

## **“CONTINUE IN THE FAITH”**

Acts 14:1–28

Key Verse: 14:22

“...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.”

What do you think about being a “disciple”? Some say, “That’s for intense people, not me.” Many say believing and living a decent life is good enough. In this passage Paul and Barnabas travel to three cities, sharing the gospel, and return to their home church. As they preach the gospel, they make many disciples (21).<sup>1</sup> Then they go back to visit and help them. Paul’s life models what discipleship looks like. And he shows us what’s involved in making disciples. We especially want to think about what it means to “continue in the faith.” What is this “faith”? How does it make us disciples, and disciple-makers? How does this apply to our lives today? May God speak to us through his word.

Paul just gave his first major sermon. His point was that through this man Jesus comes forgiveness of sins. This good news fills us with the grace of God, joy, and the Holy Spirit (13:43b,52). After hearing it, many beg to hear more, and they start following Paul and Barnabas. But the next week, these two are driven out of Antioch, shake the dust off their feet, and go to another city called Iconium (13:51). It’s about 90 miles away on a Roman road.<sup>2</sup> In culture, Pisidian Antioch was mostly Roman, but Iconium is mainly Greek.<sup>3</sup> Iconium “lies on a high, fertile plateau,” and in those times it’s “a large and wealthy city.”

Read verse 1. Though the Jews had just run them out of town, Paul and Barnabas again go to a Jewish synagogue. They’re not trying to find the easiest, safest way; they’re out to obey God’s will. In this synagogue Paul and Barnabas speak “in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks” believe. In what way do they speak? Does Paul have eloquent, plausible wisdom and lofty

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<sup>1</sup> The word “disciples” is repeated here five times (13:52; 14:20,21,22,28). In Acts, “disciples” is the most frequent way of referring to believers, and it associates the word “disciples” with “Christians” (11:26b).

<sup>2</sup> This city is still there in Turkey, now called “Konya,” one of the oldest, continually occupied cities in the world, with a population today of 1.5 million.

<sup>3</sup> *Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, article on “Iconium.”

speech? No, his message is “a demonstration of the Spirit’s power” (1 Cor.1:17; 2:1,4). His custom is to reason from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead (17:2–3). Paul’s speaking is not human ideas but Bible-based and Christ-centered. He’s sure that “...faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom.10:17).

At first, many believe. But look at verse 2. These brand new believers are quickly swayed. What do Paul and Barnabas do? Read verse 3. They remain for a long time. They don’t run; they do even more to fight it. They’re fighting not for their own honor, but to build up these new believers. God gives them the Holy Spirit to keep “speaking boldly for the Lord.” And when they do, the Lord Jesus himself bears witness “to the word of his grace.” People see Paul and Barnabas doing the very work of Jesus. How do they respond? Look at verse 4. The response to the gospel is usually divided (Luke 12:51–53). Why? Because the gospel calls us to repent, and not everyone wants to. Then things escalate. Look at verses 5–7. Jews and Gentiles, usually hostile to each other, get together to mistreat and stone Paul and Barnabas, so they have to flee to other places. But they’re not daunted; they continue preaching the gospel. Why? Because there’s still so many unreached people.

The next city they go to is Lystra. It’s about 25 miles south of Iconium. It’s a “rustic, market town in the relatively backward region of Lycaonia.” Lystra seems to have no synagogue. Here Paul encounters a man sitting who cannot use his feet. He was crippled from birth and had never walked (8). Look at verse 9. The man is listening to Paul speaking. And something begins happening in his heart. Because Paul is full of the Spirit, he can sense it, so he looks intently at the man and sees that he has faith to be made well. The man’s faith is a gift of God through the work of the word of God and the Holy Spirit. Paul, led by the Spirit, tells the man in a loud voice, “Stand upright on your feet” (10). In the compassion of Jesus, and by faith in him, Paul wants to restore his life. Miraculously, the man springs up and begins walking. It’s like Peter’s healing a lame man (3:1–10), further proof that Paul is an authentic apostle of Christ.

