



24 | ACTS 14:1-28

PROGRESS & PERSECUTION

Wherever there is progress in the gospel, you should expect persecution.

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Call to Worship

How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts! **2** My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God. **3** Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, at your altars, O Lord of hosts, my King and my God. **4** Blessed are those who dwell in your house, ever singing your praise! *Selah*
—Psalm 84:1-4

Songs

Man of Sorrows

O How I Love Jesus

Not in Me

All Glory Be to Christ

Announcements

WELCOME: We are glad you are here! Be sure to grab a Welcome Packet if you are visiting with us.

GIVING: You can give over Zelle through your bank with no fees (use secretary@livinghopechurch.net). We also have a collection box on the Welcome Center. Malachi 3, “Test me in this” Proverbs: “**Give of your firstfruits.**” We believe blessing comes by putting God first.

Introduction

Have you ever added salt to your coffee? I teased my daughter Ava the other day. She grabbed the glass sugar container and put a sprinkle on her bran flakes. I told her: what if I put salt in there? She said, “You didn’t!” I said playfully, “You’ll just have to try it and see.” She tried it and found out I was just playing. Of course, we know that just because salt looks like sugar doesn’t mean it is. Once a friend of my sisters who had just learned to drive actually put diesel in her car. Cars that run on gasoline don’t go very far on diesel. There are certain things in life that are irreplicable. I’ve been trying to eat better with a low carb diet. My dear wife tries to buy me different kinds of low carb pizza. I’ve tried pizza crust made of cauliflower. I’ve tried it made of an egg base. Finally, my dear daughter Katie declared the obvious. She said, “Dad, there is no substitute for pizza!” So true! Pizza is pizza! There are some things you cannot substitute. Now food is superficial, but our souls are not. **How true it is that the gospel cannot be substituted!** Whenever the gospel goes forth, if it is preached rightly, you can tell by its effect whether or not it was preached clearly and fully. The gospel is the gospel. It cannot be substituted. **How do you know if the gospel is being preached rightly?** One way is that it invites persecution.

Key Thought: Wherever there is progress in the gospel, you should expect persecution.

As you make progress in your growth in Christ, expect hardship, tests, and persecution. If you start having a passion for evangelism, you need to expect problems that are unique since Satan hates you sharing the gospel. As you begin a new ministry endeavor for Christ, you will also be tested severely. Satan will try to get you to stop. Get you somewhere else where “the grass is greener.” Don’t take the bait. Persevere.

Paul and his team leave Antioch of Pisidia and take a seventy-eight-mile journey southeast to the pristine city of Iconium. Its name is proper, since it truly is **an iconic city** located on a vast plain known for its beauty and agricultural fertility (13:51). The population was prospering as a proud, sophisticated, and glorious Greek city. Highways from Syria to Ephesus pass through the city, and it buzzed with traders and merchants from distant lands. It was a bit of a melting pot with people from everywhere living there, and there was a large, thriving Jewish population with a fair-sized synagogue. It is here the apostles begin a new work.¹ Acts 14 depicts Paul and Barnabas completing their first missionary journey, traveling through Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe, and returning to home base in Antioch in Syria.² The gospel is having great success. As we see the gospel spread

¹ Chalmer Ernest Faw, *Acts*, Believers Church Bible Commentary (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993), 155.

² R. Kent Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1996), 182.

to Jews and Gentiles here in Iconium, there are four indications of the gospel's success in the hearts of people.

1. THE GOSPEL INVITES **PASSION** (14:1-7)

The first mark we see of gospel advancement is passion, both positive and negative. There is both joy and hatred when the gospel is preached. There is both rejoicing and rioting. When the gospel is preached properly, people aren't able to hide on some neutral ground. One must choose sides. There is this great distinction of responses when the gospel is preached rightly.

Often when the gospel is preached, there is at first rejoicing. It's what excites us about evangelism. That's exactly what happens in Iconium. People were coming to know Christ, both Jews and Gentiles.

PASSIONATE REJOICING

Acts 14:1 | 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.

A Great Message. They "spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed." What way was that? As Paul and Barnabas preached, the Holy Spirit energized their words and melted the hearts of the hearers. **The apostles did not persuade with the eloquent "words which man's wisdom teaches"** but in words "which the Holy Spirit teaches" (1 Cor 2:13).

