



FORTIFYING THE FOUNDATIONS OF OUR FAITH

SERIES: ACTS LIFE UNLEASHED

Acts 14:19–28

30th Message

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This month our eldest grandchild is graduating from High School. Graduation evokes mixed feelings for parents. On the one hand, there is the elation and joy over a student's accomplishments; on the other hand, there is the fear of letting go and relinquishing a son or daughter as "spiritual adults" responsible to depend on the Lord for all that they do. Will the foundations of their faith be strong enough to stand the temptations and pressures of the world, not to mention the persistent intellectual attacks upon their faith from university professors? For that matter, how strong are the fortifications of your faith? How do we remain strong and persevere to the end? How do we strengthen each other's faith?

Today we come to the final leg of Paul and Barnabas's first missionary journey. Last week we saw how the growing resistance to Paul's messianic preaching by Diaspora Jews reached a fever pitch in Lystra. After Paul had healed a cripple, his Jewish opponents from Antioch and Iconium descended upon Lystra with unrelenting force, and poisoned the minds of the people with false accusations. The fickle crowd, who earlier lauded Paul as divine, quickly turn and join the mob and hunt him down like pack animals unleashed upon their prey. This time Paul doesn't escape. He is cornered, stoned and dragged through the streets and left for dead outside the city.

I. Struck Down but Not Destroyed

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. 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. When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned... (Acts 14:19–21a ESV)

I wonder if Paul felt the painful irony, remembering, as he is "dragged" out of the city, that he himself had "dragged" believers out of their homes (8:3), and, as he is stoned by an angry mob, he once stood by watching the stoning of Stephen. The mob thought Paul was dead, but as God would have it his life was far from over. Normally when a leader falls, his followers scatter, but not in Paul's case. Surrounded by the loving gaze of disciples, who formed a circle around him for support and protection, he rose up and went back to the city. Luke's portrayal leaves much to our imagination. I don't think Paul jumped up unscathed and entered the city in triumph like Superman. The mood seems much more somber and moving. I suspect he rose as one who was deeply wounded and needed the assistance of his friends to make the journey back to the city. It was a miracle he was still alive. It must have been a holy time in one of the disciples' homes that evening—washing Paul's body, cleansing his wounds and listening to his comforting words and stirring exhortations regarding the grace of our Lord. His return to the city that had sentenced him to death was a courageous move to demonstrate to the disciples God's faithfulness in saving Paul's life

and the unwavering faith and loyalty of their leader. Though he must move on to another place where he can preach freely, he was not going to abandon them.

The following day Paul and Barnabas set out for their final destination, Derbe, about 60 miles southeast of Lystra. The journey would not be easy. Unlike the Imperial highway that was wide and paved to Lystra, this section of the Via Sebaste "was unpaved and more difficult."¹ Derbe seems to be the only town where there was no overt opposition to the gospel. Paul and Barnabas had great success evangelizing the city and making many disciples. Luke's phrase "make disciples" is significant, for it implies not just conversion, but perseverance; not mere belief, but practice. "Disciple" (*mathētēs*) is Luke's normative term for believers and is found twenty-six times in Acts. It is derived from the verb "to learn" (*manthanō*) and describes the rigorous discipline of an apprentice who learns the skills of an accomplished mentor. To be a disciple then is to be committed not just to learning, but to the acquisition of the skills of one's mentor. As Jesus said, "A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone when he is fully trained will be like his teacher" (Luke 6:40).

Derbe is the last town Paul and Barnabas will evangelize. Considering the violent persecution they have encountered, one would think they would choose the shortest and safest route home, traveling east across the Taurus Mountains through the Cilician Gates to Syrian Antioch by way of Tarsus, Paul's hometown (about 150 miles or a week's walk from Derbe). Instead, they fearlessly head straight back into the fire and retrace their steps all the way home.

