

Acts 14

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[0:00] I saw the start of a new series of Race Across the World.! I'm leaving TV.

The book of Acts is the Race Across the World. The book of Acts is the story of the gospel going from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth.

The story of Acts is a tiny little group huddled together in a room at the start of Acts and at the end of Acts, a worldwide global movement.

It's a race across the world. And the first series of the Race Across the World is this missionary journey of Acts 13 and 14. It takes six minutes to read.

The journey lasted about three years. 46 to 48 AD. Before Paul and Barnabas set out, there are no Christian congregations in Asia Minor.

[1:20] Within a decade, there are Christian churches in every major city. Come with me to the end of Acts chapter 14. And there's a summary verse.

And they report back at the end of this race across the world. And they say, verse 26, where we sail to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they'd fulfilled.

And when they arrived, they gathered all the church together. They declared all that God had done with them. And how God had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.

Chapter 14 is God in action. It is God opening a door of faith to those who are not Jews, to the Gentiles.

We have a picture here of how God opens the door wide for people like you and people like me. How God sets an opportunity before his people.

[2:17] But it is very different from what we might expect. If God is really opening a door of faith, wouldn't you expect things to go really well?

If we had a missionary who came to us and said, well listen, and the door of faith is opening wide in this area of the world, we would expect success stories.

We would expect for things to come together. For there to be some level of safety and security. You would not expect all sorts of opposition and hostility. But what we find in Acts 14 is very different.

Paul and Barnabas, remember, they are run out of Antioch. Run out of Iconium. They are stoned.

They are left for dead in Lystra. Four years later, the apostle Paul is writing to his sidekick, Timothy. To one of the young men who had come to faith when Paul preached in Lystra. And Paul reminds him of this first visit. He says, you followed my teaching, my conduct.

[3:19] My aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and my sufferings. All that happened to me in Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, Acts 13 and 14.

All the persecutions I endured, yet from them all the Lord rescued me. That is your picture of God opening a door of faith.

And there is an idea out there in lots of churches, and even in churches like this, that if you follow the Lord Jesus, and if a church is obedient to the Lord Jesus, then all its problems will disappear.

And what Acts 13 and 14 teaches us is the opposite of that. Remember Paul and Barnabas, they're coming from Antioch in Pisidia, and there's a map, there's two Antiochs.

There's Antioch on your right, and there's another Antioch, isn't there, on the top left, Pisidian Antioch. And Pisidia and Antioch is really this kind of trendy city.

[4:29] It's the trendy place of London, wherever that is. Greenford. Hanwell.

It's where the media are, artsy people, influences, key people on the arts, on the board of trade, and they've turned against Christianity and the gospel. And yet the Christians, they remain joyful and full of the Spirit.

And what do you do when you've been thrown out of a city for preaching the good news of the Lord Jesus? What do you do? Do you go back to home base? Do you lick your wounds? Do you go back

to safety? Do you take a holiday on the med?

Do you rethink the strategy? Do you think, let's take some of the nasty bits out of the gospel? Let's not tell people about the wrath of God, or the judgment of God, or repentance.

Let's not do that. Well, what do they do in chapter 14? They take courage in their hands, and they do what is unsafe, and they do what is massively risky and unconventional.

[5 : 30] There are three episodes in the chapter, and I want to look at one at a time. Verses 1 to 7, they come to Iconium. Can you see the risk of faith? They do the same thing.

They go to this place, Iconium, and they do the same thing they did in Antioch. They go to the synagogue, and they preach as they've done again and again.

Look at the emphasis. What do they do? Verse 1, they speak. Verse 3, they speak boldly. Verse 7, they preach.

How does the gospel go forward? How do churches get planted? God's word is preached. That is the way that the risen Lord Jesus brings salvation to people, through a message, through the preaching, proclaiming of the gospel.

How many verses does it take for persecution to break out? The answer is 1. Verse 2, some from Antioch come, and people's minds are poisoned, and Christianity is seen as a pernicious threat.

[6 : 38] So what do Paul and Barnabas do? Verse 3, they remain there a long time. They speak boldly for the Lord. They bear witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands.

But the people of the city are divided. The Christian message comes to a city, and the city is divided. Some side with the Jews, some side with the apostles.

What's going on here? God is showing stunning and remarkable kindness to the people of Iconium. He's sending them, these messengers, these apostles, who are preaching to them the good news of the Lord Jesus.

He confirms the truth of which they're preaching by signs and wonders. And God gives strength to Saul and Barnabas. And when the tide changes, and suddenly things go against them, they don't suddenly run away when it gets difficult.

