, He always did!

August 23

**Acts 20:32; 1 Thessalonians 2:13**

Yesterday I wrote about the step of commending a person to the Lord once you have done your part in helping them grow up in the Lord. There is another extremely important element to letting a person go. Our focal verse for today goes on to say further that we are to commend them to the Lord AND “to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up.” Folks, I don’t want you to miss the process of commending. Paul had done a great job of following up and helping the believers mature as followers of Christ. We are not taught in the Scriptures here that you do your part and then just walk away. Part of the reason Paul was able to commend his brothers and sisters to the Lord and leave Ephesus was because they had taken the time to establish good leadership.

Note that when Paul went to Ephesus, he met with the elders of the church and encouraged and taught them further. Paul had tremendous confidence in the Lord and the Spirit, but he also had a high level of confidence in the leadership that he had grown to shepherd the church. Paul did not just walk away and leave them to the wolves and dangers that were present. He made sure that he left them in the hands of capable leaders who had demonstrated the qualifications of the office of elder and who loved them as he did.

Now, in our text for today, we read that he commended them to the word of His grace. What is that? Dear ones, that is nothing less than the teaching of Scripture. I can say without a doubt that Paul had trained the elders up and some of them were absolutely capable of the teaching ministry of the Word. Paul was confident that the proper and accurate application of God’s Word in the lives of the believers would serve to further grow them up and be a source of protection as it provided wisdom from on high for daily living.

Look at what Paul wrote to the church in Thessalonica. In chapter 2 verse 13 it says, “For this reason we constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe.” Do you friends, the word of God actually performs at work in those who give themselves to it? Paul was confident that the Holy Spirit in their hearts, the Lord Jesus in heaven, and the application of the Word taught by godly and capable elders, was more than enough to build them up after he had to depart.

You might recall that Paul wrote to Timothy that the Word was profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16). Do you see then the need to train up teachers who are adequately equipped to handle the word of God accurately and faithfully. If Paul had left Ephesus without good leadership, the believers would have quickly been swallowed up by the ungodly influences of the world. I cannot say enough how crucial godly leadership and constant teacher training is in the life of the church. I believe it is safe to say that the very spiritual health and safety of the church and its members depends on the consistent and right teaching of the Word of God. I have no doubt that many churches are anemic in our day because of poor teaching and the absence of biblical exposition from the pulpits. Paul was able to continue in further ministry opportunities because he was able to entrust Christians to others to continue the work of the ministry among the various churches. Beloved, this is still the way it is supposed to be done in our day.

August 24

### 1 Corinthians 9:16

Sometimes when I think about the apostle Paul's life, I honestly cannot imagine all that he went through and the steadfast faithfulness to the Lord and his calling. If anyone had reason to say they had done enough, it was probably Paul. If anyone had reason to say they had suffered enough, paid enough, and sacrificed enough it was probably Paul. Remember back in Acts 14:19 that he was stoned nearly to death. He was so close to death that the people thought they had actually killed him. Even after that experience, he recovered and went right back to the same area where the stoning took place.

From our text for Sunday's message, we find Paul and Barnabas continuing their journey of strengthening the churches through many cities and towns. Notice the pattern that continued in verse 25. There it says, "When they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia." Regardless of how tired, worn, or battered they must have been, they continued faithfully preaching the Word of God with every opportunity provided. Even as our passage ends, we read, "When they had arrived (back in Antioch) and gathered the church together, they began to report all the things that God had done with them... (v.27).

We could all understand if Paul and Barnabas had left the cities mentioned in verse 21 and decided to simply take a break to rest. Dear ones there are certainly times when that is both necessary and right, but obviously not in this instance. The question that we may ask ourselves is why did they not just stop and take it easy for a while? I think we can find the answer from a passage such as 1 Corinthians 9:16. There Paul writes to the believers in Corinth, "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." Paul goes on to say in that same chapter that he is slave to all men by choice so that he may win more to Christ as he proclaims the gospel (v.19). What he means is that he feels an obligation to share the Good News with others so strongly that he is a slave to the need and the calling to see people saved.

