

LIFE GROUP FIELD GUIDE

BIRTH OF A NATION

THE STORY OF ACTS: TAG, YOU'RE IT.

WEEK TWENTY-FOUR

A PERSEVERING FAITH





TAG, YOU'RE IT!

BIRTH OF A NATION

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ACTS 14:21-22

21 WHEN THEY HAD PREACHED THE GOSPEL TO THAT CITY AND HAD MADE MANY DISCIPLES, THEY RETURNED TO LYSTRA AND TO ICONIUM AND TO ANTIOCH, 22 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.



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a persevering faith

THE STORY: ACTS 14:1-28 [ESV]

1 Now at Iconium they entered together into the Jewish synagogue and spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed. **2** But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers.[a] **3** So they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord, who bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands. **4** But the people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews and some with the apostles. **5** When an attempt was made by both Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to mistreat them and to stone them, **6** they learned of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding country, **7** and there they continued to preach the gospel.

8 Now at Lystra there was a man sitting who could not use his feet. He was crippled from birth and had never walked. **9** He listened to Paul speaking. And Paul, looking intently at him and seeing that he had faith to be made well,[b] **10** said in a loud voice, "Stand upright on your feet." And he sprang up and began walking. **11** And when the crowds saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in Lycaonian, "The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!" **12** Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. **13** And the priest of Zeus, whose temple was at the entrance to the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds. **14** But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their garments and rushed out into the crowd, crying out, **15** "Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. **16** In past generations he allowed all the nations

to walk in their own ways. **17** Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.” **18** Even with these words they scarcely restrained the people from offering sacrifice to them. **19** But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead. **20** But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city, and on the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe. **21** When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, **22** 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. **23** And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed. **24** Then they passed through Pisidia and came to Pamphylia. **25** And when they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia, **26** and from there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had fulfilled. **27** And when they arrived and 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. **28** And they remained no little time with the disciples.

BIG IDEA

WE ARE CONDITIONED FOR COMFORT AND CONVENIENCE, HOWEVER, GOD INVITES US INTO THE MESS OF MISSION.

In chapter 14 the missionaries simply keep on doing what they were doing previously. This chapter contains stories of more sacrifice; it includes more examples of the Spirit at work; it notes more gospel proclamations suitable for a particular audience; it mentions more mixed responses to the gospel as well as more opposition. Paul saw these events as stories of endurance. In his last letter Paul spoke of his sufferings on this missionary journey, encouraging Timothy (who was from Lystra) to persevere:

But you have followed my teaching, conduct, purpose, faith, patience, love, and endurance, along with the persecutions and sufferings that came to me in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra. What persecutions I endured—and yet the Lord rescued me from them all. In fact, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. (2 Tim 3:10-12)¹

¹ Tony Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Acts*, ed. David Platt, Daniel L. Akin, and Tony Merida, Christ-centered exposition (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2017).

In a day when many were abandoning the faith, Paul was to Timothy a godly example of perseverance to be followed. These stories should spur us on to endure for the sake of the gospel too, as we consider not only Paul's endurance but also the faithful help of the Lord, who rescued the apostle from every trial.

Perseverance in Iconium

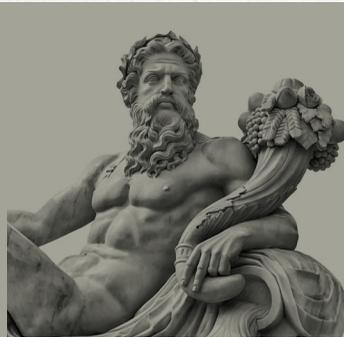
The journey to Iconium wasn't easy. The city was about ninety miles southeast of Pisidian Antioch and is currently called Konya. Paul and Barnabas traveled along the famous Via Sebaste, through rolling countryside, then past the snow-capped peaks of the Sultan mountain range. The strenuous nature of this trip is obvious.