They don't lie down in front of the lies, but they speak openly, boldly, clearly. Which means that clearly, there's some physical threat, isn't there?

[7 : 51] You don't speak boldly, unless there is some threat. And the gospel that they are preaching, we're told, is the word of God's grace. And the Iconians don't deserve this.

But God, in his mercy, is offering to them eternal life through his Son. And he's offering to them forgiveness of sins, and the hope of glory, and the transforming presence of his Holy Spirit through the gospel, as he does today.

Wherever the gospel is preached, it is divisive. The gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, for some people, is like a breath of life.

It's like fresh, life-giving oxygen. But to others, the gospel of the Lord Jesus is poisonous cyanide. And it's the hearing of the gospel that always has this paradoxical effect on its hearers.

The gospel of the Lord Jesus always brings about unity, and it always brings about division. And whenever God truly reveals his Son through the preaching of the gospel, it creates unity and division.

[9 : 08] It did in the life and teaching of Jesus, didn't it? It did in the life and teaching of the apostles, and it will do so in your life and in my life. The Bible is thoroughly realistic.

And division is not nice. And division is a miserable reality. It shows our terrible perversity.

That the gospel of God, which ought to be the source of such true unity and true joy, becomes the object of such division.

But I want you to see that the division it causes doesn't show that Paul and Barnabas were defective in their work.

It wasn't that Paul and Barnabas needed to learn to speak in a more gracious, more relevant way. Exactly the opposite is true. Paul and Barnabas were being true to the word of Jesus Christ, and that is why the division took place.

[10 : 19] As a church, we cannot serve Jesus Christ, and be at peace with the world. Or as the apostle James says to each one of us, do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity, it's war with God?

Whoever wishes to be a friend of the world, makes themselves an enemy of God. So when these threats rise to abuse and physical violence, what do Paul and Barnabas do? Do they flee? Do they look for a quiet and easy spot? Well, no, they continue preaching the gospel. Verse 7, God is here opening a door of faith. It's very interesting to see when the apostles stay in Acts, and when they speak boldly, and when they get up and move on. And I think what governs their choices is clear in the second episode. So let's look at verses 8 to 20. 8 to 20. And the first thing that happens in Lystra is a repeat.

[11 : 28] It's a repeat of what we've seen in Acts before. This miracle is a carbon copy of the miracle that Peter did at the temple. Do you remember when he was there with Peter and John? Silver and gold I don't have, but this is what I give to you in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. Get up and walk. The apostle looks at him, orders him up, and he leaps. The reaction is very different here, isn't it? In Jerusalem, Peter was arrested. But in Lystra, can you see? What's the reaction? Well, they want to make Paul and Barnabas gods. They want to make them gods. I have never had that response to my preacher. Geoff Thomas has been preaching the gospel for 60, 70 years. 60 years, we'll say. I suspect he's never had this response. Reuben might have, but I haven't. They say, don't they, that gods have come down to us in human form. They're called Barnabas Zeus, Paul Hermes. The priests go off, they get cows and garlands. You might think that's an unusual reaction. But there's a legend in the area.

[12 : 39] And the legend in the area is that decades before, Zeus and Hermes had assumed human form. They'd visited the town of Lystra, the people of Lystra. They'd looked for hospitality. And Hermes and Zeus came house after house, and they were not welcome. They received no hospitality. They visited a thousand homes, until finally one poor elderly couple brought them in, fed them, and gave them hospitality. And Zeus and Hermes then took them out onto their veranda and destroyed all their neighbours with fire and transformed their hovel into a local temple. So you could see, at this point, with that legend that has grown up, that the locals are motivated towards hospitality. Now, I imagine that there are many church leaders that would have loved this. They would have loved to have seen this local religious expression. They would have received the garlands and overlooked the sacrifices and gone home to their hotel that night thinking things have gone very well. There's things to learn, but things are marvellous.

[13 : 53] They write the email. They send it off to their supporters. They say it's remarkable. But Paul and Barnabas, they see the sacrifices and they spring literally into action. Verse 14, they tear their garments.

Why are you doing this, man? We are men of like nature, like you. We're just like you. And we bring you good news that you should turn from these vain, empty things to the living God who made the heavens and earth and the sea and all that is in them. You don't tear your clothes unless you're in the presence of blasphemy. And Paul and Barnabas do not say, what you're doing is wrong. Ah, ah, ah. This isn't wise. They tear their clothes. More than that, they rush into the crowd and they physically try to stop the crowd from offering sacrifices. It's the second time in the first missionary journey that the gospel has come into confrontation with non-Christian religions. And both times are really helpful to us because they help us think, how are we to think of other religions?