Paul feels that because of the grace that the Lord Jesus showed him, he must be gracious, kind, and sacrificial so that others may hear too. Paul is so driven by the truth of the gospel and the lostness of humanity that he cannot sit by quietly when an opportunity to speak avails itself. So, as he and Barnabas make their way back to Antioch, they simply speak when doors to do so providentially open. Paul says that he has nothing to boast about in regard to preaching the gospel. In fact, he says that if he does not preach the gospel, he senses the severest punishment from God for not doing so. He has no room for pride because he understands it is the call of God on his life. I think Paul would say that if he does not preach the gospel when opportunities arise, his conscience works him over so badly that he feels sick.

By the way, let me close today by saying that serving when you are challenged and when it requires sacrifice is the surest sign of real commitment. It is easy when you are well rested, healthy, and comfortable; but are you just as committed to the gospel when you are pressed on every side and rather worn? Paul and Barnabas show us what it looks like to steward time well and to make the best use of opportunities. Do not be one of those people who are grateful with the slightest excuse to get off the hook when they know they need to do something. Commitment says, "I'm not so much worried about myself, I know what God wants me to do right now and I am all in.

August 25

**Acts 14:27; Ephesians 2:10; John 15:5**

Isn't it wonderful to read about all that Paul and Barnabas did, to see their tireless service to King Jesus, and the Lord's deliverance of them every time they were in trouble? The stories that Paul and Barnabas could tell were nearly endless. It would have been so easy for them to try to take center stage and become the focus of the gains the early church made. I get the impression that when the two of them finally make it back to Antioch, they could not wait to tell people what they had experienced and what had happened across the towns and cities in many regions. To make it even more tempting to become the center of attention, we must remember that they had left Antioch one and a half years ago. The people would have been thrilled and ecstatic to see them.

Sure enough, the Bible tells us that when they arrived in Antioch, they gathered the church together to tell their stories. The interesting and amazingly humble next step was to begin to tell them all the things that God had done with them and how He had opened a door of faith among the Gentiles. Paul Barnabas did not start their account by saying, "We did this and we did that." They began where they should have begun, with God. What Luke records for us here is telling and a doctrinal truth that could easily slip by and often does. Everything that we are able to accomplish for good is a result of God's favor and presence in our lives. The advancement of the gospel among the Gentiles was not a result of Paul and Barnabas' brilliance or eloquence. This is not to say that we should not do our best. The progress and success among the Gentiles was a result of God opening a door of faith among them.

Dear ones, we must be quick to recognize our inability apart from God and His ability in all things. John wrote in the fifteenth chapter of his gospel, "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, apart from Me you can do nothing" (v.5). It benefits us all to remember this truth. Anytime we start to think that we have all that we need to do kingdom work in our own strength and abilities apart from total dependence upon God, we are setting ourselves and others up for failure. How wonderful to know that we can count on God to work in and through us and to bear fruit from our efforts. Attached to Jesus Christ, we have everything we need to flourish and produce. Everything we need to do what He calls us to is supplied by Him. He has every bit of the supply within Himself and graciously gives it to us for the tasks to which He calls us. Honestly, we cannot fail when the ministry task is His idea, supplied by His riches, and empowered by His strength. What a privilege to serve Him in light of this truth.

Beloved, this is exactly why we should all be able to step up and step out with confidence. Remember what Paul wrote to the Christians in Ephesus? He said, "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them" (Eph. 2:10). So, Paul and Barnabas, on the heels of world changing missionary success, comes back to the church from where it all began to report on "what God did." I hope that you are completely okay with simply being a tool in the hand of the Master Carpenter. I hope that you are satisfied being the clay in the hand of the Ultimate Potter.

You know church family; I hope that when we come to the end of our ministry together that it can be said of us that we "accomplished the work to which we were called by the grace of God" (Acts 14:26). A "well done good and faithful servant" is only given to those of whom this can be said. Let's finish whatever it is that He has and is calling us to.

August 26

**Psalm 80:7-13**

The truths and points of application that I have written about this week have been relatively straightforward and obvious from our texts this week. The truth of the matter however is that I have struggled to date with what I want to focus on from our passage for Sunday's message. Often, we, as pastors, ask ourselves why is this text in here? We want to know what is God saying to His people from a particular passage. Pastor Aaron and I admit that sometimes it feels like a passage is a bit redundant. As I study, I find myself saying, "Okay I got that but what else do You want me to know and to preach?" So, having written all of that, I am going to dig a little deeper today, not to find something that is not in the text, but to view it from a larger perspective.

