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STRENGTHENING THE SOULS OF THE DISCIPLES Acts 14:21-23

Acts 14: 21 They preached the gospel in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, 22 strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,” they said. 23 Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.

INTRODUCTION :

You know the news on what’s happening in the Middle East. A lot of doomsayers are saying it’s the end of the world.

There’s this story about these two Christians who were holding up a sign in the middle of the road. The sign says, “The end is near. Turn around now before it’s too late.” Then a car passed by and shouted at them, “Leave us alone, you crazy Christians!” and he speeded up his car. After a few seconds, the two Christians heard the screeching of tires of that car and then a big splash. The two Christians looked at each other and said, “Do you think, we should change our sign too, “Warning! The Bridge Is Out!”

Anyways, no one knows the time and hour when our Lord Jesus is coming back. What’s more important is, are we ready when He comes back?

Talking about Iran, do you know that there’s a growing underground church in Iran?

Let me read an excerpt from an article from Transform Iran

https://transformiran.com/learn/unsilenced-the-underground-church-in-iran/?gad_source=1&gad_campaignid=21970532305&gbraid=0AAAAADJaGFAVQw3sfaObmk4z67M5Sqpqj&gclid=CjwKCAiAtq_NBhA_EiwA78nNWPTgQ87iXFxBXEliH5WD519Ju7xUBj-smjtK33ShXKJ_-N3q49QEQxoCj9wQAvD_BwE

“The underground church in Iran is unlike any other. It is vibrant, courageous, and growing rapidly under constant threat of persecution. Every day, followers of Jesus make hard choices: risk exposure or stay silent, meet together or remain isolated, trust strangers or guard their faith in secret.

Without official buildings, believers gather in small groups, usually inside homes. They worship, study the Bible, and pray together. These house churches are intimate, deeply relational communities where trust is essential and every new member is prayerfully considered.

Following Jesus in Iran can mean arrest, torture, imprisonment, or worse. Despite government surveillance, raids, and harsh penalties, the underground church grows, fueled by a deep hunger for truth and personal encounters with Christ.”



Let me show you an excerpt from the documentary “Inside the Persecuted Church of Iran.”

Show video : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V5ERFAOw9z0&t=686s>

The Bible and the Newspaper : The reason why I showed you this is because when I was a young preacher, I heard Billy Graham said that as preachers, we must “preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.” It means we need to bridge eternal Biblical truths with current world events.

The persecutions that are happening in Iran was the usual thing in the first century church.

But apparently, it is through times of persecution that the church grows, that a lot of true followers of Jesus Christ are born.

Remember, the first church in Jerusalem, how the gospel was spread throughout the whole world?

Acts 8: 1 And Saul approved of their killing him.

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. 2 Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. 3 But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.

4 Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went

Now the verse that was assigned to me is connected with persecution about being a disciple.

Let’s look at the passage again.

Acts 14: 21 They preached the gospel in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, 22 strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,”

By God's grace, as you know already, when we need to interpret the passage, it's all about context, context, context. That's how we know by God's grace, we are preaching God's Word and not man's opinions.

As Christians, we're here solely to hear and obey God's Word.

So based on the passage, what's the first question, we should be asking?

First, Why did *they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, 22 strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith?*

And look at the words they used to strengthen and encourage the disciples.

"We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," they said.

What? To the modern church, those words aren't exactly strengthening and encouraging!

Illustration: One time, there was this old timer Christian who was invited by a friend to go to their church. He said yes. When he entered, it was a huge space and it was dark and the seats were comfortable and the temperature inside was comfortable. Then the worship team came out and it was like a nice concert and he felt comforted and the preacher came out, read a Bible verse and did not preach about it. The preaching only lasted 20 minutes and talked about being comforted by God that was way out of context.

But he knew something was off. He thought maybe he was just biased. But then his friend voluntarily said, "you know the preaching here is shallow". And then he asked him, "Has that always been that way?" And his friend said, "yes". And the old timer Christians asked, "Then why are you still staying in that church?" The friend replied, "It's because I'm already comfortable here."

Brothers and sisters, to follow Christ, means He will comfort us in times of trials and persecutions but His Word will not make us comfortable.

Look at what our Lord said:

Matthew 8: 18 When Jesus saw the crowd around him, he gave orders to cross to the other side of the lake. 19 Then a teacher of the law came to him and said, "Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go."

20 Jesus replied, "Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."

That literally means, he has no permanent place, and no pillows. It means, if you want to follow me, are you willing to be uncomfortable?"

In fact, to follow Jesus Christ, this is what he said,

Matthew 16: 24 Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 25 For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.

As Dietrich Boenhoffer wrote in his 1937 book titled “The Cost of Discipleship”

Quote : “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”

And that’s how Paul and Barnabas strengthened and encouraged the disciples by saying :

“We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,” they said.

