

Chapter 35: The Kingdom through Tribulations

Acts 14:21–28

In the last section of Acts 14, the first major missionary journey of Paul (with Barnabas) comes to a close. In this, the apostles retrace their steps through many of the places where they had preached the gospel powerfully—and where they had endured fierce opposition to that gospel. There has been fruit and there has been faithless rejection of Christ and his kingdom. Yet, everywhere they have gone, they have been faithful to saturate that area with the proclamation of Jesus’ death and resurrection for sinners. While much of this missionary record has narrated evangelism, we see a well-rounded picture of what healthy churches look like as Paul and Barnabas establish these congregations for the long-term. Through this, one central message stands out to inform us about God’s vision for his church: *through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.*

Preparing for Tribulation (Acts 14:21–23)

In the previous section, Paul had been stoned in Lystra and left for dead, but then recovered “when the disciples gathered about him” (vv. 19–20a). When he rose up, he went back into Lystra, but “on the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe” (v. 20b). Luke tells us very little about the ministry of Paul in Derbe, except that “they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples” (v. 21a). The statement about preaching the gospel “to that city” suggests that, once again, they made the entire city aware of the promises of the gospel of Jesus Christ.¹ The degree to which the apostles saturated new areas with the gospel is challenging for the church today. Not all will believe, but can we truly say that *every person* in our vicinity knows about Jesus?

Next, we read that the apostles “had made many disciples” (v. 21b). In making disciples, they continued the work toward fulfilling the Great Commission that Jesus had given to his church (Matt. 28:19). The word *disciple* means “learner,” and specifically carries the idea of an apprenticeship under Jesus, learning to trust him and to follow in his ways. The apostles are not interested in mere conversions, but in the total life transformation of those disciples who put their faith in Jesus.

Toward this end of long-term discipleship, the rest of this section outlines “a brief record of the sort of pastoral care offered to newly formed congregations.”² To begin, we should notice that Paul and Barnabas “returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch” (v. 21c), in spite of the intense persecution that they encountered in each of those cities (Acts 13:45, 50; 14:2, 5, 19).³ Indeed, the

¹ “...they evangelized the city, which means just what it says, filled the city with gospel news.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 583.)

² Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 413.

³ “The two apostles retraced their steps in spite of the hostile Jews and the painful experiences they had had in those three cities.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 584.)

unbelieving Jews from Antioch and Iconium had gone out of their way to provoke the crowds in Lystra to stone Paul just before this (Acts 14:19).

In the context of such fierce opposition to the gospel, it became all the more imperative for the apostles to encourage the fledgling disciples in their new faith, especially in the areas that we read Paul devoting himself to: “strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (v. 22). Polhill argues that the “strengthening” of these disciples likely refers to “further instructing the Christians in their new faith.”⁴ This is correct, although we should not think that the apostles were teaching dry, impractical theory, as the next phrase suggests: “encouraging them to continue in the faith.” Doctrine is essential for the strength, health, life, and vitality of the believer, but doctrine of necessity spurs us on to action. As Calvin notes, “Christ doth not only command his ministers to teach, but also to exhort...Wherefore, let not pastors think that they have done their duty as they ought, when they have well trained up their people in true knowledge, unless they employ themselves to this part also.”⁵

But most poignantly, Luke reports the apostles as “saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.” The word for “tribulation” means “pressure that squeezes painfully.”⁶ Yet, the promise is that it is through these kinds of pains and pressures that we will enter the kingdom of God. Calvin observes that this “comfort is added, not to extol the dignity and merit of works, but only to encourage the godly, that they faint not under the burden of the cross.”⁷ The Scriptures regularly warn us against the dangers of falling away from our faith, particularly in light of the persecution that we will face as believers. We need this strengthening to embolden us not only to *continue* in the faith, but to press forward through a storm of *tribulations* to enter the kingdom of God. May the Lord give us grace to overcome, in spite of many tribulations that we will face on the way into the kingdom of God!

The final pastoral duty that the apostles undertake is the appointing of elders to oversee every church (v. 23). There is some debate about the meaning of “appoint,” a word that can refer to the *election* or *choice* of those appointed to the task, or it can describe the act of *installing* chosen officers into office.⁸ Different interpreters argue for a different nuance of the word’s meaning in regard to the manner of selecting and/or installing these elders; however, the important point is that these elders *were* installed to oversee these churches. The work of these apostles to fill these cities with the gospel so that some might come to faith is essential and foundational; however, these apostles

⁴ Polhill, *Acts*, 319.

