

## Do Hard Things

### Acts 14:21-28

By Phillip G. Kayser

A newspaper reporter asked a millionaire how he became rich. He said, “Well, I began by buying peanuts for 5¢ a bag and selling them for 10¢ a bag. I worked long hours and every holiday. But I didn’t become a millionaire for another five years.” The reporter asked him, “Well, what happened?” And the millionaire said with a smile. My dad died and I inherited his fortune. That’s the way some people wish all success could happen – to just land in our laps.

This past Monday Jonathan was showing me some footage that Colton took of the Reblution conference. Jonathan had done a trailer for them that is now all over the web. You can find it on Piper’s website and a lot of other websites. And the film picked up the back of a t-shirt that said, “Do hard things.” I love that t-shirt because almost everything in life that is of value and eternal significance requires doing hard things. And the things that are easy for you now probably were hard before. Now don’t get me wrong - you *can* escape doing many hard things in this life, but your life will be wasted. It will not count. Let me give an example of a person who avoided doing hard things. At the time of the Reformation there were two Martins: Martin Luther and Martin of Basle. Both came to Christ about the same time, but Martin of Basle was afraid to make a public confession of faith. It would have cost him. It would have been a hard thing. So he took the easiest way of confessing his faith – he just confessed it to God. He wrote on a leaf of parchment: “O most merciful Christ, I know that I can be saved only by the merit of thy blood. Holy Jesus, I acknowledge thy sufferings for me. I love thee! I love thee!” Then he removed a stone from the wall of his chamber and hid it there. His testimony was not discovered for more than 100 years. At the same time Martin Luther wrote: “My Lord confessed me before men; I will not shrink from confessing Him before kings.” That was a hard thing to do. But the results were world-transforming. The world knows Martin Luther; the world was changed by Martin Luther; but who knows about Martin of Basle? He disappeared without changing a thing. If you want to be a Martin of Basle, you can ignore hard things, but I urge you not to. Today’s sermon gives five “Hard Things” that Paul was regularly engaged in. And these hard things help to explain his success.

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instructions to be followed. He usually pronounces his decision, and sees no need to explain his reasons.” (Helen Wilkie)

I think that is a little bit of a stereotype. I’m not buying into an either/or dichotomy here. In fact, later in chapter 15 we are going to be seeing that the team Paul led looked a little bit different than the team that Barnabas led, yet Barnabas was able to effectively work in both atmospheres. After having looked at synopses of Paul and biographies of Paul, I have come to the conclusion that Paul’s teams don’t even remotely look like the psychologically manipulated teams found in some progressive corporations. He would have failed many church planter assessment tests and personality profiles. I was surprised at the games and inane exercises some of these guys had their teams go through to develop team spirit. I would have been embarrassed.

Paul was neither an autocrat nor a feminized man. He didn’t use gimmicks. He avoided the abusive leadership that you find described in passages like Ezekiel 34 or 3 John. Paul shows remarkable Spirit-led leadership. And I want to look at seven features of team playing that I have found in the ministry teams that are described in the Bible. It doesn’t matter how diverse they are, from David’s band of 400 to Paul’s small missionary team, they had these seven features that can be summarized in the acrostic, FASTING.

### ***A.Flexible***

The F is for Flexible. I think Barnabas was more flexible than Paul, but both showed enormous flexibility to adapt to new situations, pressures and changes of plan. I don’t think you can read through chapters 13-14 without seeing flexibility as a characteristic of all the team members – with the exception of John Mark. It was a lack of flexibility that made some team members bail out later. But Paul’s teams had to instantly be able to adapt on the fly to the new circumstances that came up. This is one of the things that has weeded out ministry people in China. If they weren’t flexible, they just could not hack it.

### ***B.Available***

The A is for available. Obviously, if a person doesn’t have time for the team, he won’t be able to play. And sometimes there can be seasons of life. It’s just not your time to be on a particular team, or you are just not qualified. So available.