But people respond in the wrong way. Look at verses 11–12. There was an old myth that the Greek gods Zeus and Hermes had arrived in their area in disguise and visited many houses that refused to accept them. When one poor family finally did so, Zeus and Hermes then destroyed all the families that didn’t

welcome them. Now, after Barnabas and Paul do this great miracle of healing the lame man, these people are afraid of treating them badly. Look at verse 13. The priest of Zeus comes from his temple right outside of town and brings oxen and garlands to have a big sacrifice. Paul and Barnabas could have made use of this situation for their own advantage. But what do they do? Read verse 14. Tearing their clothes indicates this is blasphemy. They want to stop this.

Paul's speech is brief. Read verse 15. Though they're superstitious and idolatrous, Paul identifies with these people as fellow human beings. Then, in great compassion, he turns their attention away from the gods they're afraid of, which he calls "vain things," to "a living God." The living God is the Creator of heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them. He's invisible, above all, almighty, still ruling, and sovereign over all things. All other "gods" are made-up stories, and nothing but lifeless statues. Paul earnestly wants these people to know their living Creator God. And with the coming of Jesus, the good news of forgiveness of sins, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, they can. Look at verses 16–17. Though they've been living their own ways, in ignorance of God, Paul emphasizes God's goodness to them. They've actually experienced it their entire lives. Our Creator God does all of us good by giving us rains, fruitful seasons, and satisfying our hearts with food and gladness. But these people's ideas are so fixed, it's hard to stop them from trying to sacrifice to them (18).

Then things get ugly. Look at verse 19. These Jews came all the way from Antioch and Iconium to put an end to Paul. Though he's just getting started to speak about Jesus, they interrupt him, persuade the crowd, stone Paul as a blasphemer, and drag him out of the city, supposing he's dead. What a shift these people make, from almost worshiping, to stoning! It again shows how people need discipleship in faith to become steady and stable in Christ.

What happens? Read verse 20a. "But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city..." Since they just arrived in Lystra, these disciples are probably new believers from Pisidian Antioch and Iconium who've begun following Paul. Though the crowd abandons him, these disciples gather about him. They care. Maybe they're worried he's going to die. Maybe they're praying together. In any case, Paul becomes conscious and sees them gathered around him. And what does he do? It says he rises up. Not only that, he enters

the city. He's showing them an example. He goes right back to the place where they just about killed him. Why?

Paul is demonstrating what it means to be united with Christ by faith (Rom.6:2–4). Through faith in his death and resurrection, and filled with the Spirit, Paul is infused with resurrection power to overcome his badly damaged body. He's full of resurrection faith in Jesus that drives out fear. With resurrection faith in Jesus, he goes right back to fight against the power of darkness and unbelief. But Paul is no superhero. Like him, every believer is baptized into Christ's death and resurrection and filled with the Spirit. We all are called to live like him. He writes elsewhere, "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies..." (2 Cor.4:8–11).

Let's think for just a moment a bit more about Paul. He's just been stoned, nearly to death. What that does to his body doesn't just miraculously disappear. From now on, he'll have to live with health issues. Soon he will write these new believers that he bears in his body "the marks of Jesus" (Gal.6:17). People can visibly see what he's been through. In the first days and weeks after the stoning he'll need to stop the bleeding, alleviate the pain, and treat any fractures. He may have a concussion. It'll take weeks or months for all the bruising, lacerations, swelling, and internal injuries to heal. He's been through emotional and psychological trauma, and may now have permanent physical disabilities. Look at verse 20b. Even with all this, Paul immediately presses forward in ministry.

Not much is known or said here about the third city, Derbe. All we hear is that Barnabas and Paul preach the gospel to that city and make many disciples (21a). There's no drama, no opposition. Maybe Paul's physical appearance after the stoning has a profound impact on these people. So they can make many disciples here. Making disciples means to go beyond evangelizing to teach and train people to follow Jesus as Lord. Together, Barnabas and Paul made disciples back in Syrian Antioch; now they're doing it here. What is a disciple? Basically, it means <Next Slide>to change from living for self to living for Jesus as Lord of my heart and life. It means <Next Slide> to follow his teachings and learn to depend on him. It also means <Next Slide> to learn from one of his followers as my mentor. It means <Next Slide> to join with his followers as my

brothers and sisters, to side with them, not with unbelievers (4b), and <Next Slide> to gather around those who've suffered for Jesus (20a).