When I consider what God has done in the world so far, it helps me to rightly understand what He is up to now. Next week when we begin in Acts 15, it feels like a turning point in the book of Acts. So, as we finish up chapter 14, I think in some way it is a summation of all that has been transpiring to this point. The obvious objective of Sunday's focal passage as well as much of what preceded it, is that God has a plan to bring people into His kingdom by the proclamation of the gospel. We see in the book of Acts that there exists great opposition to this endeavor and yet we are confident that people will be saved, churches will be planted, and the will of God will be accomplished. Another great joy is that we, as fallen human beings, are privileged to have a part in seeing His plan of redemption accomplished in the world. For now, let us go back in time a bit to better understand and see what God is doing in the world today.

I think we would all have to admit that to some degree, the church (generally speaking) appears to be floundering in our society today. We have little influence on our culture these days and it feels like we are more marginalized today than any of us can ever remember. The world either laughs at us or ignores us for the most part. It causes me to sometimes want to ask God, "Where are you? How long is this going to go on? Are you listening and seeing what is happening?" I want to say to God, to remind God, that the church was His idea. I want to join the Psalmist of old is plead with God to restore us and to make His face to shine upon us. That is the heartbeat of the 80<sup>th</sup> Psalm. At that time in the life of Israel, many felt like many of us do today about the church. The Psalmist read of God's power and victories, but all of that seemed to be in some long-ago distant past. I know the feeling in some ways today as churches falter and stumble about. So, what is God's plan in our world today. I believe that our text from Sunday (Acts 14:23-28) shows us what His plan still is.

My heart cries out this morning, "Restore us, O God of hosts; cause your face to shine upon us, and we will be saved! You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it; You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land...Why then have you broken down its walls, so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit?" (Ps. 80:7-13) Oh how sad! Now, I write this because I want us to ponder the reality that we are living in the middle of a story that has been unfolding for thousands of years. The story of redemption, as humanity can know it, began with the call of God on Abraham's life. God planned to gather people from every nation to Himself by beginning with one nation descended from Abraham: Israel. For centuries, the plan unfolded as the nation grew like a vigorous vine rescued by the hand of God from seasons of suffering. But, as Psalm 80 is written, the whole project is on the brink of ruin. The vine was unhealthy and became a laughingstock to surrounding peoples. Stay tuned for more tomorrow.

August 27

**Hosea 14:4-7; 1 Peter 1:10-12**

Picking up from yesterday, we hear the Psalmist cry out for mercy and rescue, BUT we also begin to hear the prophets of the Old Testament cry out with God's answer. The answer contained two truths: First, there would be judgment for Israel's sin. Second, there would be the promise of mercy, rescue, and restoration that would unfold in God's time and in God's way. So, what did the prophets say?

Walk with me for a bit into the 14<sup>th</sup> chapter of Hosea. Hosea describes Israel as a luxuriant vine that had strayed from God. Like most people, as God blessed Israel, she turned from the Creator to the things created. The phrases in Hosea 14 beginning in verse 4 remind us of the once fruitful vines of blessing lost to sin. In the midst of their judgment, the prophet is speaking of restoration and the days when she would rise again. It is extremely important that we understand the days of restored blessing would come along a path of suffering and judgment due to sin. There would be no avoiding the consequences of sin. The hope that they could hold onto, as we can today, is that the day would come when God would bring His people through judgment and out into the precious promises of His salvation. What Hosea penned in chapter 14 is a promise of God that is just as sure and certain as any promise He has ever made. The day will come.

In similar fashion, Peter wrote of promises fulfilled in his first epistle. He wrote, "Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours..." (1 Peter 1:10). He is writing about what Hosea and other prophets had written. Even as the prophets wrote, inspired by God, they were not able to fully understand God's plan; yet they knew that it would include the suffering and glory of the Christ (v. 11). This amazing passage written by Peter ends with the reality of the angels longing to look into the extraordinary fulfillment of God's plan of redemption. So, we know that prophets understood there would be suffering for the Messiah who would in the fullness of time come to deliver them. When Jesus came to stand in our place, we should expect that He had to suffer judgment for the sins of the ones He came to save. It was after His suffering that His exaltation occurred – just like Hosea said it would be.