### ***C.Submissive***

The S is for Submissive. It doesn't matter whether the person is a team member or the team leader; he needs to have learned submission. And interestingly, lack of submission was the thing that led to the abusive leadership of Diotrephes in the book of 3 John. Commentators point out that his name is a rare name used by Aristocrats. It may have been his position that made him feel that he couldn't submit to a peasant like John. But ultimately it was pride that made him love to have the preeminence (there was the first abusive characteristic), to engage in gossip, to refuse John's apostolic authority, to reject the input and teachings of others, to control the actions of his group down to the level of telling people who they could invite into their homes and expelling people from the fellowship simply because they wouldn't submit to his abusive control. So it is an irony you find in several places in the Scripture that a leader who isn't submissive himself will have a tendency to be abusive and require blind obedience rather than true submission. But all team members need to learn this. I have found many times that mothers are frustrated with their unsubmitive children, and they don't realize that they have taught their children to be that way by the wife's own attitudes toward Dad. I have seen Dad's inculcate this by the way they talk about their bosses or their elders. Submission.

### ***D.Teachable***

The T stands for teachable. A know-it-all can help a team out for a time, but if he persists in being unteachable, he will cause problems in the long run.

### ***E.Initiative***

The I stands for Initiative. Without initiative, a team member becomes a drain to the team rather than an asset. Of course, without the other characteristics, initiative can divide the team because everybody will want to do their own thing.

### ***F.Networkable***

The N stands for Networkable. I couldn't think of a better N word, but it means that he needs to be able to work with others. There are some people who simply will not fit on a team. You can assign them solo work, but that's it. This is why MTW screens team members for mission teams carefully to make sure that each person can relate well to the others. But in addition to that, there needs to be a balance of giftings. Think about it this way: even if you had all good people like Paul on a team, it would have difficulty

working. They need to be networkable. Not every team player can work on every team.

### **G. Growing**

And then finally, he needs to be growing. If you aren't growing, you are diminishing. There is no neutrality in life. You are either moving forward or you are moving backward. A person who is committed to growing.

## **II. Press Forward (v. 21,24-25)**

### **A. The wind of enthusiasm was not taken out of their sails (v. 20 - "Derbe"; v. 21 - "preached the Gospel")**

Which leads us to the second of the five hard things these men did. They pressed forward despite opposition, discouragement and apparent failure. They didn't get very far in Lystra. They were kicked out almost right away. In verse 20, after Paul was stoned, he went back into the city of Lystra, but then pressed on to a brand new preaching post – Derbe. Apparently he stayed in Derbe for quite some time because verse 21 says, **And when they had preached the gospel to that city and made many disciples...** It was preaching the Gospel that had gotten Paul stoned. If there was a good time to suggest a furlough or a brief vacation, this would have been it. Many a lesser person would have allowed the wind of enthusiasm to be completely taken out of their sails. But Paul was committed to doing the hard thing *if it was the right thing*. Obviously there is a place for vacations. Both Paul and Christ practiced that. But they didn't allow hard things to take the wind out of their sails. And here in Derbe, God is gracious and there isn't any persecution. God knows how much we can handle, and that in itself can enable us to press on.

### **B. They aren't content with winning converts (v. 21 - "to that city," "made many disciples")**

Nor were they content with merely winning converts. Verse 21 says that they **made many disciples**. The word for disciple means one who is engaged in the "study of the law with a view to knowing and doing God's will" (TDNT). It can have the idea of apprentice, but in the New Testament is generally a reference to a person who is learning all God's Word and is learning *how to apply it in life*. It is far more than simply getting converts. This is the problem I have with many versions of missions out there. They really aren't giving comprehensive discipleship. Christian aren't taught how

to be godly businessmen with Biblical economics. New Christian politicians aren't being taught how to apply Biblical law. Mothers aren't being taught the practical skills and characteristics listed in Titus 2. Making disciples is a hard thing, but if the church is to press forward, it is an essential thing. But notice in verse 21 that Paul "**preached the Gospel to that city.**" It's interesting that he doesn't say, "to the people in that city." No, it was the city itself he was trying to convert. Peter Wagner points out that Paul always had the goal of reaching entire cities. Such a goal may seem audacious, but Paul was not just content to win individuals. As God gave opportunity, he engaged in a nation-discipling mission.

