

Book of Acts Series - Part 18 - It's Not So Easy

by Jim Cymbala

The sermon emphasizes the importance of courage and boldness in sharing the gospel, despite the risk of division and persecution.

Duration: 34:01

Scripture: Acts 14:2-27

Topics: "Book Of Acts"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes the importance of preaching the gospel and not holding back the truth, even if it may be unpopular. He highlights that the gospel message includes the acknowledgement of sin and the need for forgiveness. The preacher also discusses the challenges faced by Paul and Barnabas as they preached the message of Jesus to both Jews and Gentiles. He encourages believers to endure hardships and reminds them that suffering is a part of entering the kingdom of God. The sermon also touches on the issue of false advertising in Christian ministry.

Transcript

We started this series on the book of Acts and we're in the part now where Paul and Barnabas have left Antioch and Syria and are on what is called in Bible history their first missionary journey. And we learned that they left Antioch and Syria and were on an island in the Mediterranean for a while, the island of Cyprus, and now they headed north into what we call Turkey, but it's called in the Bible Asia. And we learned last Sunday, we studied Acts 13, that they go to Antioch, oddly, Antioch, but the Antioch that's in Pisidia or in Turkey, and they go to the synagogue and they preach and converts are made, but opposition comes and they are forced out of town.

They're driven out of town, but converts are made. And the last verse of chapter 13 says, and the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Ghost. And now they are in Asia, in Turkey, and now they're heading east and they go to, because they're driven out of there, they come to a place called Iconium.

And here's what happens in Iconium. Let's read it carefully, okay, and see what we can learn today. The same thing happened in Iconium.

Paul and Barnabas went to the Jewish synagogue and preached with such power that a great number of both Jews and Greeks became believers. Hold that. The Jews, of course, would be in the synagogue.

Who were the Greeks? Remember, we learned about that. They were the God-fearing Greeks, the God-fearing Gentiles who half converted or converted to Judaism because of its monotheistic approach and its rules of purity and life. So some of the Jews, a great number, and the Greeks became believers in the synagogue.

Some of the Jews, however, in the synagogue spurned God's message. They wouldn't believe. And they poisoned the minds of the Gentiles against Paul and Barnabas.

That's probably the Gentiles in the city. But the apostles stayed there. Some translations have, nevertheless, the apostles stayed there a long time preaching boldly about the grace of the Lord.

Notice, they were preaching. They were preaching boldly. And what was their subject matter? The grace of the Lord, His blessing, His unmerited favor, what He wants to do for everyone listening to me today.

And the Lord proved their message was true by giving them power to do miraculous signs and wonders. So God worked with them. But the people of the town were divided in their opinion about them.

And some sided with the Jews and some with the apostles. Then a mob of Gentiles and Jews, along with their leaders, decided to attack and stone them. When the apostles learned of it, they fled to the region of Lycaonia, to the towns of Lystra and Derbe and the surrounding area.

God willing, we'll learn about that next week. And there they preach the good news. Now, from there, the rest of the chapter tells us what happened in Lystra.

And then they went to a place called Derbe, D-E-R-B-E. And then they went back to visit all the towns where they had ministered, including this one. Imagine what courage that took.

They were talking of stoning you, and you go back to go strengthen the disciples. That takes courage. That takes courage.

They're ready to throw you in prison or beat you or stone you. And you go, no, I got to go back and see the believers. Most people would say, just stay away from there.

On their way back, we pick this up. After preaching the good news in Derbe and making many disciples, Paul and Barnabas returned to Lystra, Iconium, we just heard of it. See, they're backtracking, and Antioch of Pisidia, the one that we learned about last week, where they strengthened the believers.

The translations say, they strengthened the hearts and the minds of the believers. They encouraged them to continue in the faith, reminding them that we must suffer many hardships to enter the kingdom of God. Haven't heard that verse lately on Christian television, have we? You know, America has truth in advertising laws, because you're not allowed to go on television or on the radio or through the media and promise something from a product that it doesn't deliver.

