

**Strengthening Disciples**  
(*The 1<sup>st</sup> Journey Concludes*)  
Acts 14:21-28 on May 23, 2021  
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*Please read Acts 14:21-28 before going further in this transcript.*

Three weeks ago, at the beginning of Acts 13, the very 1<sup>st</sup> missionary journey was launched by the local church in Antioch. Today, as we come to the end of Acts 14, that 1<sup>st</sup> missionary journey comes to its conclusion. See the back cover for a quick review of our map. Antioch (Syrian Antioch) is where the journey began; it's on the far right, on the east side of this map, the BLUE arrow. The Antioch Church responded to the leading of God's Spirit by setting apart and sending off Paul and Barnabas. Cyprus is the island on the bottom middle of the map, the ORANGE arrow. Their ship landed in Salamis, on the east end of the island, and they traveled over land all the way west to Paphos. This is where we met Bar-Jesus the sorcerer and the proconsul Sergius Paulus. Perga is on the left, the west side of this map, near the GREEN arrow. Perga was just a short boat ride across the northern edge of the Mediterranean Sea. From Perga, Paul and Barnabas traveled north, up to Pisidian Antioch. This is where Paul gave a powerful message on God's Promise of Salvation. Then they traveled east to Iconium where both the Jews and Gentiles were given the opportunity to choose a side, whether to accept or reject Jesus. Then, they fled to Lystra because some of the Jews threatened to stone them to death. In Lystra, a lame man is healed, and Paul and Barnabas are thought to be Greek Gods, but then the crowd turns on them, and tries to stone Paul to death. The next day they head east for Derbe. All that Acts 14:21 tells us about Derbe is that... "They preached the gospel in that city and won a large number of disciples...."

Here's where today's passage gets interesting. They're now about to return to Syrian Antioch, the BLUE arrow. But, they don't travel by the shortest route, which would have been through Tarsus, to the east, the RED arrow. Instead, they do a U-turn and head back west again. If their goal was simply to get back to their sending church in Syrian Antioch, it would have been MUCH faster to go east, through Tarsus. However, their goal was not to economize their miles nor was it to save time. Nor was their goal to avoid persecution. Heading back through these same places, meant heading right back into the teeth of persecution and possibly another stoning. None the less, they take the U-turn in Derbe, and they retrace their steps back through all of these cities. Back through Lystra, Iconium, Pisidian Antioch, and Perga. In fact, the only place that they don't revisit is the island of Cyprus. They sail from Attalia straight to Syrian Antioch.

Today's passage tells us what they were up to, why they chose to retrace their steps rather than taking the shortcut home. Please turn in your Bible to Acts 14:21. Acts 14:21 begins, "They preached the gospel in that city [*Derbe*] and won a large

number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch.”<sup>1</sup> This is a bold and courageous decision to return, “despite the danger.”<sup>2 3</sup> So, what’s the deal? Are they just being gluttons for punishment? Or, is there some other reason for this rather risky behavior? We find our answer as verse 21 flows right into verse 22, “...Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, 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.” And so, we find 3 reasons for their return trip:<sup>4</sup> Strengthening, encouraging, and warning about hardships. First of all...

**1) They strengthen the disciples.** Many translations (including the *ESV/NKJV*) translate verse 22 more literally: “strengthening the souls<sup>5</sup> of the disciples.”<sup>6</sup> This is a good translation. Paul and Barnabas go back through each of these cities to do some inner, soul-care ministry. They build up the Christian faith of these disciples, by strengthening their souls. Now we aren’t told exactly how they did this strengthening, but we can get a fairly good idea based on how they ministered in other places. For example, they did quite a bit of soul strengthening back in Acts 11, with the church in Syrian Antioch. Back in that church’s infancy, before it ever considered sending out any missionaries, the church in Syrian Antioch was filled with all kinds of brand new, baby Christians. Acts 11:26 tells us that for a WHOLE YEAR, Paul and Barnabas, “met with the church and TAUGHT great numbers of people.” In other words, souls are strengthened when they are nourished by teaching from God’s Word.<sup>7</sup>

Brother or Sister in Christ, the gospel involves MUCH more than just making converts. The gospel is NOT finished with us once we make our initial decision to follow Jesus and get baptized; NOT even close! Actually, the GOSPEL is just getting started; the gospel is about making disciples! And disciple-making is a process of winning the spiritually lost, building them up as believers, and then equipping those believers for service.<sup>8</sup> When a newborn baby doesn’t receive proper nourishment,

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<sup>1</sup> After fleeing all of the persecution and death threats in these cities, it seems like it would have been more than reasonable for Paul and Barnabas to just keep moving east, rather than backtracking. It seems like they could have just entrusted these cities to God. After all, the people in those cities had heard the gospel, and many had responded to it, and now, they would simply need to take personal responsibility for their own future growth and development in the Christian faith. See discussion by Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, bottom of p. 479.