***C. They weren't scared away from the persecuting cities (v. 21 - "they returned...")***

Nor were Paul and his team scared away from the previous persecuting cities. Since God called them, verse 21 says that **they returned.**

***D. Taking previous churches to the next level (v. 21, 24-25)***

And the purpose for their returning was to take the previous churches to the next level. Can you see that? They were constantly pressing forward. If you examine the cities listed in verses 24-25 you discover that Paul was backtracking all the way through his previous journey in order to ground those churches deeper. And we will look at the summary of that in verse 22 in a second. But I just want to highlight the geography. I've printed maps for you of Paul's journey. If he had just kept going southeast from Derbe, it would have been only another 90 miles to the coast and then a quick ride to Antioch of Syria. And it would have been a beautiful road. Or alternatively, he could have taken a jaunt over to his former hometown of Tarsus along easy roads. The second map shows the Roman roads, which were beautiful; the third shows the major national highways.<sup>1</sup> It is clear that Paul was not looking for the shortest way home. We have already seen that the journey he took to get to Iconium was incredibly difficult travel. The reason they retraced their steps was that they wanted their churches to be well grounded in the faith. It shows an incredible pastoral heart.

***E. But they never stopped reaching new people***

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<sup>1</sup> See last page for maps.

### III. Grow Deeper (v. 22)

#### ***A. Disciples***

So I want to look at Roman numeral III – the third hard thing that Paul not only promotes, but a hard thing that the churches themselves embrace. It is to grow ever deeper in our walk with God. You can see that simply in the word “disciples” that occurs in verse 22. We’ve already looked at the meaning of the word disciple. But the Great Commission itself helps define that Word as much more than simply converts. It calls us to disciple nations, and to teach those nations to observe all things that Christ has commanded. In Matthew 5 Jesus commanded us to teach and obey all God’s Old Testament laws, even the least of them. So making disciples involves a constant growth into more understanding of the Word and better application of it.

Now contrast that with a current view that all the Great Commission is about is getting more converts. Here is Jack Hyle’s interpretation. He says,

“Notice the four basic verbs: (1) Go. (2) Preach. (3) *Baptize*. (4) *Teach* them again. You teach them something after you get them saved and baptized. What do you teach them? To . . . ‘observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.’ . . . Now what did He command us to do? Go, preach, baptize, then teach what He commanded us to do. So, we teach them to go, preach, and baptize, that they may teach their converts to go and preach and baptize.”

His version of the Great Commission is simply to make converts.

Well, God calls us to do something that is much harder – make disciples.

#### ***B. Strengthening them***

This is why Paul goes back to these churches to strengthen them. He knows it’s going to be hard. So verse 22 says, **strengthening the souls of the disciples**. Paul wants them to grow deeper, and to do that he will need to teach, coach, encourage, correct and refine. If you’re not growing stronger, you’re growing weaker. Your goal should be to exercise your spiritual muscles so that you can keep growing stronger.

#### ***C. Exhorting to perseverance***

Verse 22 goes on to say, **exhorting them to continue in the faith...** It’s so easy to fall away without such accountability. This is why Hebrews 10 connects isolation with apostasy. Hebrews 10:24-25 is frequently quoted out of context. It says, **And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the**

**more as you see the Day approach.** But the whole next section gives the reason. It tells us what can so easily happen if we don't connect with the body. It starts with a "For," and then speaks of the reasons why we can apostatize. The last verses sum it up saying, **Therefore do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise. For yet a little while, and He who is coming will come and will not tarry. Now the just shall live by faith; but if anyone draws back, My soul has no pleasure in him.**" **But we are not of those who draw back to perdition, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul.** The doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints is quite different the counterfeit doctrine of Once Saved Always Saved. Once Saved Always Saved often says that once you profess faith you will go to heaven even if you apostatize and live in rebellion. It is the opposite of doing hard things. But the Reformed doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints says that without perseverance there is no salvation, that we *must* persevere, and that it is God's *grace* that enables us to persevere, and that if we are the elect we *will* persevere. But there is a world of difference between once saved always saved and the Biblical doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. In any case, Hebrews 10 says that God does that in the context of the body.