II. Strengthening the Disciples

... they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, 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. 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. (14:21b–23)

Fledgling groups of disciples must be strengthened and the foundations of their faith fortified, if they are to have any chance of surviving the onslaught of persecution they will experience in the apostles' absence. To that end, believers must first and foremost be given clear expectations of what it costs to follow Jesus. Second, they need to be gathered into communities with godly leaders to nurture them. And finally, they must be relinquished and entrusted to the Lord's care with prayer and fasting.

A. Proper expectations

The apostles strengthened the souls of the disciples by warning them of the afflictions they would experience as followers of Jesus—"through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." Imagine what an impact this exhortation would have had upon you,

coming from a man who had endured slander, ridicule, death threats, stoning and being dragged out of the city and left for dead in your hometown. How different this is than heretical teachers who preach a gospel of wealth, health and prosperity. How many people do you know who have become disillusioned with their faith because leaders gave them false expectations? The apostles made it crystal-clear right from the start that following Jesus would be costly. What will it cost you? In some instances, it will cost you everything. Many Christians get all worked up about the “great tribulation” that is to come at the end of the age. For Paul, however, tribulation is already present and will continue throughout “the last days” until Jesus’ return.

As believers we need constant encouragement to persevere, to remain faithful, to not give up. This became a life long passion for Paul, which is why he was always making plans to visit his churches whenever possible, and if he couldn’t go, he would often send others to represent him. I feel similarly about the friends we’ve made in Romania. On my first mission trip in 1988, I was hosted by Ioan and Lucia Pop, who put their lives at risk having a foreigner stay in their home. We became as close as family and their youngest son, Flaviu, became like a son to me. In 2015 he organized two conferences for us to teach. Saying goodbye is always difficult and that year was no exception. Flaviu looked at me with tears in his eyes and said, “You always leave us.” “Yes,” I replied, “but I always come back.”

B. Appointing leaders to nurture the flock

Paul was not satisfied just making scores of converts. His goal was to plant self-propagating churches, where believers could grow to maturity and have a sustained impact on the cities in which they lived. Just as companies need management structures to foster growth and maintain the health of an organization alongside its visionary entrepreneurs and developers, so the church needs ecclesiastical structures alongside its charismatic prophets and evangelists. As Keener writes, “Organizing converts would consolidate the mission’s results into self-propagating bodies capable of sustained growth. Gathering converts into churches fits the sociological principle that people are influenced by their social context (1 Cor 15:33).”²

You are grievously naïve if you think you can grow to maturity and not be committed to a local church. Of course, the problem with church is that everyone in them is as flawed as you, which means you have to learn to get along as if you are family. Eugene Peterson says, “When we sin and mess up our lives, we find that God doesn’t go off and leave us—he enters into our trouble and saves us,”³ and so it should be in God’s family.

Jesus did not give the apostles specific instructions regarding organizational structures for his followers, but he was adamant about the character of leaders and the “way” they were to lead. As Mark records in his gospel,

“You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:42–45)

Leaders in the church must not exercise their authority by lording it over others from the top down, but rather they are to sacrificially serve others from the bottom up.

When Paul lists the qualifications for leaders in Timothy and Titus, every qualification but one (“apt to teach” in 1 Tim 3:2) pertains to an individual’s character or reputation in the community. This focus on character allows the forms and structures of leadership to evolve in different ways over time and cultural contexts, as long as those who are chosen to lead are godly and maintain the priorities taught and modeled by the apostles.

The apostles had two organizational models they could adapt for their house churches: the temple and the synagogue. One was primarily liturgical and symbolic with a full time priesthood; the other focused on instruction and prayer and was more participatory. Keener elaborates,

The primary leadership model that the Christians had available to adapt was leadership in the synagogue... and it is reasonable to suppose that it borrowed the term “elders” from there as well. Synagogues in the Jewish Diaspora were ruled by a council of elders...Biblical usage of the title suggests its long history in ancient Israel; there the older male members of a community typically functioned as its de facto community leaders. The usage was natural in a world where respect for elders was part of the broader culture...Although exceptions were made for the spiritually mature, it made sense to select most elders...at least somewhat on the basis of their age, both because of the respect this would entail in the community and because older members of a local community normally knew the community best. They were generally considered to be the wisest. Not only the factor of age but also the status of heads of stable households, with success in governing their households, would make church leaders more respectable to the broader community...Small house churches of new believers had patron families in whose homes they met and probably some senior members who had previously attended synagogue and could offer teachings on Scripture.⁴