What a fantastic privilege you and I have living on this side of the cross. We live today knowing "the things which now have been announced to you through those who preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven" (1 Peter 1:12). Let us tie this back a bit more to our Acts 14 passage. What we have so far is that evangelists like John the Baptist, the disciples, and the apostles came announcing the gospel of Jesus Christ to the people. The news was that Jesus Christ, the suffering and glorified One, had died for sin and risen to glory, and that it was time to put faith in Jesus, turn away from sin, and repent. The Holy Spirit had come from heaven aiding them to preach with clarity and boldness even as he worked in the hearts of the hearers to bring many to faith.

What we see then is that God had brought salvation by sending Christ to pass through the prophesied judgment due humanity for sin and had come to the place of glory once again. He is now announcing this monumental news to humanity by His Holy Spirit working through human witnesses who have been redeemed themselves. It is by this method that He is saving people, giving them new life, and an imperishable inheritance. Dear ones, read 1 Peter today and marvel as you thank God for His perfect plan to save us. More tomorrow.



August 28

**Acts 10; Colossians 1:5-6**

What we see at the end of Acts 14 is what God was doing in the world then and what He is doing in our world today. What we have is Spirit empowered gospel preaching that leads to the salvation of souls. The challenge is that His work is a quiet and steady growth of leaves on the vine of His kingdom. I have heard it said before and I believe it is fitting to say now, we call the book we are preaching through the Acts of the Apostles. A better title would probably be the Acts of the Holy Spirit through His people. I want you to recall how determined the original disciples were to remain faithful to the preaching of the Word back in Acts 6. They knew the priority that they had to hold onto was preaching the Word. It must be our priority today as well.

I want you to see how God moves. A good example would be the conversion of Cornelius in Acts 10. There we see the Holy Spirit fall on "all who heard the word" as Peter was speaking. Through the proclamation of the Word, God granted faith and new life to those who heard the Word and believed. He still does the same thing today with the same method. The same thing happens among the Colossians as described by Paul in Colossians 1:5-6. Paul says that he gives thanks to God for giving the hearers faith when Epaphras preached the Word to them. Look at how Paul's describes the work of the gospel when it is preached. He writes, "...of which you previously heard in the word of truth, the gospel which has come to you, just as in all the world also it is constantly bearing fruit and increasing." The gospel, as if it has a life of its own, is bearing fruit and increasing in all the world. Keep reading in Colossians 1 all the way through verse 14. It is wonderful.

It is interesting how little the New Testament actually talks about church growth. You know what it talks about? The growth of the gospel in the growth of individual people. Our text from Sunday contains a major emphasis on the strengthening of disciples. Now, we must understand that as people are strengthened and grow in knowledge and sanctification, the church automatically does as well. What we have to do is be sure we stay focused on growing people rather than growing numbers in the church. There is a difference.

Colin Marshall and Tony Payne wrote a book entitled, "The Trellis and the Vine." In it they emphasize the great need for spending our time working on and investing in the vine rather than the trellis. The idea is that the vine represents the people of God while the trellis is simply the building or structure where we gather. An analogy they use involves two trellises of which one is nearly invisible because the vine has grown so large and healthy. The other one is pristine, well painted, and gorgeous but it does not have a full and healthy vine growing on it. Their point is that too many churches are consumed with the trellis and how it looks rather than the vine. I agree!

So, let me go back to the thought that I began writing about a couple of days ago. What we see happening at the end of Acts 14 is what we need to see happening in our day. I thank God that to some degree we are seeing this here at Smyrna. God's plan, in the face of pressure, persecution, and faltering is still the same. It was always His plan to rescue His people through Christ and for all of us who are redeemed to keep on telling others about the Way. We are to exemplify Christ in our daily living, proclaim the Good News every chance we get, and never lose confidence in the power of the gospel. There is no plan B and there is no better way to change our world than to follow our King's plan. It is intentionally slow, but it is completely fail proof. As chapter 14 closes, we get a perfect picture of how His plan works. Join me as we carry it out to completion.