

#102
January 19, 2020
Acts 14:20-29
Closing Ranks

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.

Today we wrap up the first missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas.

Last Sunday Paul and Barnabas were in Lystra. They were an instant hit after healing the lame man. They resisted the temptations that come with popularity and fame. They refused to be what people wanted them to be. They refused to adjust to the local religion. They refused to be worshipped.

Some angry Jews traveled many miles to stone Paul. We looked at our own hearts and brought forward stones which represented negative emotions that we carry every day. We chose to forgive. We chose to let God to be the judge.

We all get upset and angry. They are emotions. It is part of being a human. Even Jesus got angry. What is most important, though, is how we choose to deal with it. Can we recognize it before we react? When I get upset I clench my fists reminding myself not to speak and not to punch 😊 I turn my thoughts to God in prayer. I try to filter and win time to process. It is not a sin to feel angry, but it is a sin to react out of anger. I think all emotions are like signals. When we see a red light, we know not to drive. When we feel angry, we know not to speak or act. It is signal for us to ask and process why we feel angry. Some people suggest counting to 10 first. Others recommend saying the Lord's Prayer before responding.

Ephesians 4:26-27 gives a strange command: Be angry. Most commentators agree that we should be angry whenever we see sin such as immorality, injustice or ungodly behavior. Yes, be angry, but without sinning. Do not let your rage be fuel for

revenge. Make sure it is not because of wounded pride or bad temper. These verses also tell us that we should never allow the sun to set upon our wrath, exasperation, fury or indignation. If you do, the devil will have a foothold on your life.

In Lystra, they threw stones to Paul. They thought he was dead. You cannot kill the gospel and they did not kill Paul this time, either.

The Almighty God said, "It is the same with my word. I send it out, and it always produces fruit. It will accomplish all I want it to, and it will prosper everywhere I send it". (Isaiah 55:11).

In verse 20 we read "But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city". Disciples? What disciples? Where did they come from? So maybe the labor was not in vain. Have you heard of Timothy? Two books in the Bible are Paul's letters to the church leader named Timothy. Guess where Timothy was from: Lystra.

The disciples gathered around Paul. The next thing we read Paul gets up. He went back to the city. I can see Paul laying down, bleeding, hurt, shaking the cobwebs out of his head and I can see the disciples gathered around him. I can hear them praying and lifting up Paul. This is a community of Christians doing what they should do. This is a picture of the family of God. When somebody is hurt we stand around to help him or her to get up.



I saw this picture on Facebook. This group of female elephants is protecting the mama elephant who is giving birth. According to scientists, they normally take this formation in only two cases - under attack by predators like lions or during the birth of a new elephant.

Isn't it a beautiful picture? As a church, we are called to always surround each other, to protect, to give time to heal, to recover.

We use a common expression that a group has closed ranks. It originates with the military when soldiers come close together to face to face the enemy and protect each other.

I believe we all know the feeling when somebody has your back. I know and I have seen that New life is a very strong in supporting each other. I encourage us to continue: Not only for those we care about and love, but for all who become part of our family through the faith in Christ.

Now we see Paul getting up and limping. Where he will go? Somewhere far away from that town and those people. He will never speak about God again. He will blame the people and God for letting this happen.

No, not Paul: Not those who have been captured by the vision, the love and the purpose of why Jesus came to earth and suffered and died upon the old rugged cross. Where did Paul go? Back to the town where people stoned him. What would you call it: Stupid or courageous?

Maybe it was because he knew these disciples would surround him and care for him. Maybe he knew they were scared and he wanted to convince them that to live is Christ and to die is gain.

Once a discouraged young pastor asked a pastor of thirty years, "How have you made it in ministry so long?" The older pastor replied, "My dad once told me, "Never decide to leave the ministry when you are tired or depressed", so I have never left the ministry"! There is a sadness mingled with this humor.

It is obvious from the circumstances that Paul was not doing very well. Yet, Paul cared more about salvation and sanctification of people than his own well- being?