Iconium attracted lots of people since it was along an east-west trade route. John Stott tells us, "It was still a Greek city when Paul and Barnabas visited it, and was a center of agriculture and commerce" (Message of Acts, 228). In Scripture we see Paul's pattern of proclaiming the gospel to large, influential cities in a region and then working outward from there.

Persevere with Courage

The missionaries begin, as usual, by engaging people in the synagogue. Paul and Barnabas were very successful (v. 1). Based on the recorded synagogue sermon in Pisidian Antioch (13:17-41), we can imagine Paul telling the story line of the Bible, which climaxes on the person and work of Jesus, the Messiah. Even though Paul was committed to reaching the Gentiles (13:46), he still sought to win his fellow Jews to Christ. Not all of them opposed Paul's message. Also present in the synagogues were Gentile proselytes and God fearers, many of whom were also open to the good news and some of whom had at least a rudimentary understanding of the Scriptures.¹

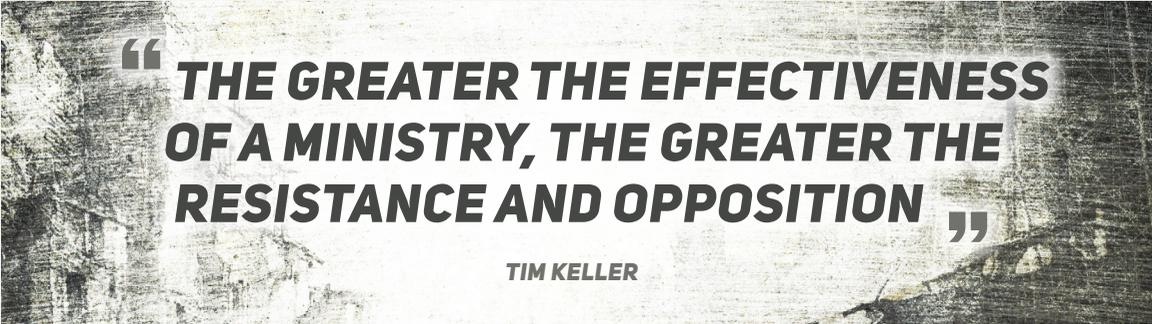
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According to local legends, Zeus and Hermes had previously visited the area disguised as humans. Only an elderly couple named Philemon and Baucis showed them hospitality by welcoming them into their humble cottage. The gods rewarded their kindness by transforming their home into a magnificent temple and making them the priests of it, while the rest of townspeople who had ignored them were punished with a severe flood. It's likely that the crowds who witnessed the miraculous sign at Paul's hand were remembering this story they'd heard many times throughout their lives and assumed that Paul & Barnabas were the gods disguised as humans once again. Perhaps the crowds wanted to escape disaster formerly inflicted upon their region. They rolled out the red carpet, so to speak, to avoid missing their opportunity for fame and fortune!

(Merida, p. 199; Garland, p. 146)

¹ Tony Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Acts*, ed. David Platt, Daniel L. Akin, and Tony Merida, Christ-centered exposition (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2017).



**“ THE GREATER THE EFFECTIVENESS
OF A MINISTRY, THE GREATER THE
RESISTANCE AND OPPOSITION ”**

TIM KELLER

What's more striking than Paul's pattern of starting at the synagogues, however, is Paul's perseverance. Remember, he just left a situation where those from the synagogue attacked him! He was driven out of town. Yet here he is again, back in a synagogue. He courageously goes right into a place of likely opposition.

Have you ever known that you would be opposed for speaking faithfully for Christ in a certain situation and yet did so anyway? The type of courage needed for encounters like that comes from the enabling power of the Spirit.

Persevere in Reliance on the Lord

In verses 2-4 the missionaries encounter resistance from nonbelieving Jews. Effectiveness and opposition go together in the missionary enterprise. Tim Keller notes this general ministry principle: "The greater the effectiveness of a ministry, the greater the resistance and opposition" (Evangelism, 117). Not only did the Jews reject the message, they "poisoned [the] minds" of the Gentile population (v. 2). The opponents engage in "anti-evangelism" with slander and false teaching. Tensions are clearly rising.