#### ***D. The role of tribulations***

Then comes an interesting phrase, saying, **"We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God."** That is tied in with this perseverance of the saints. And I love that phrase because it is a broadside against modern wimped out Christianity. I want you to notice four things about that phrase: 1) First, there are tribulations. 2) Second, those tribulations are not an option: Paul says, **we must.** 3) Third, it is through tribulations that we enter the kingdom. 4) Fourth, this means that entering the kingdom is *not* a one time event. Until Jesus Christ comes back we will continue to pray, **They kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.** In heaven God's revealed will is being perfectly obeyed, but on earth that is not the case. Our prayer is that His will be done on earth as perfectly as it is in heaven, and that requires that His kingdom come more and more in the world, in the church, in our families and in our lives individually. So we enter the kingdom at conversion, we continue to enter into more deeply throughout our lives and we will enter into the final expression of the kingdom in heaven at the time of our death. Every one of those stages engages us in tribulation. Even death is one kind of tribulation. The word "tribulation" does not just mean persecution. Any difficulties or



hardships can be tribulations. So this is a theological statement that stands in total contrast to the Health and Wealth Gospel. It is not simply backslidden Christians who face trouble. Those who are seeking to enter the kingdom and to press that kingdom forward also experience tribulation. And Paul said that it wasn't avoidable – “**we must through many tribulations enter the kingdom.**”

Just think of the spiritual warfare side of that tribulation. Preaching the kingdom involves the church in invading Satan's kingdom. Taking people out of darkness requires spiritual warfare. Of course, this warfare isn't always with Satan. Sometimes it is our own flesh that gives us the difficulty, and we have to war against it. Sometimes it is the world system. Sometimes God Himself allows difficulty simply so that we can mature and grow. Kingdom growth is one of the hard things we must do.

### ***E. Entering the kingdom***

## **IV. Develop Leaders (v. 23)**

The fourth hard thing is developing leaders. Verse 23 says, **So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.** Obviously this is talking about church leaders that are being developed. But every parent here is involved in raising up a generation of leaders. To do so adequately is indeed a hard thing. But it is something that results in great satisfaction and great blessing. Though we are going to be talking about church leadership, don't forget to apply the general principles to your family. There are going to be times when you are going to need to engage in prayer and fasting. There are going to be times you are going to pull your hair out. But it's one of those hard things that we must do.

### ***A. The delay in leadership (chapters 13-14 with 14:23a)***

The first thing we see about these leaders is that there has been quite a delay in ordaining them. That's significant. The total trip from the beginning of chapter 13 to chapter 14:26 took a little over two years,<sup>2</sup> going from 47-49 AD. The return trip is a lot more rapid than what has happened to this point. So by far the most of this trip is up through verse 20. The long time in verse 28 is an additional two years spent in Antioch. So it appears that many of these churches have been without elders for up to two years.

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<sup>2</sup> See my chronological reconstruction of Paul's life from 33 AD to the Jerusalem council.

### **1.Churches can survive without elders (body life) even if it is not healthy**

To me this shows four things: first, it shows that churches can survive without elders. When I preached through the book of Titus, we saw that though the churches in Crete survived for a long time without elders, it was not healthy situation. But still, they survived. And this underscores and highlights the Biblical truth that ministry is not the exclusive work of the leadership. Everyone is called to ministry. We can't think that no ministry was happening in these two years. There have been a number of times in other countries that the entire leadership of a church got thrown into jail. But the church continued to survive, and new leaders emerged from those who are already doing the ministry. So my first observation is that churches can survive without elders. It's called body life.

### **2.Elder training is largely on-the-job experience that is gained by simply ministering**

A second thing that it shows to me is that elder training is largely on-the-job training. Paul had given theological training before and afterward. But while he was gone, the emerging leaders were doing ministry; were being tested. When Paul and his team examine the elder candidates, they are looking for the degree of maturity, calling, character and ministry competencies they have developed over the past two years. Over time, certain people began to rise to the surface and begin to be recognized by the people as having what it takes. But you don't learn that in school. You learn it by doing ministry.