<sup>2</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, top of p. 480.

<sup>3</sup> Paul and Barnabas bravely retrace their steps through: Lystra: Where they’d tried to stone Paul to death. Iconium: Where they’d plotted to mistreat and stone both Paul and Barnabas. Antioch: Where they not only stirred up persecution against them but then EXPELLED them from their region!

<sup>4</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, top of p. 482.

<sup>5</sup> Ψυχή = “seat and center of the inner human life in its many and varied aspects, soul... of feelings and emotions.” (Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed., p. 1099). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.)

<sup>6</sup> So this wasn’t about physical strengthening, like we’d gain through weightlifting, nor was it mere emotional hype, from a quick pep talk or a motivational lecture.

<sup>7</sup> This matches up with Jesus’ Great Commission instructions in Matthew 28:19-20, “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and TEACHING them to obey everything I have commanded you....”

<sup>8</sup> Ephesians 2:8-10 says it this way, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

he or she isn't able to physically develop and grow, the way they're supposed to. The natural biological development of the child is hindered by a lack of nourishment. This is similar to our spiritual development. In other words, God intends His people to mature spiritually all throughout their lives, NOT to remain spiritually immature babies in the faith. Ephesians 4:11-13 describes it this way, "So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ." Verse 14 goes on... "Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ."

This begs the question: what are you doing to ensure your own, personal, spiritual strengthening? What are you doing to make sure that your own personal soul, is STRONG!? This needs to be among our very highest priorities in life! We need to make sure that we're on an intentional, effective path, toward spiritual growth and development. So even right now, make a commitment to your own spiritual strengthening. Commit to consistent weekly church attendance. (Even on nice summer days 😊) But we need more than just 1 hour a week to stay spiritually strong. So, also commit to finding a good Bible study or Life Group. Commit to a daily quiet time of prayer and Bible reading. Commit to reading a good book on Christian theology or finding a good Christian podcast. Commit to discovering and designing a personal, spiritual workout plan that will strengthen your soul! This leads right into our next point... The 2<sup>nd</sup> reason for their return trip is that...

**2) They encourage the disciples to remain true to the faith.** The middle of Acts 14:22 says, "...encouraging them to remain true to the faith..."<sup>9</sup> The very fact that they needed encouragement here, can't help but remind us that not everyone remains true; not everyone stays the course of the Christian life. In fact, there are any number of people who claim the Christian faith for a time, but then wander away from it. And that's one of the main reasons that Paul and Barnabas decided to return back through these towns. Remaining true is NOT guaranteed, and it is NOT easy. This is demonstrated in our own day and age, by the word: Deconstruction.<sup>10</sup> Deconstruction of someone's Christian faith happens when something knocks our faith off of its foundation. It might be some doubt that creeps in or some skepticism that is voiced against Christianity or some theological question that we can't seem to find an answer for. Some examples might be:

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<sup>9</sup> "Christianity is now called 'the faith,' pointing to the dynamic that drives the community." Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, bottom of p. 482.

<sup>10</sup> Find a recent example on YouTube: "Christian Lead Singer Talks Losing His Faith in God (Hawk Nelson)" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sgo-z4TOzwc> I preached on "Injustice" from Proverbs 24:1-12 on 7/5/20, <https://efcbemidji.org/sermon/injustice/>.

Why does a good God allow so much suffering in this world?  
Why don't Christians do more about racial injustice?<sup>11</sup>  
Why don't Christians love those who are struggling with gender identity?  
Why don't Christians care about refugees?<sup>12</sup>

These are just a small sampling of some of the questions and concerns that are causing some Christians to go through a deconstruction phase. For some, this amounts to just a small bump in the road, and they get right back on track spiritually. For others however, their Christian faith is COMPLETELY decimated! The rug is pulled out from under them, and they find no solid foundation on which to stand. Somehow the faith to which they once held tightly, just doesn't hold up under the pressure, and their belief system crumbles. For these, deconstruction leads to deconversion (if that's even possible<sup>13</sup>). In other words, when these spiritual questions and concerns aren't properly addressed and answered, they lead some Christians to leave the faith, or lose their faith. This very real danger of deconstruction, is a compelling reason for us to keep our faith strong; to keep our souls well-nourished. Perhaps a better way of thinking about all of this, is that a vibrant, lasting Christian faith, is a faith that is constantly UNDER CONSTRUCTION. Constantly being renewed and built up, and, at times, torn down in certain areas that lack a proper foundation on God's Word. Romans 12:2 encourages us, "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will." In other words, one of the best ways to keep our faith from being deconstructed, is to allow God's Word to continually renew our minds. To allow our faith to be constantly UNDER CONSTRUCTION, under the transformative influence of God's Word and God's Spirit. This points us right back to the importance of strengthening our faith daily. Deconstruction is not the only thing that makes "remaining true to the faith," challenging though. There's a 3<sup>rd</sup> reason for their return trip...