[15 : 05] And the truth is this, they are not neutral exercises. Other religions are not harmless expressions of a universal spiritual impulse. According to the Bible, they are futile and they are blasphemous because they steal glory from the true and the living God. And the apostle, he's got no regard for how ancient and well-established these beliefs are. He regards the religions as false, empty, spiritually hazardous. And verse 15, the aim of the gospel is to turn people away from these vain and empty things to the living God. It's not kindness, is it? To say, keep going for a moment with these vain and empty things. They're dead, they're worthless. They cannot bring you eternal life, they cannot bring you forgiveness and grace.

[16:17] What you need to do is turn away from those things and those rituals to the transforming hope that we have in Jesus Christ. And I think what's really striking about this episode is we are given a glimpse into the heart of Paul and Barnabas.

We are given a glimpse into this man. What motivates this man? What motivates Paul and Barnabas? It is not so much results and it's not so much numbers.

It's not even so much his love for these people that he's never met. Those things are present but what burns brightest in the apostle's heart is a love and a zeal for the glory of God.

And he cannot bear it and they cannot bear it when they see God's name soiled. And he's filled with jealousy that God should be treated as God and his name would be treated as holy.

It's a personal injury to them when they see God dishonoured. And that's why they do this incredibly dangerous thing.

[17:40] And I'm aware today and we live in a city don't we that is rightly nervous of religious fanaticism. But we need to remind ourselves that zeal for the glory and the name of the living God is a defining mark of all who belong to the living God.

Do you remember what it was said of the Lord Jesus? He said it of himself in the words of the psalm. He says zeal for your house our Lord consumes me. The insults that should fall on him fall on me.

So in verse 15 we hear this first Christian sermon ever preached to out and out pagans possibly illiterate people probably illiterate people who've never heard of the Old Testament. They've never heard of Jesus Christ.

They've been speaking of Jesus but now they go right back to basics. I don't have time to go through it fully but look at verses 15 to 17. There's four points to this sermon. He tells them first of all God is your creator.

He made you. He's transcendent above all things. Number two he is sovereign. God rules every person and every nation. Thirdly God has revealed himself and God wishes to be known.

[19:02] And fourthly God is full of goodness. Full of mercy and full of kindness. and he doesn't just satisfy your stomach but he satisfies your heart with gladness. It's a lovely message isn't it?

A lovely message. God made you. God rules over all. God has revealed himself and wishes to be known and God is full of goodness.

What's the response? Verse 19 and 20 it's monumental fickleness. The same people who want to make them gods turn and very quickly try to kill Paul by stoning him.

They think he's dead so they drag him outside the city. Somehow Paul survives and the next day he goes on to preach the gospel in Derby. I wonder if you were writing a letter to the folks back home an email update I wonder if you would say God had opened a door for the gospel.

We come to the third point and the last section verses 21 to 28 is very important. After two years of pioneer missionary work there's one final thing to do and that is to ensure that the door of the gospel remains open.

[20:21] Let me read three of the verses. Verse 21 and when they preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples they returned to Lystra to Iconium to Antioch. Can you believe it?

They went back to these places strengthening the souls of the disciples encouraging them to continue in the faith and saying that through many tribulations to write we must enter the kingdom of God.

And when they'd appointed elders for them in every church with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they believed. It's interesting isn't it that when we want to bring the gospel to a place what has often been done is they have a mission.

That's what the evangelical church has done. They have a mission in an area. It's interesting that isn't what the apostle Paul does. He establishes churches. At the end of two years work in Galatia province what does the apostle leave behind?

Churches. Churches are the flower of the gospel. And not missionary organizations not parachurch organizations but local churches.

[21:36] And so the question that I'm asking at the end of Acts 14 and you should be asking too is how on earth can these churches survive? I mean there's not a believer in Galatia who's known the gospel for more than two years.

And these new congregations they are the definition of fragile and they're facing bitter and vicious physical opposition and persecution. How are they going to keep going? How can Paul leave them

on their own?

Surely he needs to establish a head office or something. And so I want us to see as we close in three ways churches that the apostle provides for these churches to enable that the door of faith remain open.

Three things he does. Three gifts he gives them. Three foundations to make sure that churches not only survive but churches thrive and grow. So here are the three foundations for growing churches. Number one the apostolic teaching. Notice! Notice verse 21 and they go around and what are they trying to do? They're trying to strengthen, encourage and exhort.