Instead of being intimidated, however, the missionaries are inspired to even bolder witness! They stay several months! And as they rely on the Spirit, they preach the "message of his grace" (Acts 20:24; Gal 1:6-7). What upset their religious opponents? Grace. They were mad enough to kill the missionaries over the good news that God extends unmerited kindness to all who will turn to him by placing faith in Christ. Grace tends either to give people an unspeakable sense of relief and joy or produce hostility and anger. The default mode of the heart is works-based righteousness; that's why people generally either embrace grace or oppose it.

To some in the crowd, a statement like, "Sinners aren't qualified to receive God's grace," would've been as welcome as a drop of poison hitting their eardrums. But in that teaching is the beauty of the gospel. Paul told the Colossians that it is "the Father who has enabled you to share in the saints' inheritance in the light" (Col 1:12). No one is qualified. Yet by God's work through Jesus, sinful men and women can be forgiven, freed, and transferred into the kingdom of God's beloved Son (Col 1:13-14). The missionaries preached grace with great boldness for an extended period of time, and the Lord accompanied their verbal witness with signs. These signs were also acts of God's grace, authenticating the missionaries' teaching. These men weren't fragile. But their determination didn't come from their own strength and willpower. They were strong because they were reliant on the Lord. They preached about the grace of Jesus, while they relied on the grace of Jesus. Jesus uses people who depend on him.¹

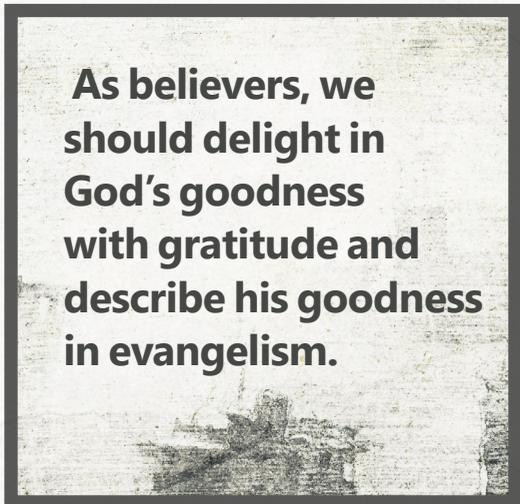
¹ Tony Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Acts*, ed. David Platt, Daniel L. Akin, and Tony Merida, Christ-centered exposition (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2017).

These missionaries are giving us a picture of grace-enabled grit that's necessary for enduring hardship in gospel ministry. This boldness and stick-with-it-ness come from the Lord of heaven and earth, who promises to be with us as we make the gospel known (Matt 28:18-20). In verse 4 we see people divided. While the gospel unites people who would never otherwise be united (1 Cor 1:10), it also divides the human race (cf. 1 Cor 1:18). If the gospel message shared is not both uniting and dividing, in fact, you can be sure that the true gospel isn't being preached.

Persevere with Prudence

Soon the verbal opposition the missionaries encountered deteriorates into physical threats. Jews and Gentiles plot to stone Paul and Barnabas (v. 5). Upon learning about this plan, the missionaries flee to the nearby towns of Lystra and Derbe in Lycaonia. In this act of relocating, we should notice the combination of prudence and perseverance. The missionaries were brave but not stupid! In fleeing danger, they lived to preach another day. Sometimes the best way to make the gospel known may mean remaining; at other times it may mean relocating. For such matters one must seek the Father, who promises to give his children wisdom when they ask him (Jas 1:5).

Once in Lystra, we find Paul preaching the gospel in a way fitting for this audience, once again giving us a model for effective evangelism. In the previous chapter Paul preached in a synagogue to the Jewish audience who were familiar with the Old Testament, but with this crowd Paul has to start with what they can see in creation instead of what they can read in the Scriptures. This doesn't mean Paul ignored the Bible. Everything he says is consistent with its message. Paul's main theme is the nature and work of the living God. The Lystrans believed in many gods and had no knowledge of the only true God, who created and sustains the world. If Paul would have jumped straight to Jesus's life and ministry, many may have accepted Jesus as one god among the many other gods in their polytheistic worldview. Paul needed to establish that there's only one God over all things.