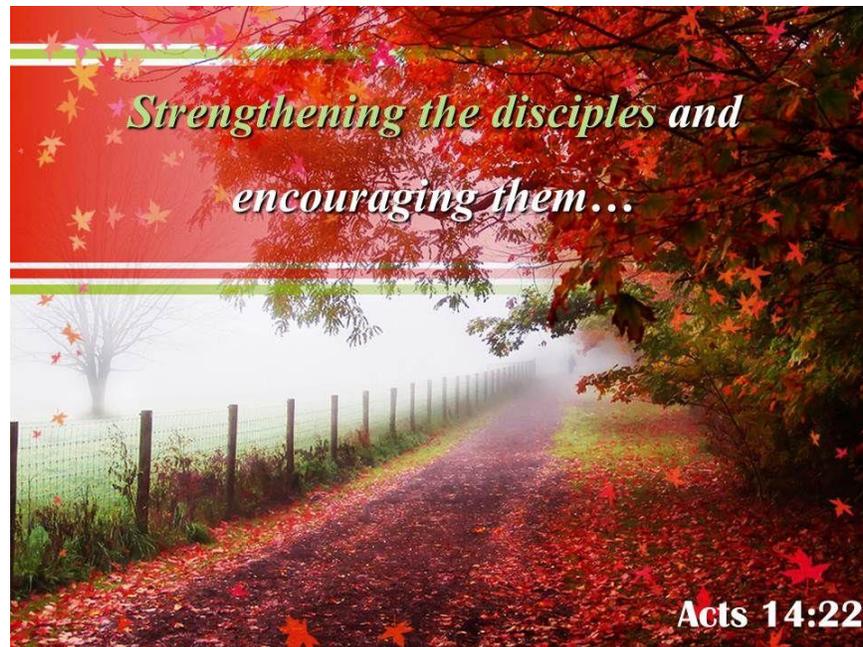


After spending the night in Lystra, Paul and Barnabas went on to Derbe. They walked about 60 miles. After “they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith”

As important as salvation is, it also is important to grow. You need both obstetrics and pediatrics.

John Wesley often spoke about sanctification. He strongly encouraged the pursuit of holiness. For Wesley, the ultimate goal of sanctification was "to renew men's and women's hearts in God's image."

Paul and Barnabas returned to the ones who already had received Jesus as their Savior. Their ministry was not done. They knew that all believers need encouragement. All of us need encouragement. All of us need to be encouraging somebody. They set apart elders knowing that Christianity must be lived in fellowship. John Wesley wrote, “No man ever went to heaven alone; he must either find friends or make them.” From the very beginning it was Paul’s aim not only to make individual Christians, but to build these individuals into Christian fellowship.



Today's passage says Paul returned to Lystra to strengthen the disciples and encourage them to remain true to the faith.

In 1993 a wonderful movie called "Rudy" was produced which is an adaption of a true story. Rudy dreamed of playing football at Notre Dame. There was no way it would happen. He had bad grades in high school, no money and no talent. Besides, he was too small. He tried everything. A quiet man, by the name of Fortune, was the Notre Dame head groundskeeper who gave him a job. Rudy manages to enroll in the college and practice with the football team but does not get to play in any game.

After overcoming all sorts of discouragement and time running out Rudy finally gives up.

Fortune finds Rudy and offers him encouragement. Because of that encouragement Rudy found the ability to return to his dream. His dream was fulfilled in the last play of the last game of his senior year.

We all need encouragement in our faith.

Why do we need encouragement? Because life in Christ is not easy. We are surrounded constantly by many choices. Life gets very difficult and very busy. Slowly and easily we slip into life where Jesus is not the center. Little by little our priorities get mixed up. Gradually our prayer decreases. Bit by bit our time of worship slips to only if it fits our lives. No wonder our life is filled with so many things that are not right. No wonder we struggle and have holes in our lives. No wonder we feel overwhelmed.



When Joseph and Mary brought 8-day-old Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem, an old man by the name of Simeon was led by the Spirit to come and meet them. He took Jesus in his arms and blessed God. Then he turned to Mary and said some very troubling words: “This child is a sign from God. He will be misunderstood and contradicted. He will be opposed. The rejection will force honesty as God reveals to people who they really are. A sword of sorrow will pierce your heart.”

I know if you are serious about your faith you will face many tests and trials just as Jesus did. If your faith is real and you are real in living your faith all the time and in all places you will face challenges. It is a constant battle to choose to live a holy life. It is a battle to make a choice based on your faith in Christ. I promise people will not like it when you are too serious about your faith.

Paul was “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”. Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom. Jesus did not come to make our life easy.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “Blessed – happy – are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

Didn't Jesus also say: “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it”.

I'd rather hear verses like Ephesians 2:8-9: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.”

Accepting Christ is just the beginning. If that would be enough, why would Paul go back? The people already accepted Christ. Why would Paul appoint elders to each church or continue to write letters to the established churches? Because we need each other to be encouraged and to stay strong in the faith.

Finally, the tired, bruised and battered missionaries returned to their home church "where several years earlier they had been commended to the grace of God for the work they had now completed".

The report does not talk about them being heroes through all their suffering. Instead, it was a celebration of how God used them for God's glory.

The mission was not finished, but the work of this trip was completed.

As you came in today you have received a little tag. Write your name on it. As you leave, put that tag in the basket. We will have an encouragement wall. Next Sunday you will be able to come and pick a name. You will be an encourager and somebody will be your encourager. For the next 5 , until the beginning of Lent, we will try to be original and the best encouragers for somebody. Paul traveled miles, endured stoning and came back to the disciples for one reason: to encourage them to stay in their faith.

Let us close ranks and face the world together.

Today as we celebrate Communion we come as one Body of Christ. Though there are many of us, we are one. God gave his life for all to be saved.