So let’s look at the context on why they said this:

*Acts 14: 21 They preached the gospel in that city and won a large number of disciples. **Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch,***

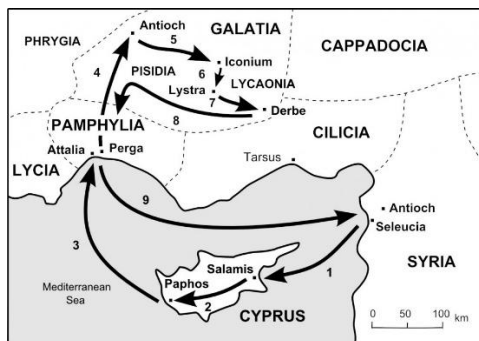
In order to understand this, we need to understand why they “returned” to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch

Background :

This was the first missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas.

You will see this in Acts 13 and the first part of Acts 14.

Show the map:



- This is where the Bible now records the name of Saul to Paul. By the way, Saul did not change his name. “Saul” was his Hebrew name, which means, child, small and “Paul” is his Hellenistic or “Greek” name, which means “small,humble”

*Acts 13: 1 Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. 2 While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, **“Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul** for the work to which I have called them.” 3 So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.*

In Cyprus, they were able to preach and by God's grace the proconsul (like the governor – Roman governor) began to believe in Jesus Christ.

A sorcerer tried to stop them and here's what happened.

*Acts 13: 9 **Then Saul, who was also called Paul**, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, 10 "You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord? 11 Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind for a time, not even able to see the light of the sun."*

By the way, you will notice this in the next verses in chapters 13 and 14 you will see explicitly or even implicitly the influence of the devil in the persecution or temptation of Paul and Barnabas while they were doing God's work.

There's a saying :

Quote : "If the devil is not bothering you, it's probably because you're not bothering him."

Or in another context :

"If the devil isn't fighting you, then it's probably because he's not worried about you."

Meaning : The devil won't bother you because he sees you're not growing in your Christian life anyway or you're not doing God's work anyway.

What is the significance of Saul's (Hebrew) name now being used now with his Greek name "Paul"

Remember that Saul (Paul) was the one trying to kill the Christians, our Lord Jesus Christ called him in Acts chapter 9 and then blinded him. Jesus Christ called Ananias to place his hands on Saul to restore his sight, afterwards, Saul began preaching to his fellow Jews. But look at the purpose really of our Lord for Saul : Ananias who was wary of Saul because he persecuted Christians, was saying to our Lord Jesus Christ, "Are you sure Lord?" (Acts 9:10-13)

But here's what our Lord said to Ananias about Saul.

*Acts 9: 15 **But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. 16 I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."***

Saul was a Jew but our Lord did not only want him to go to the Jews, He wanted him to go to world. Beloved, it's the same with the church. CHURCH IS NOT FOR US. IT'S NOT TO MAKE US COMFORTABLE. IT'S NOT FOR US. A lot of people still needs to hear the Word of Christ.

Leonard Ravenhill said,

Quote : "The early church was a lifeboat for rescuing the perishing. Today's church is a cruise ship for pampering the prosperous."

That's what Paul did. He went to the Gentiles

Without going into the details, in Acts 13: 14-52

- **(show map). After going through Cyprus and then other cities, Paul and Barnabas reached Antioch in Pisidia.**
- **This is** where the Bible first recorded his sermon. A lot of Jews and Gentiles became followers of Jesus Christ. But to no surprise, they were persecuted.

Acts 13: 48 When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.

*49 The word of the Lord spread through the whole region. **50 But the Jewish leaders incited the God-fearing women of high standing and the leading men of the city. They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas,** and expelled them from their region.*

51 So they shook the dust off their feet as a warning to them and went to Iconium. 52 And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.

- **(show map), Then they went to Iconium a lot of people believed but again persecution.**

Acts 14: 1 At Iconium Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue. There they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Greeks believed. 2 But the Jews who refused to believe stirred up the other Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers.

5 There was a plot afoot among both Gentiles and Jews, together with their leaders, to mistreat them and stone them. 6 But they found out about it and fled to the Lycaonian cities of Lystra and Derbe and to the surrounding country,

- **Then they went to Lystra, where Paul healed a lame man but people now there thought they were Zeus and Hermes and wanted to sacrifice to them... look at the tactic of Satan now here. If they cannot discourage them by persecution, they try to get them by temptation.** Paul and Barnabas tore their clothes, saying no... there's a living God that you should truly worship (Acts 13:14-17). But the crowd insisted.

- **When that did not succeed, you know the devil tried to kill them.**

19 Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. 20 But after the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city. The next day he and Barnabas left for Derbe.

And what did they do at Derbe?

21 They preached the gospel in that city and won a large number of disciples.

Wow! They were already persecuted, tempted in those areas and was even almost left to die and yet they still continued to preach the gospel AND AFTERWARDS, THIS IS MORE AMAZING!

Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch

(show map again) SIGNIFICANCE!

They went back to the places where people wanted to kill them!!!! WHY?

22 strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith.

It's to strengthen and encourage the disciples there. Why? If Paul and Barnabas were persecuted, of course, the followers of Jesus Christ will also be persecuted and their lives will be in danger in these places too! Paul and Barnabas were thinking of the disciples of Christ and not themselves!

By the way, why was Paul able to do this? Why can he go back to the places where people want him killed.

Galatians 2:20 I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.