As believers, we should delight in God's goodness with gratitude and describe his goodness in evangelism.

What's stressed here in this sermon, as in previous sermons in Acts—and as in the sermon to the Athenians—is the call for repentance. Paul urges the listeners to “turn from these worthless things to the living God” (v. 15). Paul calls the gods of the Lystrans “worthless”. Paul exhorts the people to abandon these nongods and turn to the one true and living God. That's why repentance is good news! People can know and worship the living God, instead of worthless idols, through repentance and faith in Jesus. Repentance may not sound like good news to some people, but it is! By turning from dead idols and trusting in Jesus, anyone can experience the Father's merciful, full forgiveness; they can be set free from slavery to sin; and they can have eternal life.¹

¹ Tony Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Acts*, ed. David Platt, Daniel L. Akin, and Tony Merida, Christ-centered exposition (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2017).

Then Paul emphasizes God's goodness and providence (vv. 16-17). Who sent the rains for the crops? The only true and living God (Ps 104). Who nourishes the body and satisfies hearts with good things? The only true and living God, who showers common grace on even his enemies. In making a contrast with the harsh pagan gods, Paul emphasizes the goodness of God in everyday life. Every good thing the people had ever experienced was owed to the mercy and grace of the one true God.

Are you aware of the goodness of God in your daily life? Every time you eat a good meal, relax in a comfortable chair after a day's work, laugh with friends and family around a campfire, listen to the ocean, watch a sunrise, and breathe in the fresh air, you are experiencing the kindness of God. But do you talk about the goodness of God to unbelievers over meals or in other venues as you talk about the beauty of creation? As believers, we should delight in God's goodness with gratitude and describe his goodness in evangelism.

Signs of God's goodness are all around us. Creation itself is preaching an ongoing sermon (Ps 19:1-6). It wasn't God's purpose in the past to provide specific revelation to everyone about himself and his ways, as he did for Israel. Yet God revealed himself to the nations through creation, and consequently, everyone remains accountable to God and without excuse before him. Paul develops this concept more in Romans 1, where he says that sinful humanity exchanges worshiping the glory of the Creator for worshiping created things. Consequently, all are in need of redemption.

Perhaps you're thinking, I can't use this approach because most people today believe in evolution. They don't even believe in God. But we must remember that the reality of God's existence is planted inside of every person (Rom 1). When you hear the statement, "Atheists don't believe in God," remember this: God doesn't believe in atheists! When you talk to unbelievers, don't feel you must prove to them the existence of God. Paul presupposes God's existence in his preaching in Lystra. He starts with what is visible in creation and attributes it to God. It seems like this sermon was cut short (v. 18). The crowd was determined to offer their sacrifices. They hear Paul preach, but they are underawed by his words.

Unfortunately, the opponents are able to persuade the fickle locals to join them, and as a result of mob violence, they "stoned Paul" (v. 19). One wonders while reading this account whether Paul reflected back on the stoning of Stephen, and even Stephen's prayer for the murderers, during the ordeal (Stott, *Message of Acts*, 233). One also wonders if young Timothy witnessed it. This was probably one event Paul had in mind when he wrote,

Five times I received the forty lashes minus one from the Jews. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked. I have spent a night and a day in the open sea. On frequent journeys, I faced dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my own people, dangers from Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers at sea, and dangers among false brothers; toil and hardship, many sleepless nights, hunger and thirst, often without food, cold, and without clothing. Not to mention other things, there is the daily pressure on me: my concern for all the churches. (2 Cor 11:24-28)¹

¹ Tony Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Acts*, ed. David Platt, Daniel L. Akin, and Tony Merida, Christ-centered exposition (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2017).