⁵ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 2:24.

⁶ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 585.

⁷ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 2:25–26.

⁸ See the Greek lexicon *BDAG*, which suggests “to elect or choose someone for definite offices or tasks, *choose*” for 2 Cor. 8:19, but offers a different definition for Acts 14:23: “On the other hand, elders...in Lycaonia and Pisidia were not chosen by the congregations, but it is said of Paul and Barnabas...This does not involve a choice by the group; here the word means *appoint, install*” (*BDAG*, χειροτονέω, 1083). Someone like Lenski insists that the apostles “conducted a congregational meeting in which a vote was taken by show of hands, the congregation choosing with participation of the apostles and under their guidance” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 586).

themselves cannot undertake the ongoing shepherding of these congregations. Calvin takes these “elders” to be *teaching* elders (i.e., *pastors*) and writes, “the apostles had no certain place of abode, but they went to and fro to found new churches; but pastors were set and appointed, every man to his own church, and were, as it were, placed to watch over their congregations.”⁹ Whatever benefit Paul’s exhortations may have provided in the short-term, it was the long-term work of the elders to strengthen the congregation to ensure that they continued in the faith in the face of all tribulations that they would encounter from that point onward.

Then, before leaving, “with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.” By this the apostles exemplify a perspective to remember that the church never belongs to those who plant the church, or to those who lead the church as office-bearers. Rather, the church always and only belongs to the Lord, in whom every believer’s faith rests.

Declaring the Kingdom (Acts 14:24–28)

In vv. 24–26, we read that the apostles continued their ministry as they worked back to Antioch, where they had been commissioned for ministry by the Holy Spirit—that is, “where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had fulfilled” (v. 26). It was in Antioch, through prayer and fasting, that “the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them’” (Acts 13:2). Now, this work has been “fulfilled,” and they return to the congregation who had “laid hands on them and sent them off” (Acts 13:3) to report on the work that the Lord had done through them.

Upon arrival, and after having “gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles” (v. 27). Lenski writes, “Significantly they tell not of what *they* did but of what *God* did....The glory belonged wholly to God.”¹⁰ The report of these missionaries gives us a practical picture of what it looks like for the local church to send out missionaries. Our missionaries should not be “gone and forgotten,” since we need to foster an ongoing sense of connection, including the welcome receiving of their ministry when they are able to return (3 John 5–8).¹¹ Here, the apostles report joyfully about God’s work among the Gentiles (v. 27), and “they remained no little time with the disciples” back in Antioch (v. 28).

Discussion Questions

1. What does it mean that the apostles “preached the gospel to that city [Derbe]” (v. 21)? What level of saturation does that suggest? What hinders us from similarly saturating our whole cities with the gospel? What is the significance of their having “made many disciples” (v. 21)? How is a “disciple” different from a mere convert? What is required of the disciples of Jesus? As you look at your own

⁹ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 2:27.

¹⁰ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 589.

¹¹ “Too many communities lose track of those they send out into ministry or of those who have ministered to them in the past. In addition, many ministers leave a community and then are never heard from again. But the attitude here is not ‘gone and forgotten.’ It is of a family that is left behind for other responsibilities but that is still precious enough to care for when possible.” (Bock, *Acts*, 484.)

life, are you a disciple of Jesus, or only a convert?

2. What does “strengthening the souls of the disciples” (v.22a) mean? What does “encouraging them to continue in the faith” mean (v. 22b)? Why does Paul say that “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (v. 22c)? How are these ideas different and distinct? How do they all stand together in the work of building up the church? What is the role of biblical elders for the ongoing care of the church (v. 23)?

3. What had originally happened at Antioch in Syria (Acts 13:1–3)? What was the significance of the church in Antioch (Acts 11:26)? What is the relationship of the church in Antioch to Paul and Barnabas as missionaries? How does the sending church relate to foreign missionaries in your congregation? What kind of report do the apostles bring to the church in Antioch (v. 27)? Why do sending churches need to hear these reports from their partner missionaries?

4. What kinds of criteria do we see here for God’s vision for healthy churches? To what degree are you taking advantage of those opportunities to grow in your own church context? Where are you exposing yourself to the kind of evangelism in which you can come to experience God’s power and provision? How are you exhorting those around you to persevere in following Christ? What particular gifts has God given to you for building up the whole body of Christ?