The Spirit cuts right to the heart. What made the message great was nothing in the messengers. **Some plant and some water, but "God gives the increase" (1 Cor 3:6).** The increase comes by the power of the Holy Spirit applying the message of salvation. Like he brooded over creation and turned chaos into order, so he creates a new heart and transforms the heart of stone into a living heart by the word preached.

A Great Response. "A great number believed." When God's word is proclaimed with courage and love and boldness, God will open people's eyes so that there is great **rejoicing**. God can put a passion for the gospel in the hearts of sinners.

A Great Number. It wasn't just a few who believed, but there was such rejoicing that "a great number" of Jews and Gentiles believed. Perhaps you remember Paul and Barnabas had declared, "We are turning to the **Gentiles**" (13:46), but **that did not mean they were abandoning the Jews**. After all, Paul will later write that he would perish eternally if that would bring the Jews in.

Romans 9:3 | I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh.

Paul is the apostle to the Gentiles, but not to the exclusion of the Jews.³

A Great Unity. "Both Jews and Greeks believed." Paul and Barnabas know that God is "not wishing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (2 Pet 3:9). Their pattern in most new cities will continue in the same manner: to the Jew first, and

³ James M. Hamilton Jr. and Brian J. Vickers, *John-Acts*, ed. Iain M. Duguid, James M. Hamilton Jr., and Jay Sklar, vol. IX, ESV Expository Commentary (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 468.

then to the Gentile (Rom 1:16). What is glorious here is that **when the gospel is preached it brings people together who were before perhaps opposed to each other.** When the gospel unites people, we become part of God's forever family.

PASSIONATE REJECTION

While some rejoice in Iconium, so many others resisted the gospel.

Acts 14:2 | But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers.

While we preach the truth, Satan will be busy working in the hearts and minds of unbelievers, and **the wicked one never plays fair.** He is the father of lies, and he will bring opposition against you when you are faithful to preach the good news of Jesus. Expect satanic attack.

POWERFUL REVELATION

We should be passionate about preaching the gospel. If we are, God will open the eyes of the blind. He will even bring miracles to vindicate your message amidst persecution.

God is passionate about your preaching of the gospel, and he will give glorious revelation in the face of opposition. He will open the eyes of the blind and if necessary, he can give signs and wonders. Missionary Paul and Barnabas and their team stayed on and witnessed boldly for Christ, and God gave signs and wonders.⁴

Acts 14:3 | 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.

Now whenever you are attacked for Jesus' sake, you must remain courageous and bold. God will vindicate you. People will recognize that you are from the Lord. They may not like it, but if you stand in your integrity, God will defend you. **Great signs and wonders accompanied the preaching of the apostles.**

Most importantly, notice the content of the message Paul preached—it was “the word of his grace.” Salvation, both Old and New Testament, had always been by grace through faith. Eternal life is always given not by human merit, but by the merit of another. This was the content of Paul's message. There was no New Testament at the time, so Paul was preaching the gospel of God's grace from the Old Testament.

Notice they spoke boldly! That is the mark of the filling of the Holy Spirit. Bold proclamation of the truth of the gospel is urgently needed in our time. We need preaching of the caliber of the Puritan Richard Baxter. We should all adopt his mindset of boldness and urgency.

I preached as never sure to preach again, And as a dying man to dying men.—Puritan Richard Baxter!⁵

⁴ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 459.

⁵ Richard Baxter, *Poetical Fragments* (London, 1821), 39–40, quoted in John Stott, *I Believe in Preaching* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1982), 277.

PASSIONATE RESOLVE

After preaching and teaching the people for a long time, **the effects of the gospel began dividing the city**, and great persecution came, so that the apostles' lives were in danger.

Acts 14:4-7 | But the people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews and some with the apostles. ⁵When an attempt was made by both Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to mistreat them and to stone them, ⁶they learned of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding country, ⁷and there they continued to preach the gospel.

Notice that the apostles didn't give up. Their lives were threatened, but they kept on preaching. It looks like they attempted to stone Paul and Barnabas (14:5). That's a big deal. They wanted to carry out the death penalty on them, but they were able to escape.

They could no longer preach in Iconium, so they fled to the twin cities of Lystra and Derbe. They could have gone home, but instead they carried on. They came, first, to Lystra (eighteen miles east) and then Derbe (a further fifty-five miles away), and to the surrounding area.⁶ What passion they had for the word.