To the Galatians he simply summarized his sufferings like this: “I bear on my body the marks of Jesus” (Gal 6:17). And he wasn’t exaggerating. Paul imitated the sufferings of Christ as he carried the good news to people who often rejected and even assaulted him. Every Christian who wishes to follow Jesus faithfully and desires to see people come to know the Savior will have to bear some measure of suffering. It’s what I like to call the missions law. We simply won’t reach people without sacrifice. Although for some reason Barnabas wasn’t stoned alongside Paul, he was also enduring many trials along this journey—his agony over the beating his friend endured no doubt being one of them. Everyone thought Paul was dead, but as the disciples surrounded him—as a sign of love, protection, and surely in a spirit of prayer—Paul suddenly got up! Then he accompanied the disciples back to the city where the people had stoned him, and he stayed the night. This scene reminds me of another of Paul’s classic statements about grace-enabled endurance:

Now we have this treasure in clay jars, so that this extraordinary power may be from God and not from us. We are afflicted in every way but not crushed; we are perplexed but not in despair; we are persecuted but not abandoned; we are struck down but not destroyed. (2 Cor 4:7-9)

Paul was struck down, but he didn’t stay down! What tenacity! And what a testimony of God’s grace!¹

REFLECT & DISCUSS

- In the face of intense negative opinions about them, Paul and Barnabas “remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord.” How are you hindered by people’s opinions of you? Are there presently any situations in your life that beckon you to remain steadfast in love and boldly speak truth, despite what someone may think?
- Paul’s explanation of the gospel to the Greek people of Lystra was very different than his explanation to the mostly Jewish crowd at Antioch in chapter 13. Think of someone you know who currently does not know the truth of the gospel - if you had the opportunity, how could you explain the good news of what God offers in terms that person would understand? Try writing out what you might say or verbalizing it to a friend or spouse.
- Slowly read 2 Corinthians 11:24-28 and consider the list of the difficulties that Paul faced in order for men everywhere to experience the same radical transformation that he himself had experienced. Are there any ways that you regularly choose comfort or convenience over God’s invitation into the mess of the mission?
- Paul & Barnabas returned to each of the cities where they had faced persecution, strengthening the souls of the disciples and encouraging them in the faith.” Are there any people or places that have rejected you and your attempts to proclaim the goodness of God that the Spirit may be leading you to return to once again?

¹ Tony Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Acts*, ed. David Platt, Daniel L. Akin, and Tony Merida, Christ-centered exposition (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2017).

A Letter from Liz

"Since the end of May there have been over 30 attacks on villages here in our province of Cabo Delgado. They normally attack a remote bush bush village where they torch houses and behead 5-10 people. Some villages have as many as 200 houses burned others as little as 20. They also burn mosques and churches. What has come to light is the attackers are radical islamist who are seeking to enstate shari law here. We have not had an attack in the last 7 days our longest break thus far. Praise Jesus. What Pemba is seeing is lots of displaced people. There have been no attacks here in the city or even near by.

What has been most powerful is seeing our Mozambican pastors rising up. These men pastoring these churches in these remote villages and those who are attending our Bible school here in Pemba right now have risen up with a boldness never seen here. The prayers they pray are not for protection but for boldness to stand, for the faith to endure, and for the gospel to go out like never before. Its funny how we tend to want to pray protection and alleviation of the fighting, but actually when I fall on my face and pray from my belly I pray for these men and women to be as bold as a lion, to walk in a deeper love, and joy then ever before. It's not to pray away the evil, but to pray for the endurance and perseverance in it. To be overcomers. I've never experienced this. Suffering brings God's presence in such a different way. And it's not suffering for the sake of suffering, but its being so in love with Jesus that whatever comes His presence is your reward more than the alleviation of any pain.

One of the things that we have been encouraging one another in is to keep our eyes fixed. Fixed on Jesus. Not on our ministries, programs, news, government, or anything else but Jesus. I truly believe there is a great revival coming out of this time. And while the days are evil there are more that be with us then be with them. So as you feel led to pray for us, pray for our Mozambican pastors and believers here that they would remain unflinchingly bold, that they would preach the gospel fearlessly, and that they would inherit the victor's crown. They are not asking for escape, but for more joy then they have ever known to be there strength." -

Liz,
Mozambique
July 2018