Keener concludes by saying,

Most likely, leadership forms remained in flux for some time, with various titles in use alongside each other, just as titles and offices for synagogue leaders varied throughout the Roman world.⁵

Next week marks our 45th wedding anniversary. After our honeymoon, Emily and I loaded up a truck in Los Angeles with all our possessions and moved to the Bay Area to intern at PBC. As we were leaving, my father asked to me, “If you want to become a pastor, why don’t you go to an accredited seminary?” I wasn’t able to put my answer into words then, but my heart was saying, “I’m not seeking an academic credential. What I long for is to have my life shaped by godly men.”

As a college student I had the privilege of being an advisor to the Board of Elders of PBC. Sitting in that circle was an unforgettable experience. I was awestruck by these men. On the night of my first meeting, as the meeting came to a close, I was particularly impressed as I watched On the night of my first meeting, I was particularly impressed as the meeting came to a close, one of the elders approach another brother and ask, “Is there something between us in our relationship? If there is, I want to set it right.” That had quite an impact on me. I began to discover the true definition of the church. The church is not an organization; it is a family whose leaders humbly serve to foster healthy relationships. If you were to ask me today, forty-five years later, what has been the greatest asset of my spiritual education, I would insist that it was not learning Greek or Hebrew, or indeed anything I received in the classroom. It has been

the wisdom, care, and protection I have received from our elders all these years.

C. Entrusted to the Lord

After they appointed elders they committed them to the Lord with prayer and fasting, just as they had been sent forth with prayer and fasting. “Prayer and fasting” is the most serious and dependent posture we can take before the Lord. When we commend someone to the Lord, often with the laying on of hands, it is not a way of exercising control over them. It is a way of letting go and relinquishing them to the Lord’s care and protection. It is testifying that they are now “spiritual adults” responsible to depend on the Lord for all that they do. So it is only right and proper that the entire community seek God’s anointing and grace, trusting the Spirit of Jesus to equip them, guide them, warn them and encourage them. Paul and Barnabas are keenly aware how effective it has proven to be.

What amazes me is how quickly these foundations were put into place. These elders had no formal training or academic degrees. The New Testament wasn’t yet written, there were few copies of the Hebrew Scripture and no commentaries. Paul expected the elders to learn everything on the job. There is nothing that speeds the process of learning more than living in the midst of intense conflict. These leaders are like inexperienced medics, who are thrown into the front lines and forced to learn how to make life and death decisions on their feet with limited resources and precious little time. Although most of their names will remain anonymous in the annals of history, Keener notes the long range impact these leaders had in Anatolia.

Although the short-range results of Paul’s mission seem small compared with his later ministry in more cosmopolitan Ephesus or Corinth, this southern Anatolian mission both provided Paul necessary experience and laid the foundation for a growing movement. In Asia Minor, as word spread from the cities, “thousands of communities converted en masse to Christianity during the third and fourth centuries.”

How thankful I am that my first mentor, David Roper, followed the apostles’ model. I accepted Christ during my senior year in high school and shortly after I entered the university, I asked David if he would teach a Bible study in my fraternity house. He said “No.” Puzzled by his response, I asked him “Why?” He replied, “Because I’m going to teach you and you’re going to teach it.” After I objected that I had no knowledge of the Bible, he said he would meet with me every Tuesday to go over the Scriptures and assured me that the Lord would be with me. What could I say? I confess that I didn’t sleep much that week. To my surprise, it didn’t take long for me to discover the power of God’s word spoken through an inexperienced, broken vessel. I prayed that four of my fraternity brothers would accept Christ and, by the end of the second quarter, four had come to Christ. David continued to gently push me out of my comfort zone to share the “good news” everywhere God had placed me, from the gym to the classroom, from the local campus to overseas in Italy, where I studied my sophomore year. From the impact David had upon my life, I have become a passionate believer in “on the job” training ever since.