**3) They warn the disciples about coming hardships.** A lifelong spiritual journey, that endures, does not come easily.<sup>14</sup> Acts 14:22 concludes, "...We must go through many

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<sup>11</sup> "Two of the biggest reasons for them leaving and deconstructing are issues of racial justice and sexuality." Charles Holmes, *Reconstructing Faith in a Deconstructing Culture, Insights, Discipleship & Evangelism*, March 19, 2021.

<https://lifewayresearch.com/2021/03/19/reconstruct-faith-in-a-deconstructing-culture/>

<sup>12</sup> "...many young adults perceive that the church has lagged behind the culture when it comes to issues of justice. There is the perception, even among churchgoers, that more pastors have skeletons in the closet when it comes to sexual sin. In the eyes of many, the church doesn't have any moral ground to stand on."

"Our greatest apologetic right now to those who are doubting and pointing their fingers at the church may be our humility, repentance, and prioritization of the lowly." Charles Holmes, *Reconstructing Faith in a Deconstructing Culture, Insights, Discipleship & Evangelism*, March 19, 2021. <https://lifewayresearch.com/2021/03/19/reconstruct-faith-in-a-deconstructing-culture/>

<sup>13</sup> At this point, I'm avoiding a long explanation or debate over "eternal security" or "once saved always saved." Although this is an important theological consideration, the point Acts 14:22 is driving at, is the importance of remaining true to the faith. Whether Paul's concern was about someone actually losing their salvation or not is unclear from this particular verse.

<sup>14</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, top of p. 482.

hardships<sup>15</sup> to enter the kingdom of God....”<sup>16</sup> Not only do Paul and Barnabas warn these disciples, about coming hardships, but they also clarify, that they should expect them as a MUST. Enduring hardships is part of entering God’s Kingdom. Romans 8:17-18 says it this way, “Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.” To be clear, it’s not that we somehow earn His kingdom through suffering, but rather that we share in Christ’s sufferings as part and parcel of sharing in His glory. They go hand in hand. Paul describes it this way in 2 Timothy 2:8-12, “...This is my gospel, for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God’s word is not chained. Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory. Here is a trustworthy saying: If we died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him....” In other words, going through hardships are opportunities for our faith to prove that it has endurance.<sup>17</sup>

All of this strengthening, encouraging, and warning by Paul and Barnabas was GREAT! There’s just one problem with this though... Paul and Barnabas weren’t sticking around. They were headed home, headed back to give a missions report, to their sending church in Syrian Antioch.<sup>18</sup> This is why a key part of their long-term strategy for strengthening, encouraging, and warning, was to plant local churches in each and every city. Churches that would be there LONG after Paul and Barnabas were gone. In order for this strategy to work though, each of these local churches would need local leadership. Acts 14:23 says, “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.”<sup>19 20 21</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> The Greek for “hardship” is θλίψις = “trouble that inflicts distress, oppression, affliction, tribulation.” (Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed., p. 457). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.)

<sup>16</sup> In Matthew 7:13-14 Jesus clarifies that the road that leads to life is NARROW.

<sup>17</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:16-18 encourages us, “Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.” (It’s worth reading all 18 verses of 2 Corinthians 4.)

<sup>18</sup> This doesn’t mean that they didn’t love all of these people, it just means that they could only be in one place at a time. There were only two of them. As local churches continued popping up in more and more places, they simply couldn’t lead every one of them. “the attitude here is not ‘gone and forgotten.’ It is of a family that is left behind for other responsibilities but that is still precious enough to care for when possible.” Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 484.

<sup>19</sup> To be clear, they put their trust in the LORD, not in their elders. Even so, the elders were God’s appointed leaders for each local church. Hebrews 13:17 urges us, “Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account. Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you.”

