

Last time we read how Paul and Barnabas fled to a small outpost named Lystra to hide from the Jews, who persecuted them in Iconium. The Jews were jealous of the missionaries because the people were becoming believers, and not paying attention to them any more. So they denied the gospel message, and set out to kill the disciples.

There was no synagogue in Lystra, so Paul and Barnabas immediately spoke directly to the gentiles in the village, who had no knowledge of the scriptures or Judaism. Speaking in their Lycaonian language, which Paul and Barnabas did not understand, they began to worship the missionaries as Greek gods who had come down from the heavens in the form of men. When the disciples realized that they were about to sacrifice animals to worship them, they tore their clothes, and tried to convince the people that they were just men like them. They had the same sin nature, and everyone needs God's forgiveness and grace. To make the gospel relevant to the people in their audience, they proclaimed a sole creator God, whose Son came as a sacrifice for sin. Even then, the people kept trying to make sacrifices to them.

In our passage this evening we will read of the results of Paul and Barnabas' efforts in Lystra, and see a summary of the conclusion to their first missionary journey. In so doing we can gain some insights into how the gospel spreads today, and the responsibility of the church to encourage and disciple new Christians. Please read along with me, Acts 14:19-28.

The first thing we notice in the text is that the Jews came from Antioch, and Iconium, to track down the disciples. This was not small undertaking, and gives us insight to the depth of hatred the Jews had for Paul and Barnabas. They must have searched everywhere to finally come to Lystra, which was way out in the boonies. These Jews were committed to the missionaries' destruction, and to stamping out the gospel message.

It is remarkable to me how the people of Lystra were so easily swayed. With the arrival of the first opposition to the gospel, they went from trying to worship Paul and Barnabas to joining with the Jews to drag Paul out of town, in an attempt to stone him to death. The bible does not tell us if they succeeded in killing Paul, or if they just knocked him out and left him for dead. In any case, God's hand was on Paul, and He miraculously delivered him from this trial of persecution, so that he could continue in his efforts to share the gospel, in answer to God's calling upon his life.

There is a biblical principle here that should serve as an encouragement to us when we have to face persecution because of our faith. When God's hand is on you or me, as we go about doing His will, He goes before us. He protects us. So long as He has a purpose for our lives, and we are doing our best to fulfill that purpose, we have nothing to fear. Even if our service to the Lord leads to death, our martyrdom will usher us into the Lord's presence, which is greater than anything this world has to offer.

Paul writes about this event in 2 Corinthians 12, where he lists the many dangers, persecutions, and sufferings he endured for the cause of Christ. There he concludes that God's grace is sufficient to meet any challenge, and His power is perfected in our weakness. This goes to the core of faith. We learn to trust God in every circumstance, and that He is trustworthy even when our challenges spin completely out of our control.

Verse 20 presents a challenge to my faith. If I were stoned, and left for dead, I am not sure that I would have the courage to go back to Lystra, but that is exactly what Paul did, after the disciples gathered about him, to pray for him, and to make sure that he was alright. The disciples referred to, may be another indication that there were others who accompanied Paul and

Barnabas on their first missionary journey, or it may refer to those in Lystra who became disciples as a result of hearing the gospel. The statement that Paul and Barnabas returned to Lystra again, after they visited Derbe, informs us that there were a group of believers in Lystra, and thus a new church.

After Paul returns to Lystra to let everybody know that he is alright, and to encourage them in their faith, he and Barnabas set off on the next leg of their journey. These missionaries did not let anything stand in the way of completing their task, so they moved on to the eastern-most town of their efforts.

We know little about Derbe. It was probably another relatively insignificant city. Apparently the missionaries' intent all along was to share the gospel in the region of Galatia, because if they had gone any further, they would have been in a whole new district. To bring context to the New Testament, when Paul writes his letter to the Galatians, these cities, which he and Barnabas evangelized on their first missionary journey are among the recipients of that Epistle.

This brief mention of Derbe may encompass a significant amount of time, because they made many disciples there. In each of the towns mentioned, not only did they share the gospel, they also established churches. This is why the missionaries retraced their steps, and visited each of the cities again on their way back to their home base in Antioch of Syria. Along the way they shared the gospel in new areas as well.

Notice that the bible specifically mentions their return to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, the three places where Paul and Barnabas faced their greatest persecution and resistance to the gospel. To me, this is a remarkable demonstration of courage. Why would they return to cities where they knew their lives would be in danger? They returned because this is where God was at work. The Holy Spirit led them there because the people in these young churches needed discipleship in order to be able to stand, and endure, the hardships that come with faith.