### **3.It takes time to develop good leaders (note that some of these leaders may have already been well grounded in the Old Testament as Jews)**

The third thing that I see is that it takes time to develop good leaders. Now I should point out that the core of most of these churches came from a Jewish synagogue where there well may have been people who were elder material. And yet Paul still waits. Even though those Jewish converts were already well grounded in the Old Testament, he still waits. He still let's the churches see how these guys minister. He doesn't rush into the ordination process. It takes time to develop good leaders. But most of the development was without the apostles. They were just *doing* ministry like everyone else. They were demonstrating initiative.

#### **4. It takes a plurality of elders to ordain elders (“they”)**

The fourth thing that it shows is that it takes a plurality of elders to ordain elders. That’s implied by the word “they” in verse 23. Leaders cannot be ordained by lay people. We have already seen that they are selected by lay people, but they are ordained by other elders.

#### ***B. The nature of the leadership (“elders”)***

The nature of the leadership can be seen by the word “elders” itself. The word has two meanings: 1) an older man well advanced in years and 2) an officer of the synagogue, and later in the church. One dictionary says, “denotes age, rank, or the old or older man, who is no longer a *neaniskos* (young man) and is probably over 50 years old.” But there was no such thing as a young elder. The minimum age for an elder was thirty, though Jews had elevated status for one who was forty and then fifty. This too shows patience. When Paul told Timothy not to let anyone despise his age, he was in his forties. It takes a great deal of maturity and experience to guide a church.

#### ***C. The way they were selected (Literal Greek is = “when they had selected by a show of hands”<sup>3</sup> [i.e., in a congregational meeting])***

I just want to make a quick comment on the way these elders were selected. It doesn’t come out very well in this version. The New King James says, **so when they had appointed elders in every church.** The literal Greek is “when they had appointed by a show of hands.” It was a Greek term for the election process. Paul’s team oversaw the process and did the ordination, but the people chose the officers. Let me read you how some other translations translate this. “when they had ordeyned them elders by election in euery Churche” (Bishop), “when they had ordered them elders by eleccion in every congregacio” (Tyndale) “they selected Elders by show of hands” (Weymouth), “having appointed to them by vote elders in every assembly” (Youngs). The Greek is clear that the people choose their own officers. Since I covered this in depth under our sermons on church government, I won’t repeat what I said before.

#### ***D. The importance of leadership (“in every church”)***

But this shows the importance of leadership. These elders were

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<sup>3</sup> Examples of how this worked can be seen in the Old and New Testaments. For numerous Scripture references, see my book, *Universal Suffrage: A History and Analysis of Voting*, on [www.BiblicalBlueprints.org](http://www.BiblicalBlueprints.org).

selected or appointed **in every church**. Though they had to wait, waiting indefinitely is not a good thing. Churches need leadership if they are to flourish. The ideal is to have more than one elder in every church.

***E. The dangers in leadership (“and prayed with fasting”)***

Of course, there are dangers with leadership as well. We have already referenced Ezekiel 34 and 3 John as passages that warn against abusive leadership. This is in part why verse 23 says, **and prayed with fasting...** They wanted God’s clear guidance as to who should be a leader. They took this very seriously. If you ever enter into elections without seeking God’s guidance, you are foolish. Leadership can make or break a congregation, and it is critical that prayer and fasting always accompany such elections.

***F. The need to trust God to guide the church (“they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed”)***

The last aspect of leadership development that is mentioned is that they trusted God to guide the church. Verse 23: **they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.** The question is, “Did they commend the congregation to the Lord or the leaders or both?” Hendriksen applies it to both the elders and the congregation. But whatever the case, we have to trust God at some point and let things move forward. We will never have all the information that we wanted. We will never have all the perfect training that we wanted. We need to trust God and move forward at some point.

Leadership is hard to develop, it is hard to select; once they are leaders, their work is hard. But this is what God calls us to do: Do Hard Things.