2. THE GOSPEL CAN BRING PANDEMONIUM (14:8-18)

Whenever the gospel has great success, you can expect the wicked one to try and bring chaos and pandemonium, which is exactly what happened. Yet they started out with a very promising meeting with a healing.

Don't think that just because everything starts well, that you can avoid persecution and pandemonium. This meeting starts so good. It's almost like you can forget about all the suffering and persecution when things go well.

THE MIRACLE

Paul, Barnabas, and their missionary team were at Lystra for quite a while (*cf* 14:20, there were already many "disciples" by this time), and one day this incredible miracle was performed.

Acts 14:8-10 | Now at Lystra there was a man sitting who could not use his feet. He was crippled from birth and had never walked. ⁹He listened to Paul speaking. And Paul, looking intently at him and seeing that he had faith to be made well, ¹⁰said in a loud voice, "Stand upright on your feet." And he sprang up and began walking.

This sounds a lot like many miracles in the book of Acts. Normally from these miracles there is great revival and an outbreak of conversions. Not this time. This time there is great mayhem because of the significance of the place Paul is. They are in **Lystra, which was, according to Greek mythology, the place of the great visitation of Zeus and Hermes, the mythological Greek gods.**

⁶ Derek W. H. Thomas, *Acts*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2011), 383.

THE MAYHEM

Paul and Barnabas may well have known the story of the author **Ovid, titled *Metamorphoses***, written half a century or so earlier about the Greek gods' visitation to the area of Lystra. The story told of two Greek gods, Zeus and Hermes.⁷ During the gods' visit, they were turned away from a thousand homes until they reached an elderly couple's home, where they were given lodging. Zeus and Hermes destroyed those who had turned them away and gave special honor to the elderly couple, making them priests in the pagan temples. The people who saw what Paul and Barnabas had done must have been very familiar with this story, and they mistook the apostles for two famous Greek gods.

Acts 14:11-13 | 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.

They thought Paul was Hermes because Hermes was the messenger of Zeus. The apostles are merely preaching the gospel, and now all mayhem and confusion break loose. You never know what's going to happen when you preach the gospel, but I'm sure the apostles were not expecting to be worshipped as gods!

THE MESSAGE

They quickly responded with a strong message: we are not gods. Don't worship us, instead worship the one true and living God! Listen to what happened.

Acts 14:14-18 | 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.

One of the first things you have to do with those of a pagan mindset is to help them gain a true understanding of the one true God. There are not many gods, but only one. He created us. He gives us rain and harvest. So far so good, but **instead of repenting and believing the gospel, they go from worshipping Paul to stoning him!**

This is a reminder that we are not responsible for the outcome and response of the gospel. We are just the messenger (the mailman), but in Paul's case, they decided to stone the messenger.

⁷ Thomas, *ibid.*

3. THE GOSPEL BRINGS PERSECUTION (14:19-23)

Now we see that when the gospel is preached there will inevitably be persecution. It is unavoidable. Paul says to Timothy who is from the Lystra area, “Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim 3:2).

A REJECTION & RESURRECTION

Little did Paul know that **Jews from Antioch and Iconium followed him eventually to Lystra, and there they carried out the death penalty.** After they killed him there at Lystra, they dragged him out of the city where the believers there gathered around him.

Acts 14:19-20 | But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city [of Lystra], 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.

Rocks hit Paul all over his body, tearing his flesh until he was knocked unconscious to the ground. Supposing that he was dead, the people opposed to him grabbed him by the feet and dragged him outside the city.⁸ This is the occasion which he recalls several years later in 2 Corinthians 11:25: “**once I was stoned.**” The scars received at Lystra were among the “marks of Jesus” which he bore to his dying day (Gal 6:17).⁹

Can you believe it? **After being stoned, Paul is resurrected and goes right back into the city,** probably to recover at a disciple’s home. But it was just for one day! Paul wastes no time, even though this might have been the **fiercest persecution of all his journeys.** Paul writes later about these fierce persecutions.

2 Timothy 3:10-11 | You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness,¹¹ my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra—which persecutions I endured; yet from them all the Lord rescued me.