What's the real substance of disciple-making? Read verse 22. Above all, we need to strengthen people's souls and encourage them to continue in the faith. Strengthen their souls? How can we possibly strengthen anyone's soul? Here, "strengthen" means to lean on a firm foundation, and thus become strong. Hebrews 6:19–20a says, "We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters through the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf..." Through Jesus, our souls have a sure and steadfast anchor. Jesus saves our souls. Jesus gives our souls hope. Through Jesus, we have strong encouragement to hold fast to this hope with confidence, without wavering (Heb.3:6,14; 6:18b; 10:23,35). Through Jesus, we have access, anytime and anywhere, to come right into God's holy presence to find mercy and receive grace to help in time of need (Heb.4:16; 10:19). To strengthen people's souls we have to keep pointing them to Jesus.

They also encourage people to "continue in the faith." "Encouraging" literally means coming alongside, to be right there with people in their struggle. We can't do this if we never visit and get close, only remain at a safe distance. We need to get right in there with disciples, as they say, "in the trenches." When someone is tempted to turn away, we need to encourage him or her to continue in the faith. "The faith" is gospel faith, faith in Jesus' death and resurrection. It's not just a doctrine; it's faith to die with Jesus and to live with him every day. It's faith to "continue" in the grace of God (13:43). Ultimately, it's faith to "remain in Jesus," to "abide" in Jesus (John 15:1–7). This is the secret of all spiritual life and fruitfulness. We need to keep coming to Jesus every day, spending personal time in his presence, leaning into him instead of depending on ourselves. When we continue in the faith, we gain every spiritual blessing in Christ (Eph.1), and we can disciple others.

But it also brings some hard results. Read verse 22b. "...and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." We enter God's kingdom only by faith in the grace of Jesus, not by our works, right? So what does it mean that we must enter the kingdom "through many tribulations"? Here, "tribulation" means oppression, affliction or distress. In the context of spreading the gospel it especially means the hardships and persecutions that come. Paul

wrote, “Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim.3:12). But it’s not just persecution. Jesus said, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). Our cross is our calling and mission from God. As Jesus our Lord denied himself and carried his cross until he died, we need to follow his example. Simply put, no cross, no crown, no suffering, no glory. To enter the kingdom, like Jesus and like Paul we’ve got to go through many tribulations.

On this journey Paul is a great example. He went through a strenuous hike in the mountains to get to this area. He was reviled and driven out of Antioch. He was plotted against and had to flee Iconium. He was stoned in Lystra. But he doesn’t just quit and take care of himself. He doesn’t take the easy way and go back home to nearby Tarsus. He turns around the long way back and visits each place where there are new disciples, at great risk to himself. It’s not to show off how great he is; it’s out of his shepherd’s heart for these new believers. Even while recovering and in pain, he goes to encourage and comfort and inspire.

In our lives today, our tribulations aren’t as epic as Paul’s. They can be as mild as being refused if we invite people to church or Bible study. Just living in secular culture with its ungodly values is hard. We’re pressured to keep silent about our faith. The media represents Christians negatively. Sometimes it gets personal. People’s minds can get poisoned against us. Sometimes they misunderstand, despise, ridicule and even threaten us. We can feel ostracized or humiliated. We can experience trouble at church. It can make sharing the gospel seem futile. But all this is part of learning from Jesus. He said, “Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:20a). We’re all surrounded by life’s cares and riches and pleasures that can choke out the word of God even if we study it (Luke 8:14). Though it’s counter-cultural, disciples need a clear decision of faith to suffer like Jesus and for Jesus with hope in God’s kingdom.

Read verse 23. It tells us that to live as disciples today, we all still need to be plugged in to a church with God-appointed elders (23a) and be really committed to the Lord (23b). At the beginning and end of this chapter, in verses 3 and 28, it says that Paul and Barnabas “remain” with disciples. Today still, to really grow as disciples, people need gospel servants to remain with them.

Verses 24–28 describe their return to their home church in Syrian Antioch. The highlight is their missionary report. Read verse 27. They could have said many things. They could have talked about all the hard travels and persecution. They could have exaggerated about what they had done. But they only mention what God had done with them. It was really the grace of God that used them and brought them through it all. And their main point is that God himself had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. God still opens such doors when disciples of Jesus learn to “continue in the faith.” Let’s pray that through our faith, God may send us out and open the door of faith to unreached people all around the world today.

Let’s read our key verse, verse 22 again. May God help us to suffer for Jesus with resurrection faith, so that we can strengthen and encourage those around us to continue in the faith.