That's against the law. People are always near the edge of it, but I've noticed sometimes on radio, you ever hear some of those infomercials that if you take this product, this powder, this honey, this whatever, and you'll live forever, you'll never get a cavity, cancer will never be in your body, and just wild stuff. How they get away with that, I don't know how, but we have truth in advertising laws.

You can't promise something you can't deliver. I think a lot of Christian ministers have been guilty of false advertising. I really do believe that.

They cherry-pick verses and paint a picture of Christianity that is nowhere found in the Bible. You can cherry-pick verses in the Bible and become a Calvinist, five-point Calvinist. You can cherry-pick verses in the Bible and be an Arminian and believe the opposite of Calvinism on many things.

You can cherry-pick verses and teach false prosperity gospel and a lot of things, but you can't look at the whole counsel of God and not come to the conclusion that Christianity is not so easy after all. Is there peace? Is there joy? Is there, quote, victory and all of that? That's right, but we can get into a mental positivism, cheerleading type of Christianity. God is good all the time, bump, and all of that, and it's not true to life.

It's not true in the Bible. It's not true to us, so let's look at what happened to these godly men. Luke was inspired by the Holy Spirit to write this incident in Iconium, so let's see what we can gather from it.

When they go to the town, Paul and Barnabas go to the synagogue, which was their practice. They would go and visit the Jewish people who were gathering to worship. Then usually their policy was they would stay there as long as they could, but if they were rejected there, they would turn to the Gentiles, and they would... Who's a Gentile? Anyone who's not a Jew, so they would then spread the message to others so they could believe, and this was all new.

As we're going to learn as we move on through the book, they went back and reported to the people that, oh, God is not just saving Jews. God is saving Gentiles, and the word hadn't gotten out of what happened in Cornelius' house where Peter went there. Remember we learned that? Now Italians were becoming Christians.

Some of the people fought Paul and Barnabas and said, what are you talking about? You're bringing the message of Jesus to Gentiles. See, we live in such a different world. It's hard for us to imagine because it's a rarity now relatively that a Jewish person is a believer in Yeshua, and most Christians are Gentiles.

It was just the reverse 2,000 years ago. So they go to the synagogue, and they preach. I want you to notice we've read this, and now we're going to extrapolate from this as we would in a Bible study.

I'm doing it a little differently today. What are the lessons from this passage for us? What can we apply? We know the story. We know what happened.

They went to the synagogue, and some of the Jews and Gentiles believed, but then some of the other Jews chose not to believe. They disbelieved, and they stirred up animosity and poisoned the minds of the Gentiles in the city and in the synagogue. So now the whole city was divided, and it was getting hot.

It was starting to pressure cook, but the Bible says nevertheless Paul and Barnabas stayed there for a long time, and they preached even more effectively about the grace of the Lord, and God seeing that worked with them and confirmed what they were doing through, in this case, signs and wonders done through Paul and Barnabas. But even though there were signs and wonders, the town was still divided. Some sided with the Jews who were against them.

Some sided with Paul and Barnabas and the converts that had been made. Then they heard that things were getting so hot that they were talking about the versions have grabbing them, molesting them, taking them under control, and taking them out and stone them and kill them. When they heard of that, they said, out of town.

I'm out of town. We're leaving, and they left, and they went to now Lystra, which we'll learn about next week, God willing, and they continued preaching the good news. So how does that challenge us? How does that inform us about Christianity? First of all, I want you to notice that not believing is a choice, the Bible says, that those in the synagogue made when they rejected the gospel.

We talk about people, I can't believe. I just can't believe. Yes, you can.

If you don't believe, you choose not to believe. Unbelief is a sin because Paul came and said, I saw him on the road to Damascus. He had died and risen from the dead.

I saw him. I used to persecute Christians. Why would I make this up? I'm in danger by giving you this message.

Why would I do that if it's not true? On top of that, the original 12 disciples minus Judas, they saw him crucified and saw him risen from the dead, and for 40 days off and on, he appeared to them. Why would they go and say that if it meant persecution? I mean, be real about it. We learn here that religious prejudice or prejudice of any kind can be so strong that even when presented with a truthful testimony, you can reject it and say, I don't want to believe that.