<sup>20</sup> The practice was to appoint multiple elders in each church, not just one elder per church. This is sometimes referred to as a “plurality of elders.” In other words, there was a team of elders, “there was more than one elder per community.” (Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 483.) By the way, we should note that, during His earthly ministry, Jesus didn’t plant any churches and He didn’t appoint any elders. He left that for His followers to do, empowering them by His Spirit.

<sup>21</sup> This verse highlights a helpful distinction about how elders should be chosen: “with prayer and fasting.” In other words, these elder appointments aren’t just “a mere administrative exercise but a spiritual one, with prayer and fasting.” (Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 483.) The fact is, here at E-Free Bemidji, we always try to be careful and

At our church, we appoint our elders through a voting process; either by hiring them as pastors or by voting on them each fall.<sup>22 23</sup> Elders are tasked with the spiritual care of those within their local church. Let me be a little transparent here: Caring for those within our church has been incredibly challenging over this season of COVID-19. Our elders have found it particularly difficult to identify exactly who is part of this local church. Especially when people stopped physically gathering in the church building, it became difficult to keep track of which sheep we were spiritually responsible for. We realized something fairly quickly last year: anyone who hadn't become an official member of the church, wasn't necessarily on our contact list. Some were listed in the church directory, some were on the picture wall in the Fellowship Hall, but many people fell through the cracks because we just couldn't keep track of so many hundreds of sheep. This is why you're going to keep hearing us encourage you, toward prayerful consideration of membership. Church membership is an incredibly helpful way for our Elder Board to know exactly who is part of this particular local church, and who wants shepherding care.<sup>24</sup> God's plan is to use the local church for strengthening disciples. Becoming an official member of a local church, demonstrates a strong commitment to God's primary plan for Christian growth and maturity. We have some membership classes coming up in June. If you're not a member yet, please consider attending. Call the office or email us at [efree@paulbunyan.net](mailto:efree@paulbunyan.net). Becoming a member at E-Free Bemidji can be a significant help to your spiritual strengthening and maturity in Christ.

Acts 14 ends with Paul and Barnabas sailing back to Syrian Antioch and giving the first missions report in the history of the local church. Acts 14:26-27 says, "From Attalia they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed. On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles." And so, we come to the end of Acts 14, and this marks our halfway point through the book of Acts: 14 chapters down, 14 to go!

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prayerful when choosing any of our various church leaders. And some of us also practice fasting around these kinds of decisions.

<sup>22</sup> The exact process for how these elders were appointed in the Early Church is not completely clear. It may have been that on some occasions Paul and Barnabas did the appointing, while on other occasions the local church likely took a vote. See the helpful footnote on Acts 14:23 on pp. 1854-1855 in the *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011.

<sup>23</sup> The qualifications and ministry description for local church elders is spelled out in several different places in the New Testament including: 1 Timothy 3:1-7, Titus 1:5-9, and Acts 20:28-31. In Acts 20:28 the church elders are urged to "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood." The New Testament uses the words "elders," "overseers," and "shepherds" interchangeably. This is likely because of the various duties they fulfill. Here's a simple summary of the duties of a church elder: 1 – Be a spiritual role model, keeping a godly reputation. 2 – Shepherd the flock (Caregiving, benevolence, discipline, etc.) 3 – Teach God's Word and protect the church from heresy. 4 – Oversee and give direction to church ministries. This isn't comprehensive, but it's a good start.

<sup>24</sup> If someone doesn't become a member, it can be difficult to know exactly what their relationship status is with our church. Sure, some of us have been around for a long time, but our elder board changes a little every year. We don't always have established relational connections, between every attender of our church and someone on the elder board, in a particular year. People move around, people watch the livestream from home, people switch churches, but a commitment to membership helps our Elder Board gain a clearer picture of who belongs to this church.

For the next three Sundays, we're going to take a break from our Acts series. We'll resume again on June 20<sup>th</sup>. Until then, we're going to take a 3-week detour. Next Sunday, I'll be preaching from Revelation 20 about the Glorious Return of Jesus Christ. The following week, on June 6, I'll be on vacation due to our daughter Serena's wedding. There's a note about that in the church bulletin. Pastor Eric will be preaching on 1 Corinthians 11 and Unity in the Church. We'll celebrate the Lord's Supper on that Sunday as well. On June 13, Pastor Albin will be preaching. His last official Sunday isn't until June 27, but his final sermon at E-Free Bemidji will be June 13. He'll be preaching on the importance of Sound Doctrine.

Just like the churches that were planted in Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, and so on, E-Free Bemidji was planted in northern Minnesota. We're here for YOU; we're here to strengthen you as a disciple, to encourage you to remain true to the faith, and to warn you about the hardships that lie ahead.