**V. Be Accountable (vv. 26-28)**

***A. This base of operations provides a place of spiritual support (“where they had been commended to the grace of God”)***

The last hard thing that Paul did was to be accountable. You might think that an apostle would not have to be accountable, but everyone should be. And we can see this accountability not just in verses 26-28, but all the way through chapter 15 as well. But take a look at verse 26. **From there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work which they had completed.** The phrase, “where they had been commended” is referring back to chapter 13. And it’s very similar in

language to the commending of the leaders that Paul's team did in verse 23. It's a hint that Antioch was their oversight leadership. But it was probably more than simply oversight. It was a prayer base. Most commentators assume that this was where a lot of their financial support came from. It was where many of their team members came from. It was also a base of operations from which he went on all three of his missionary journeys, and to which he reported. Which by the way is one reason why I think that our denomination should not have missions centered out of Atlanta. It should be having the base of operations out of the Presbytery. That's where the best accountability, support, prayer and encouragement will come from. Antioch was the Presbytery level of the church, not the General Assembly.

### ***B. This provided accountability (v. 26-27)***

The reporting comes in verse 27. **Now when they had come and gathered the church together, they reported all that God had done with them, and that He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles.** Commentators point out that the imperfect tense indicates that the reporting was not done all at one time. So either they were sharing various parts of the story at different times, or (more likely) they were speaking with various churches in that city. Paul needed to report to each of the churches that had taken him on in fund raising.

#### **1.A motivation to not give up (v. 26b)**

#### **2.A place to report to (v. 27)**

### ***C. This provides growth through cross-pollenization of churches (14:28-15:35)***

This reporting gives opportunity for cross-pollenization of the churches. It also brings controversy in chapter 15, but it enables the church to mature as it has to face the challenges of growth.

Verse 28 ends by saying, **So they stayed there a long time with the disciples.** This has been a strenuous work, and they needed a place to furlough. This can be a place where they can recuperate, minister with less stress and get re-energized. It's good to have a home you can go back to and relax.

On part of the Reblution Blog, Alex and Brett Harris relayed how rest and fun fits into doing hard things. They said that there are two principles;

- 1) First Things First

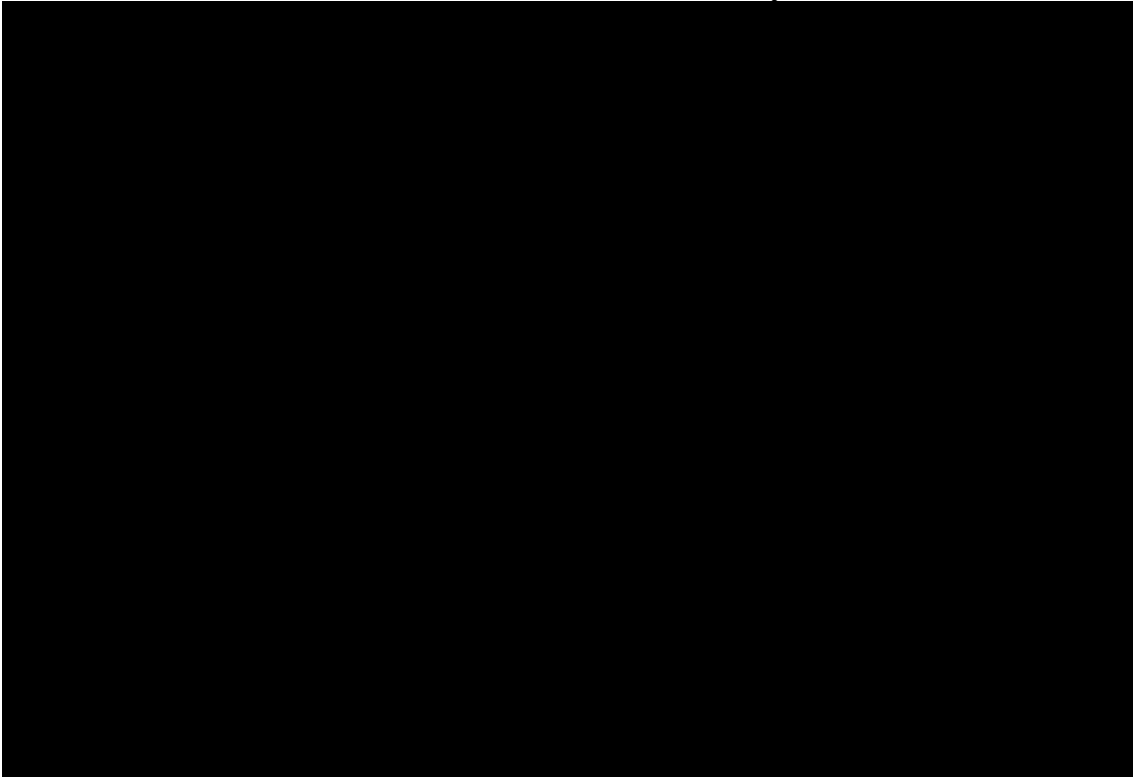
Being a “rebelutionary” does not mean you have erased “fun” from your life. It means that you have relegated it to its proper place. “Do Hard Things” does not eliminate fun, but it elevates, honors, and recognizes the superiority of the activities and pursuits that strengthen, stretch, and grow our character and competence for the glory of God.