I want to believe what I believe, and that's self-incriminating. That's why judgment comes on people, because they choose not to believe. Like all of you here, if you're not a born-again Christian and you die, you're going to have to answer for your sins.

We're all sinners, but we who have put our faith in Christ, he's the sacrificing atonement for our sins, and our sins have been forgiven and put away, not because we're any better than anyone else, but because of faith in Christ and his grace and mercy. But everyone either has to answer for their sins or Christ is their savior from their sins. It's all a matter of believing.

You choose to believe or you choose not to believe. I'm struggling and praying and working with people and have all my life, and I preach the gospel to them. Some are family members, relatives.

They've chosen not to believe, and that's what Christian work is about, presenting the gospel, loving people, praying for them so that God might help them to believe, because right now they're adamant, and it's a guilt. We choose not to believe. If you're here today, it's not because you can't believe.

It's not because you had a certain kind of bringing up or rearing environmental concerns in your social environment, but it's because we choose not to believe in the testimony of Jesus Christ. This is what the Bible says condemns a person to the end, not their sins. Really, the ultimate is rejecting the solution for your sins.

If you're not a Christian, you've chosen to reject the only sacrifice that can wash away your sins and forgive you and provide forgiveness and guarantee you eternal life through faith in Christ, but you choose that. That's why we're all responsible at the end of our life. No one's a victim.

You can choose to accept Jesus. I have. How many have chosen to believe in Jesus? All right.

Those who haven't, you choose not to. Well, I don't even believe. Well, in the end, we're going to argue with you.

In the end, we'll find out, won't we? In the end, we'll find out, but I plead with anyone listening to me today to put your faith in Jesus, not church, not the Brooklyn Tabernacle, not in me, but to put your faith in Jesus. I want you to notice that there was division from their message, and there was then, and there is now, and there will be every time you open your mouth to share Jesus, there will be division. Some believe, some choose not to believe.

It was then, it is now, and will always be. So the concept that if you share, everyone gets saved, but if the anointing is on you, and if you really pray, then everyone gets converted, that is not found in the scriptures. It didn't even happen when Jesus was here on earth.

He didn't convert all of Jerusalem, did he? I read where some people put him on a cross. This is the mystery of iniquity. This is the mystery of free will and the sovereignty of God, the sovereignty of God and free will in a way working together in a way we don't understand, but there will always be division.

Jesus said, I did not come to bring peace. This is another truth in advertising sentence. Jesus said to his disciples, I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.

I've come to divide families. I've come to divide people. One believes, one does not, and the one who doesn't usually attacks the one who does.

Is that not the history of the world? Again, truth in advertising. We have to face the fact that when you share Christ and you're a Christian, you are going to be on the cusp of division. You're going to cause trouble and you'll be around trouble.

That's the way it is. Are you more godly than Paul and Barnabas? Are you more anointed? Have you prayed more? Is there some anointing on my life or your life that, no, this is not going to happen? No, it will absolutely happen. And it's foolish to tell people it won't because if we don't tell people the truth and then trouble comes, they go, oh, where's God when I need him? No, we should be expecting.

If I serve Jesus, there'll be hard moments, but he'll see me through. Come on. Can we say amen to that? He will see me through, but there will be heartbreaking moments.

Come on, let's be real. People get converted around the world and their spouse is a Buddhist or a Hindu or a Muslim, and they come home and say, now I'm a Christian. What do you think that causes excitement? You think they have a party? Some of them have to go in hiding.

This is real. Let's drain our minds of all kinds of euphoric, silly thoughts, and let's talk about reality, as they say in Fuller Street. Let's do real talk about Jesus.

When you serve Jesus, you're in the soup because Jesus, when he was here on earth, did he have it easy? Did everyone support him? No. So are we greater than our master? No. So there was division.

There's always division. There's always a sorting out of people, and we have to understand that and say, God, thank God for the body of Christ and thank God for his fellowship, the presence of Jesus, because I'm going to need it when things get difficult. My mother is here and going to be 99 in about two months, and when her family got saved in a poor mining town, Polish family, 10 children, when the family all got saved, the neighbors, who in this case were of the Roman Catholic faith, didn't like the idea that they were not coming to Roman Catholic church anymore because the whole town was Roman Catholic.