[22 : 48] And they know that the natural drift of their hearts and my hearts is to slide back. And they know that you and I go lukewarm very, very quickly and so what do they do?

They encourage, they strengthen, they exhort, continue in the faith. Do not give up. And through the New Testament this phrase keeps being used to continue in the faith, the tradition is another way of put it, the deposit, the faith.

It's a recognisable body of teaching. We say it in the creed. What do you say to these people who have received this teaching and face violence?

What do you say to people who have watched the Apostle Paul being beat into unconsciousness? Paul says verse 22, through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.

And I think that really is the summary verse of the whole chapter. Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. Want to see what it's like for a door to open for the faith?

[23 : 59] Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. God. If I can put it like this there are two sides to following Jesus. On the one side God has opened a door for us and we will enter through that into the kingdom of God.

The path that you walk as a follower of the Lord Jesus today and the path that I walk each day takes us a day's march nearer home to the kingdom of God.

And we will be with Christ and we will be with one another and there will be no pain and no sickness and no death and no sorrow. And we will see him face to face with renewed redeemed restored resurrection bodies.

Every day is a day's march near a home. It's a path of joy but there's another side to the path. And that path that we walk towards the kingdom of God it is full of well you know it's done to you trials and tribulations and setbacks and sorrows and difficulties.

And not just one not just two but many tribulations isn't it? And do you notice that in Iconium it's not just the apostle who is the target of opposition and persecution verse 2 it's the brethren they face the persecution too.

[25 : 22] The Christians in Iconium who are going to be misunderstood and mistreated and in verse 20 in Lystra it's really interesting where they drag Paul's body out it's written in such a way literally that the disciples don't gather round Paul once the danger has passed but at the same time as the danger after he passes out to kind of literally it's this picture of a protective ring around the apostle Paul and this too is a door of faith here is the thing what the apostle is teaching them and us is that these very tribulations through which God is going to bring us into the kingdom of God it is glory through suffering he's going to bring us to heaven those who have trusted Christ but the path to heaven every single one of us faces sorrows and difficulties and I don't know what your sorrows and difficulties and tribulations and trials are right now for some those tribulations will be an opportunity for massive self-absorption and bitterness but for others they are the path that leads to joy in heaven he puts it more boldly for some these tribulations are a path for hell and for some they are a path to heaven this is the apostolic teaching and it's the foundation of the church second thing

I think is a little bit surprising and it's this the second foundation is pastoral oversight look at verse 23 how do churches survive well verse 23 the apostle appoints elders so that the gospel will continue being preached the apostle does not impose people from outside the congregation they are appointed from within he does not appoint one elder for one congregation it says in every congregation they appointed elders as corporate leaders some will work full time some will work part time the word appoint has two meanings it means to put your hand up to vote and to put your hand down to lay hands on someone so I take it what Paul and Barnabas did they didn't come into the congregation and say well this guy looks good let's make him an elder can you see there is both congregational involvement and there is outside authority as well which lays hands on them later on when Paul is writing to

Timothy he says these are the qualifications that men need when you look to appoint elders they must be people who have demonstrable moral integrity they must be people who are loyal to the apostolic words they must be people who are able to teach others so I want you to see this church government matters and I would argue that the form of church government matters Paul leaves the church with apostolic teaching pastoral oversight and the third and final thing here's the most important thing at all he offers to them the protection of God can you see what he does he prays and he commits them to the Lord the most important thing we can say about the church is that it's not a human invention every church this congregation has been created by God sustained by God ruled by God through his word and humanly speaking it is just absurd for you to think that we can continue on without God as it was for these congregations and ultimately their protection and our protection does not come through legal or structural means the gospel moves forward through tribulation as the gospel is preached and Christians encourage one another and strengthen one another to face the suffering and pray for the blessing of God so this is what it looks like for God to open up a door of faith it is risky it is unsafe it is even frightening but it is through many tribulations that we must enter the kingdom of heaven and the church in this country particularly in the UK is very cautious and churches like ours have become very risk averse and careful and prudent and I think Acts 13 and 14 calls for risk and it calls for boldness last Sunday Christchurch Lincoln began this Sunday Grove Chapel Camberwell joined next Sunday there is a new minister coming to Emmanuel Brentford Ian Clements and these are really really encouraging days for us but remember Acts 13 and 14 at tribulation trials are coming will come have come and the idea that there is going to be a time when everything is going to be safe and secure and then we'll act and then we'll risk well it means that God isn't actually adequate for us because it is through many tribulations that we must enter the kingdom of God so do not be the spirit do not be surprised do not be dismayed do not be deterred let's pray thank you Thank you.