In our efforts to share the gospel, and to win people to Christ, we focus primarily on the positive: the forgiveness of sins, the promise of eternal life, the presence of the Holy Spirit, a better life in the arms of the Lord, new meaning and purpose in life. These are wonderful realities in the life a born again believer. But if you are a mature Christian, you know that faith in Christ is met with many challenges. The devil does not leave us alone, just because we belong to Jesus. He is relentless in his efforts to discredit us, so that we do not have a meaningful witness to others. Satan tries to disqualify us for ministry. He attacks at our weakest points. If he cannot get to us directly, he will attack us by messing with someone close to us.

To complicate things further, we still live in a dark, fallen, and sinful world. Sometimes we are called upon to take tough, and unpopular stands. We have to go toe to toe with the demonic forces of evil, as we approach life with a biblical worldview. We refuse to compromise on the gospel message, or the principles of God's word. Taking these kinds of stands is not easy, especially for someone who is younger in his or her faith, and has not yet learned the power of God in his or her life.

This is why Paul and Barnabas faced danger and persecution to return to these fledgling churches: to strengthen the souls of the disciples, to encourage them to continue in the faith, and to warn them that there would be many tribulations that would come into their lives before they entered the kingdom of God.

This is the whole purpose behind planting churches. This is why it is so important for Christians to become members of the body of Christ in a local church. Sometimes when I invite

people, who claim to be Christian, to come to church, they will say something like; “I don’t have to go to church in order to be a Christian. Some say, “I can worship out on the golf course, or in a tree stand, or in a boat, as well as I can worship in church.” Others will talk about the hypocrites in church, or they will say that they had a bad experience at some time in their past. But, the sad truth is that they have allowed the devil to win a victory in their lives, because they have cut themselves off from the discipleship, encouragement, and the ministry of the body of Christ that they need in order live a victorious Christian life.

I praise God every time someone gives his or her life to Jesus in our church. It is a time of praise, wonder, and rejoicing, whenever a person is born again. God calls us all to evangelize the world, but there is more to the Christian life. To grow in our relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ requires discipleship, commitment, and service. This is what the church offers to those who seek a more intimate and meaningful relationship with the Lord.

The bible says that as they visited, they appointed elders in every church. These were the church leaders, the pastors, those who were more mature in their faith, and had God’s calling upon their lives. In order for a church to survive, and thrive, there has to be solid leadership. Through discipleship, others rise to leadership positions. There is more to church growth than seeing people come to Jesus, as wonderful as that is. Another function of the church is to produce spiritual growth in its individual members, equipping them for life, and service in the Lord.

In the closing verses of chapter 14, Luke summarizes the missionaries return trip to Antioch in Syria. They retraced their steps, and stopped in places that they had not up to that point had an opportunity to share the gospel. They made their way back to the home church, and then called the church family together, and declared all that God had done with them.

Next Wednesday evening, Brother Lee Shaw will come and share with us all that God did with him and his missionary team on their recent trip to Africa. We always ask our missionaries to Ghana to share all that God is doing there. We have a mission team preparing to go to Guatemala, and when they return, we will want to hear how God used them, and how God moved among the people. Whenever we have people return from Peru, we want to hear a report. It is encouraging to us. Even if we did not get to go on the trip, we join in celebration, because our support and prayers have born fruit.

I am sure there was a great celebration in the church at Antioch when Paul and Barnabas returned. They wanted to hear every detail. They rejoiced at the report of all that God had done, and they knew that they were a part of it all, because they provided financial and spiritual support, sending Paul and Barnabas off as their representatives.

I have never been on a mission trip over seas. I have had several opportunities over the years, but each time God closed the door. I am still open to the possibility, but God has shown me that His purpose for my life is here with you. When I see the difference these trips make in the lives of so many who return, I rejoice and praise God, but so far, God has not sent me to go, and I’m OK with that. I mention this because I think that other members of the church might feel somewhat slighted when they see others go, but they never get to.

I feel like I am a part of every missionary effort of Hickory Hammock Baptist Church. It is not important that I go, but rather that I am doing what God has called me to do. If any of you get the opportunity for missions work, if God opens that door for you, go. But at home, or abroad, we are to rejoice in the Lord, and in what He is doing. If each one of us stays focused on God’s will, and are obedient in all things, we will enjoy together, the very best that the Lord offers, as a church family.

When Paul and Barnabas returned home, they gave their report, and the biggest news was that God had opened the door of faith to the gentiles. This will be the central theme for all that follows in the book of Acts, but even among believers, there are obstacles to be overcome. We will see that in our passage next time.

For now, let us be encouraged by the gospel message that saves us from our sins. Jesus Christ is God in the flesh, who gave Himself for us. He died on a Roman Cross as a sacrifice for our sins, but He arose from the grave, is alive today, and is coming again. Through faith in Him we have forgiveness of sins, and the promise of eternal life. Let us live completely in Him and for Him. If anyone wants to know more about how to become a Christian, let's sit down together, and I will try to answer your questions and tell you how you too can be born again, through faith in Jesus Christ.