So they took garbage and threw it on the lawn of my uncles and aunts, and they told me about that as adults and told me how that affected them, and they got remarks said to them in school. They were rejected and laughed at. Oh, you holy rollers.

What do you think? You're more godly than us. Why? You're not going to come to mass anymore or so on and so forth. These things don't happen.

Well, of course they do, and there's silent persecution right now in New York City. Am I not right? What is it about the name of Jesus that sets everybody off? He knew it would happen because he said, you'll be hated by all men for my name's sake. If you go on a TV program and talk about the Dalai Lama and that you follow his teaching, everybody's cool.

If you say you believe in Muhammad, everyone is nice. You talk about Buddha, the teachings of Confucius, whatever. You just say Jesus.

What is it about Jesus that sets not just the captives free, but sets trouble that we have to expect as we're going to learn here at the end? Well, it's because partially because if someone is in another religion and you tell them about Jesus, what you're insinuating is they're wrong and Jesus is right, and people don't like to hear they're wrong. Is that not human instinct? And yet the Lord said, go into all the world and preach the gospel. There's only one mediator between God and man.

Only Jesus Christ can bring forgiveness of sin. But people have been taught something else. What are we supposed to do? Hold it back so they'll like us, or do we tell them? We tell them.

We wait for the right moment. We share it. Another thing about the gospel of Jesus, it tells you you're a sinner.

So we have to admit we're sinners. We have to admit we need forgiveness to a proud person like me and you. We don't want to hear that.

But that's the message of the good news. All have sinned and come short of the glory. Who are you to judge me? See, this is all part of the, is this not the problem everywhere? How many understand what I'm talking about? Just lift your hand.

When you share Jesus, you're going into hornet's nest and God wants us to know about it. Otherwise we're guilty of false advertising. This is the Christian life.

Don't listen to any of the people who amplify the anointing of the Holy Spirit or people who are into the power of prayer and binding evil spirits. If it happened to Paul and Barnabas, it's going to happen to you and I. This is just the way the game is played. So Christianity causes this visceral reaction and we see it here in the synagogue in Iconium where everyone is divided.

But even though they're divided and things are getting hot, notice the courage of Paul and Barnabas. They stay there. They don't run.

Oh God bless them. God bless them. Think of that.

They could run to a place of safety, but as it's heating up, they feel led by God. I'm going to stay even though it's not easy. We're going to share Jesus even though we know a lot of folks don't want to hear about it.

Brothers and sisters, don't we need an infusion of that kind of boldness? All in favor say, I hear. I mean, they were risking their lives and some of us won't open our mouths because we're afraid of the reaction of what someone might look at us a little dirty and get out of here with that Jesus stuff. So they stay and as they stay, God works with them.

Now that's another truth we have to remember. When you do God's work and you're obedient to his calling and you share Christ wherever you can, how you can, we have to expect God to help us and back up what we're saying. So that it's not just our words, but it's our words plus some witness or sign from the Holy Spirit that God is endorsing the message that we're sharing to people about Jesus Christ.

This is all happening in this time in Iconium. They preach the good news, not join a church, not be a Baptist, not be Presbyterian. They preach the grace of God.

Some believe a lot. Others don't, but the ones who don't won't let it go. They, why didn't they just say, I choose not to believe.

That's fine. You believe it. No, we're going to stir up trouble against you.

Read Fox book of martyrs down through the centuries. What's happened to some Christians who have held onto their faith, especially in the first three, 400 years of the Christian faith. And the Bible says that then it got more heated, a visceral reaction of, we're going to grab them.

We'll take them outside before anybody can stop us and we'll kill them. Now here, think of this. They're preaching.

God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whoever believes in him, we should not perish, but of everlasting life. And from that message, people want to kill them. Is that not a mystery? They're bringing a message of forgiveness and blessing and eternal life like I'm doing to you today.

And instead of the people saying, Oh, thank you. And it happened to you and you actually saw him. No, they plan to kill them.