In short : YOU CAN NOT KILL A DEAD MAN.

Application: And here we are, being insulted or being gossiped and we're easily "offended" and "hurt" by what other people are saying.

And even if they kill Paul, what is Paul's mindset.

Philippians 1:21 For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

That is the background of the passage we are studying.

They are strengthening the people who are being persecuted because of the name of Christ.

I know the title of this sermon that was given to me was "Strengthening the Souls of the Disciples". But allow me to add... "in the midst of trials and persecution"

Important : Brothers and sisters, the modern church doesn't need to be strengthened, it needs to be shaken. We must be so on fire for the Lord, that we are sharing the Gospel to others and making the disciples of Christ that the devil becomes worried about us! We are too comfortable!

Right now, the devil is saying to the modern church... "Oh let them attend church, let them have those goosey feelings when they worship, let them attend seminars here and there... I'm not worried about them."

But if you start inviting people to church, you start going to your Bible studies and you start being on your knees and really praying, and you start sharing the Gospel to others. You start making disciples.... Oh, the devil gets worried!

How do we strengthen the souls of the disciples who are undergoing trials and persecutions because of their faith in Christ?

- **With our Presence**

Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, 22 strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith.

We can strengthen and encourage brothers and sisters by being with them.

Biblical Illustration: Remember our Lord Jesus Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane, when He was undergoing so much pain, suffering and temptation that his sweat became like drops of blood.

What's the only thing that he asked?

Matthew 26: 37 He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. 38 Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me."

Story: I remember this during Pastor's Appreciation Month. People were encouraged to share what they appreciate about their pastor. There were some people who said that they learned about Christ through the preaching but there was this one person who doesn't speak much but said, the thing that he appreciated about the pastor was the time, he was sick and alone at the hospital and the pastor visited him and prayed with him.

Isn't that what our Lord Jesus said?

Matthew 25: 35 For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, 36 I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

Your presence alone can encourage someone else.

- **Through Preaching**

, 22 strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," they said.

How do we strengthen and encourage others? By sharing the word of God with them. What is the objective of sharing the word of God to those who are undergoing trials and suffering?

to remain true to the faith

Don't be shy in sharing Bible verses that encourages people. Tell them.

Romans 10: 17 "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God"

Illustration : I remember during the time had cancer, there was no social media then. I communicated only through email to my friends. I sent an email to all my friends in the Philippines regarding the situation of Chicay because her cancer came back. Everyone else, wrote an email but there's one email I remember where my best friend wrote only one sentence and it was from

Matthew 9:29 "According to your faith, it will be done to you."

That really strengthened and encouraged me.

Now how do we ultimately strengthen and encourage?

We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," they said.

By letting them look forward to the day that we will be with the Lord.

Isn't that the encouragement of Paul himself in view of his suffering :

Philippians 3: 10 I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,

13 Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself said

John 14: 1 "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. 2 My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.

That's why I love the song by Laura Story called "Blessings" but it's a song about trials and suffering.

'Cause what if Your blessings come through raindrops?

What if Your healing comes through tears?

And what if a thousand sleepless nights are what it takes to know You're near?

And what if trials of this life

Are Your mercies in disguise?

When friends betray us

And when darkness seems to win, we know

The pain reminds this heart

That this is not, this is not our home

It's not our home

- **Through Pastoring (Shepherding)**

23 Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.

Paul and Barnabas, knows that they need to continue in their mission and the flock of God will need someone to guide them, and that's why they appointed elders.

And what is the job of an elder.

1 Peter 5: 1 To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ's sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed: 2 Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; 3 not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.

Etymology : Be shepherds “poimano” from “poimen” to shepherd.. poimano means to feed.

How do we feed and take care of God's sheep?

Again, it's connected with the Word of God. We strengthen the people in their faith by feeding them the Word of God and protecting them from the evil one, again by the word of God because the Word of God is the sword of the Spirit.

Conclusion :

But do you know where we can get our greatest strength and encouragement while we're doing God's work?

Story : David Livingstone was the missionary used by God to reach people in Africa. He was a successful medical doctor in Scotland but he chose to share the gospel and become a missionary in Africa.

While he was there, he suffered 30 bouts of malaria, lost his wife to a fever, separated from his children for years, frequently faced starvation, extreme fatigue, some people stole his medical supplies and he was even attacked by a lion brutally in 1844 which crushed his left arm (people who saw it described the attack that he was being shaken like a rag doll).. because of this he has limited mobility of his left arm and suffering life long pain and yet he continued with his mission to share the gospel and make disciples.

On May 1, 1873 at the age of 60, he was found dead because of malaria and internal bleeding. He spent 30 years of his life as a missionary in Africa.

Here is how he was found dead.

It is said that they found him kneeling by the bedside with the Bible open. And when they looked at where it was opened, it was said that his hand was pointing to Matthew 28:18-20 and he underlined these words,

*Matthew 28: 18 And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. **And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.**"*

And beside those words of the Lord, he wrote, "Truly the words of a gentleman."

How do we strengthen and encourage our souls when we are doing God's work of making disciples, by knowing that OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST IS WITH US! HE IS ALL THAT WE NEED.

S.G.D.