III. Reporting to Home Base

Then they passed through Pisidia and came to Pamphylia. And when they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia, and from there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they

had fulfilled. 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. And they remained no little time with the disciples. (14:24–28)

Once the foundations of the newly planted churches were in place, Paul and Barnabas set out on the Via Sebaste and cross the pass over the Taurus Mountains and climb down to Perga in the coastal region of Pamphylia. Having bypassed Perga on their way in, they take the opportunity to “preach the word” in this predominantly Gentile town before their departure. From Perga they went down to the port of Attalia, the major port for trade between Syria and Egypt. There they took a merchant ship and sailed back to their home base in Syrian Antioch. Tom Wright notes,

Now as they get back to Syrian Antioch, Luke reminds us that that was where they had been ‘commended to the grace of God’ for the work they had completed: in other words, that the initial prayers of the church had been for the powerful, sovereign love of God to be at work in, through and around them, both guiding them and reaching out through their words, their life and their prayer to do new things in the world, works of healing of hearts and minds and bodies. In other words, ‘grace’ is not just a doctrine to be believed; it is a fact you can lean your weight on.⁷

Prayer is powerful and shapes history. When our firstborn son became listless and unresponsive a few days after his birth, Emily and I moved to San Francisco for six days to be with him in intensive care. While we were away, Elaine Stedman organized an all-night prayer meeting in our condominium to pray for David’s life. Though our son died from an incurable rare enzyme deficiency, I am convinced that those prayers unleashed a torrent of God’s grace that shaped our lives in ways we could never have imagined. The following year our daughter Jessica suffered the same fate but, miraculously, we were able to adopt a little girl fourteen days after she died. In the years that followed Emily gave birth to two healthy daughters and we spiritually adopted countless children into our hearts from Romania, where I led mission trips, and in Emily’s preschool, where she has taught for seventeen years. As David wrote, “weeping may come lodge for the night, but a shout of joy comes in the morning” (Ps 30:5).

During their journey the apostles traveled some 1580 miles in a period scholars estimate to be one to two years. Once they landed they gathered the church together and “declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.” What a blessing this must have been to those who sent them forth and faithfully prayed for them.

From the “shape” of Paul and Barnabas’s first missionary journey, we can see similarities how God shapes our spiritual journey. The apostles were “sent out” to make disciples with prayer and fasting. Then after preaching the gospel in six cities they “return” to strengthen the disciples, commending them to God with prayer and fasting. Having completed their mission, they return home to Syrian Antioch to give testimony and praise for “all that God had done with them.” Likewise, we are “sent out” into the world to spread the “good news” and “strengthen the disciples” through the power of prayer and the leading of the Holy Spirit. As we mature and age, we have a responsibility to record our praise to tell the generation to come “the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might, and the wonders that he has done” (Ps 78:4).

Last week I buried my dear friend Bill Kiefer. We met in 1975 and shortly thereafter began to study the Scriptures together. Bill

had a voracious appetite for God's word and took every opportunity to grow as a disciple, learning, teaching and traveling around the globe. In 2013 he wrote his spiritual journey entitled "Coming Home" and made copies for his family and friends. Reading through it, I was struck how the bulk of his testimony details the profound encounters of God's love and grace that he experienced on mission trips. Like Paul and Barnabas, Bill discovered that "grace is not just a doctrine to be believed; it is a fact you can lean your weight on."⁸ May we go and do likewise.

1. Craig S. Keener, *Acts, An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 2:2178.
2. Keener, *Acts*, 2:2182–83.
3. Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 53.
4. Keener, *Acts*, 2:2184–87.
5. Keener, *Acts*, 2:2188–89.
6. Stephen Mitchell, *Anatolia: Land, Men, and Gods in Asia Minor* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 2:vii, quoted by Keener, *Acts*, 2:2184.
7. N. T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone: Part One, Chapters 1–12* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 34–35.
8. Wright, *Acts for Everyone*, 35.

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