The Lord rescued Paul, even through what was probably a resurrection. Notice the people at Lystra go from worshipping Paul and Barnabas to murdering them. They go from adoration to assassination so quickly. **We cannot depend on the whims of our audience** to understand the **success of ministry.** We must **depend on God to give the increase no matter** what we see with our eyes.

It’s very likely that the rescue that Paul speaks of was indeed a resurrection. Paul at another time speaks of how he actually visited God in the third heaven. In 2 Corinthians 12, he says **he wasn’t even allowed to talk about the things he saw in the third heaven.** He “heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter” (2 Cor 12:3). It’s very likely that Paul is referring to his own death at Lystra, and that he was raised from the dead.

⁸ R. C. Sproul, *Acts*, St. Andrew’s Expository Commentary (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 258.

⁹ F. F. Bruce, *Acts: Bible Study Commentary* (Nashville, TN; Bath, England: Kingsley Books, 2017), Ac 14:19–28.

After recovering for a day at Lystra, we read “the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe” (14:20b). From there it was a **fairly short walk back to Tarsus** and Paul likely would have returned home were it not for the positive response to the gospel he found in Derbe and the surrounding region (14:19–21). Encouraged, he decided instead to retrace his steps back through Lystra, Iconium and Pisidian Antioch.¹⁰ **Not even death by stoning could stop the Apostle Paul from going to the next city and preaching the gospel.** He truly believed that he was immortal until God was finished with him.

A RETURN

We need to see the pattern in Acts is not just evangelism but also discipleship. Paul and Barnabas had seen many be converted to Christ, but **they didn’t leave these as babes without guidance.** They **returned** and encouraged those who trusted in Christ under their ministry.

Acts 14:21-22 | When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, ²²strengthening 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.

A **major part of the apostles’ ongoing discipleship** was to teach about **suffering and perseverance in trials and tribulations.** How different from so much preaching today, which promises to those who trust Christ material prosperity, good health, and a sunny path through life, and which declares that lack of those things is evidence of lack of faith. Apostolic preaching took it for granted that tribulation and affliction would be the lot in life of those who love the Lord.¹¹

In the midst of one of Paul’s greatest trials (being put to death by stoning) a great number of converts were made at Lystra whom they strengthened (14:22); among them, apparently, was one who would render Paul quite special service in days to come—Timothy (*cf* Acts 16:1–3).¹²

A RESURGENCE

They had been persecuted, driven out, even Paul was killed. But what do the apostles do? They establish the churches. They resurged where they were rejected. They *never* gave up!

Acts 14:23 | 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.

Here for the first time in the Book of Acts we find the appointing of elders (14:23), which we learn later was to become Paul’s natural pattern of church organization. I do not know how “elderly” these elders were, but I know they had not been Christians very long,

¹⁰ Paul H. Wright, *Rose Then and Now Bible Map Atlas with Biblical Background and Culture* (Torrance, CA: Rose Publishing, 2012), 240–241.

¹¹ John Phillips, *Exploring Acts: An Expository Commentary*, The John Phillips Commentary Series (Kregel Publications; WORDsearch Corp., 2009), Ac 14:22.

¹² F. F. Bruce, *Acts: Bible Study Commentary* (Nashville, TN; Bath, England: Kingsley Books, 2017), Ac 14:19–28.

since the gospel itself had not been known to them very long. Was that any way to establish a church?¹³ Certainly these were men who were Scripturally qualified, men of good reputation, men who were blameless, and men who were mature in the Scriptures. Probably they had studied the Scriptures for years but had just recently come to understand who Christ was. **Here we have the first council of elders established outside Jerusalem and Antioch.**

A plurality of elders is absolutely vital for the health of the local church. Paul and Barnabas were able to appoint the mature men who had believed in Christ to be elders. They did this in each of the cities they had preached in. Everywhere Paul would go, he would follow the pattern at Jerusalem and Antioch of a plurality of elders. Elders were leaders, elsewhere called “shepherds” (i.e., “pastors,” Eph 4:11) and “overseers” (*episkopoi*, or “bishops,” Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5, 7; 1 Pet 5:1–2). This pattern of leadership grew directly out of the Old Testament, where God is the shepherd of Israel (Psa 80:1).¹⁴ The **synagogue** in the time of Jesus would elect elders from the community who had authority to bring people in as members of the synagogue community or dismiss them as members (*cf* Mt 18). The **consistent pattern** in the New Testament is that every church had a **plurality of elders** (Acts 14:23; 15:2; 20:17, 28; Phil 1:1; 1 Thess 5:12; 1 Tim 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9; Heb 13:7, 17).