And that part of Christianity is being left out everywhere because the church has been invaded by corporate America and by wall street. We're selling products. So we think because we're worldly minded often let's present Jesus, but let's sell them good.

So people, Carmen will sign up and say, Oh, I want to be a Christian. Peace, joy, forgiveness of sin. Yeah.

Oh yeah. But if you suffer with him, you'll rain. No, no, I don't want to know.

Suffer. You never mentioned suffering there. I like the forgiveness of sin part.

Don't you like that part too? How many liked the part about going to heaven to be with him? How many know your name is written right now in the lamb's book of life. Hold up your hand. How many know if we suffer with him, we'll reign with him.

I wonder how many Christians are being reminded of that, that it's not so easy to be a Christian because wherever you are, there's division. You're a lightning rod. You're salt and you're light.

We're salt and we're light. But some people don't want light and they don't like salt. Am I right or wrong? And could any of us be greater than our master? Pastor symbol, where are you going with that? Where am I going with that? I'm going with that because it's in the Bible.

We're going to find out what happened in Lystra. You think they're in trouble now? Wait to hear about Lystra. And they go from Lystra to Derby.

And then at Derby, they decide, let's go back and see all the many converts that have been made before we sail back to Antioch in Syria, where all the trouble is going on now. Isn't that something? Hold the Bible. Lands and countries are the places that all the news is focused.

Egypt, Syria, Israel. Amazing. So let's go back and see all the believers, because when you're a spiritual father like Paul was, you care about your children, your spiritual children.

So they went back there and they strengthened their hearts and they encouraged him. And that's what I want to do to you today. I want to encourage you.

You keep on believing in Jesus. Is it not easy? It's not so easy for you. You keep believing.

Stay the course. Weather the storm. It's a little hard right now.

A little difficult. Satan attacking. Relatives hassling you.

People looking at, oh, you narrow little Christians with your narrow little Jesus way. And you don't know what to say sometimes. And they're just trying to bury you verbally.

Stay the course. That's what God has raised me up to do today. If you're a believer in Jesus, don't you falter now.

You hold on to Jesus tight because it will be worth it all when you see Jesus. Come on, let's say amen to that. Will be worth it all.

So that's what they did. I wonder if we have ministers that do that. I wonder if Jim Symbol has been faithful in doing that.

As they went back to each place, they didn't do a dissertation on the song of Solomon. They didn't give the meaning of the Old Testament offerings. They told them they encouraged their heart with the promises of the new of the gospel.

And they encouraged them to keep believing. Keep believing. Did you hear me? Keep believing up in the balcony.

Keep believing. The attack is always to get you to stop believing, to think it's futile or silly. Or you'll have more friends if you stop believing.

Or you'll have more fun if you stop believing. You will have less fun if you stop believing. Even though there's trouble being a Christian, that's the best life you could ever live on planet Earth.

Am I right? Peace and joy. For they concluded their time, it seems, in each city and they said this, God, forgive me. Forgive all pastors today who aren't telling the people this.

For we must go through much hardship to enter the kingdom of heaven. Pastor Symbol, you're making me not even want to be a Christian. My job is not either one or the other.

My job is to tell you the truth in love. And as I read it in the Bible, what are you going to do with that? We must go through much hardship. Now that word hardship is if you pick up six different alternate translations of the New Testament or the Bible, you'll get six different words.

You know what some of them are? We must go through much distress. We must go through much difficulty. We must go through much tribulation to enter the kingdom of heaven.

You mean maybe? No, we must. You mean sometime? No, no, we must. Will it be all the time? No, it won't be all the time.

Sometimes you have a couple of years smooth sailing. But if you really serve Jesus and you hold to the faith, you're going to have some hardship. First of all, the devil is going to attack you because he didn't like anybody talking about Jesus.

He didn't like anybody standing up and saying, I'm a Christian. So people will lie about you. He'll stir up people to lie about you or attack you or slander you or in some countries maybe try to kill you.

But do you want to live a long life or do you want to have eternal life? Make up your mind now. Look at me, everybody. You want to live 80, 90 years like my mom? She'll probably make a hundred.