[They then went on to talk about the fun things that they do to relax after a hard week. The second thing that they say is]

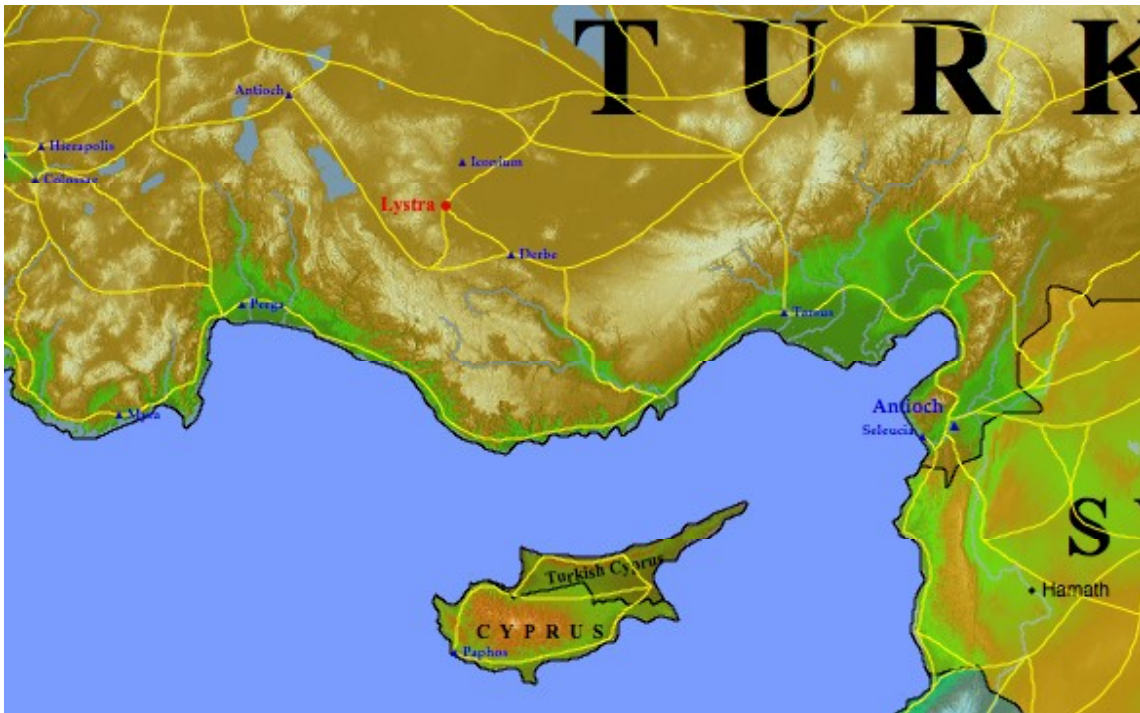
2) Hard things can be fun in their own right.

And I would say, “Amen” to both of those principles. Paul found fulfillment in the “Hard Things.” But he also knew how to find fulfillment in the times of rest. So this sermon is not a call to avoid all fun. It is a call to realign your priorities and to do “Hard Things.” Many of those hard things will become easy and lead you to new hard things. But let’s be a people who are able and willing to take on the hard tasks God has given us the privilege of facing. Let’s be a people who not only wear the t-shirts, but who *do* hard things to His glory. Amen.

## Paul's First Journey



## Roman Roads



### Another major Road to Tarsus