Why a plurality of elders? What does a plurality of elders mean for the church? A plurality provides:

- **Accountability. Mutual accountability** is necessary to avoid falling into sin or making unwise decisions. Because there is always more than one elder, authority never resides with just one person.
- **Encouragement. The teaching pastor(s) is one among several elders.** The teaching pastor does not have ultimate authority over the other elders nor is he seen as an employee of the elders.
- **Authority. Authority belongs collectively to the entire group of elders.** The teaching elder is not to take all the heat if someone doesn't like a change. At the same time, he doesn't get all the credit either!
- **Submission.** The teaching pastor himself is subject to the authority of the elder board as a whole. This goes for all the associate pastors as well.
- **Unity.** No major decisions are made without a **unanimous vote** of the eldership.

The churches established on Paul's first missionary journey were healthy and multiplied under the leadership of these elders. Paul later writes the epistle to the Galatians to these churches (Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe). Pastors are just people, no different than you. They need encouragement. Pray for your pastors and elders. Encourage them. Call and text them and let them know you love them.

4. THE GOSPEL PROMISES PROGRESS (14:24-28)

¹³ James Montgomery Boice, *Acts: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997), 257.

¹⁴ Thomas, *Acts*, 396.

Now Paul concludes his first missionary journey. Jesus said, “I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Mt 16:18). That’s the progress Jesus promised.

GOD’S GRACE IN PROGRESS

Acts 14:24-26 | 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.

Paul and Barnabas had been commended to the grace of God for the work God did through them. At the end of the day, the forward movement of the gospel is because of the grace and power of God. None of us can take credit. We are just the mailmen. God is the one who transforms hearts by his grace.

GOD’S GLORY IN PROGRESS

When Paul and Barnabas got back to Antioch, they had a praise service. **“To God be the glory, great things he has done!”**

Acts 14:27 | 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.

God gets all the glory for open doors. Man is dead in sin and unable to respond to the gospel in his own power. It is the gospel itself that opens the door to our heart so that we can place our faith in Christ.

James 1:18a | Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth.

We didn’t find God. God wasn’t lost. We were lost, and God found us and saved us. He called us with the word of truth and transformed our hearts by the preaching of the gospel. Truly, we confess with the Psalmist:

Psalm 127:1 | Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.

GOD’S GOAL FOR PROGRESS

How do we measure the progress of missions? We have to remember the goal. It is the great commission. There is no time to waste. There is no sabbatical of rest.

Acts 14:28 | And they remained no little time with the disciples.

Until every tribe, language, people, and nation are reached, then we have not reached the goal. What we see next is just as soon as the first missionary journey is concluded, they are off to another mission. The apostles are committed to the great commission. It’s not the great suggestion. We are commissioned by the Lord.

Mark 16:15, NKJV | Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.

We find out that **Paul and Barnabas need to get to Jerusalem to discuss how to do church membership for the Gentiles**. What are the requirements for bringing the Gentiles into the church? They didn't have much time before the next challenge is before them.

That's a healthy New Testament church. The church at Antioch is **constantly facing difficulties and challenges because that's the territory of Christian growth**. If you want to grow God's forever family, you have to change a lot of diapers and feed a lot of little ones. It's our highest privilege to do so. We can't be stopped by the problems that come with evangelism. Persecution will indeed come, but we must persevere in God's unstoppable grace.

Conclusion

What if you were a fireman and instead of running into the burning building, knocking down walls, and doing whatever it takes to rescue people, **you simply sat in the fire truck**, put on your headphones, and ignored the screams of the perishing? **What if you stayed comfortable?** What would happen to a fireman like that? He'd be disqualified. Dear saint, you are not disqualified. You are filled with the Spirit. Don't let anything stop you from sharing Christ with your loved ones, friends, and strangers. They need Christ, and you are the vessel God is going to use to bring them into the kingdom.

Someone said, **"The test of your character is what it takes to stop you."** What is it that will stop you from sharing Christ with others? Are you afraid of rejection from friends and family and even strangers? Don't be afraid of rejection. Be more concerned that your family and friends who are without Christ are on their way to hell. Don't let anything stop you.