I think she'll make a hundred. What do you think? I think she'll make a hundred. I think when they bury me, she'll be there and say he was a good boy.

He was a good son. He was, he was okay. So what's the 90 or a hundred years.

Come on. Those of you that are worried about dying, dying, dying. Oh, I might die.

I might die. So how long are you going to live? You're going to live forever with the Lord. The object here is not to live a long life.

That's old Testament promises. They didn't have the promise of heaven vivid in the old Testament. Everyone's trying to live a long life.

That's not the promise here. Some of the greatest Christians have died in the thirties and forties. We have eternal life to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.

Jason's going to be with the Lord 1 billion years from now. What does it matter when anyone thinks of Jason now or how much money he makes or doesn't make, or if he lives to 60 or 90, what does it matter? We're going to be with the Lord with no end with no end. So he's going to see you through your problem.

And that's why in closing, you have to be very sensitive around Christians because you don't know what they're going through right then. Because if it's true that we must go through hardship to enter the kingdom of heaven, those periods of time of hardship, suffering, tribulation, distress, literally the word in the Greek means distress. I can't speak for anyone else.

All I've ever known in my Christian life is wonderful moments. Yes, peace and joy. But if I look at every year, since I've been in the ministry, since I've been a Christian, there's just one fight after the other devil

attacking one way or the other wiping away one tear or the other fighting for someone else and being disappointed.

They fall back distress, hardship, people turning on you. I don't know anything else. You know something else? Now, people who don't advertise their Christianity and live for Jesus, a lot of times the reason we do that is to escape the hardship.

But I'm telling you, if you live for Jesus, it's going to get hot sometimes, but it will be worth it all. It will be worth it all. When I was recruited by schools from Erasmus Hall High School, I ended up for a while at the Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland.

And to become a midshipman, upperclassman and maybe an officer, and you're wearing that uniform, you got to go through plebe summer where they hassle you, haze you. You can't believe how they attack you. And back then, when I went, it was a lot more physical than now.

So people, upperclassmen, could get a little physical with you, which they don't permit anymore. It was worse before I went there. I understand.

But everyone would say to you, hey, Jimmy, hang in. You're going to make it. You're going to get through plebe summer.

Two months of just like hell. When you become a marine, you go in the Marines, you got to go to Paris Island. I think they call it like 90 days of hell is what they call it.

I just talked to a Marine who told me his experience there. I talked to a woman who went through Paris Island. She told me how she went through it.

So people just endure it because they know there's something better at the other end. Can't we go through a little hardship? How many have decided to follow Jesus, no matter what? Come on, lift your hand high. We're going to follow Jesus.

Oh, people don't like it. People are going to mock you. Your own family member.

Jesus said your enemies will come from. No, no. He brings families together.

Yeah, sometimes, but sometimes they explode too. Am I right or wrong? Enemies will come from your own household. And that's all a testing of our faith.

But how about you? About me? I've decided to follow Jesus. But maybe you're here today. Not going to make an invitation.

If you're here today, close your eyes with me. And you say, pastor, I'm going through one of those Iconium. I'm going through one of those Iconium hardship moments right now, going through some distress.

And I can link it, I think, to the fact that it has to do that I'm a Christian. Some attack of the enemy. Oh my goodness, I've been attacked.

So many believers have been attacked. Spiritual warfare, every kind of thing breaking loose. So if you're going through that, we want to comfort you, encourage your heart.

Someone sitting right next to you or behind you is going to lay their hand on your gently on your elbow because you're not going to quit. You're not going to quit. I said you're not going to quit.

You're going to keep believing. You're going to keep hanging on to the Lord. And he's going to see you through.

Pastor, I'm going through one of those moments where I need encouragement from the Lord. Just stand right now where you're seated. Just stand right where you are and say, I need I need my heart made stronger today.

I need my faith encouraged today. I need God to help me. Thank you.

Just stand right where you are. That's it up in the balcony. Just stand up.

Say this is my day that as we're reading through Acts 14, God reminded me I shouldn't be surprised by these difficulties. God's going to see me through, but it will be worth it all. It will be worth it.

It will be worth it. you

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