

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study guide is to facilitate the study of Acts 14:19-28 as a supplement to the sermon. It is based on my (Michael's) study and meditation on the passage. This handout can be used for personal study or community group conversation. (I hope you join a group!)

ACTS 14:19-28 ESV

19 But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead. 20 But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city, and on the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe. 21 When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, 22 strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. 23 And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed. 24 Then they passed through Pisidia and came to Pamphylia. 25 And when they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia, 26 and from there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had fulfilled. 27 And when they arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. 28 And they remained no little time with the disciples.

STRUCTURE

- I. Faithful ministry looks like Jesus (19-21a)
 - a. Like with Jesus, Jews incite Gentiles to kill Paul and leave him outside the city (19)
 - b. Like Jesus, Paul "rose up" from an unconscious state (20a)
 - c. Like Jesus, Paul rises to preach in a different city and makes disciples (20b-21a)
- II. Faithful ministry requires courage (21b-23)
 - a. Paul and Barnabas revisit cities that persecuted them to strengthen the churches (21-22)
 - b. Paul and Barnabas commission elders to shepherd their flocks through hard times (23)
- III. Faithful ministry finishes (24-26)
 - a. Paul and Barnabas retrace their steps to Antioch, preaching along the way (24-26a)
 - b. Paul and Barnabas "fulfilled" the mission Antioch had sent them on (26b)
- IV. Faithful ministry rests on God's faithfulness (27-28)
 - a. Paul and Barnabas tell stories to their home church, crediting God for their success (27)
 - b. Paul and Barnabas remain a long time in their home church (28)

GENERAL COMMENTARY:

This scene rounds out Paul's first missionary journey, which began in 13:1 when God's Spirit communicated to the church in Antioch, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." God chose Barnabas and Saul because they had faithfully completed their relief effort for the poor saints in Judea (11:29-30; 12:25). Just as they had been faithful in that little mission, Luke now reports on their faithfulness in a bigger mission—to reach Gentiles—where they "fulfilled" the "work" God called them to do (14:26). Similar language and themes thus highlight Luke's emphasis in this section: faithfulness.

Faithful completion of their mission requires perseverance in Lystra, their final destination before circling back home. In Lystra, the crowd moves quickly from worshiping the apostolic duo to seeking their death. Luke attributes the change to agitators from Pisidian Antioch and Iconium—cities Paul and Barnabas had recently fled. Paul's experience resembles our Lord's. In both cases, unbelieving Jewish agitators incite a fickle mob of Jews and Gentiles to strike down God's servant, who quickly rises back up to preach and make disciples. Faithful ministry always resembles that of our Lord Jesus.

It also requires courage. Rather than taking the easy road back to Antioch, the apostles circle back—the long way—through the very cities that persecuted them. Their concern is not personal safety but strengthening the churches they planted with teaching, exhortation, and the appointment of shepherds, entrusted to God's grace.

As the journey concludes, the latter theme—entrusting people to God's grace—also stands out. In 14:23, they entrust new elders to the Lord with prayer and fasting; in 14:27, Luke revisits how the church in Antioch had entrusted Paul and Barnabas to the Lord with prayer and fasting (cf. 13:3). Faithful churches and leaders must trust God enough to entrust leadership to others. Ultimately, our faithfulness rests on God's faithfulness to continue the work after we are gone.

VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENTARY:

19 But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead.

—"But": having "restrained" the pagans from idolatry (albeit "scarcely"), things seemed to have settled down in verse 18. However, agitators in verse 19 turn formerly adoring worshipers into a deadly mob.

—"Jews came from Antioch and Iconium":

- For the second time in Acts 14, Jews agitate Gentiles against the apostles (v. 2). Jesus experienced the same.
- As I've mentioned in other Study Guides, agitators frequently stir up mobs in Acts. Bonfires of persecution begin with a single spark.
- As the divisive climate in our nation increases, and as people turn increasingly against orthodox Christians, we must beware of agitators.

—"having persuaded the crowds":

- Crowds are so easily persuaded by a small number of agitators! This is one reason to resist living for the crowds. One minute, they love you, and they hate you the next. A single tweet is enough to ignite a firestorm against you. Jesus knew this. It's why He "did not entrust himself" to the adoring crowds because He "knew what was in man" (John 2:24-25). Whole populations can turn in an instant.
- Schreiner: "Shockingly, local Jews join with idolaters to oppose preachers of monotheism... Paul is hated by all men. In one moment they were going to sacrifice to him, and now he has become the sacrifice."
- Unlikely friends combine with "antichrist" animosity. We observe a similar phenomenon in today's culture, where secularists defend radical Islam against Christianity. In all the dividing lines drawn by our world, only one exists: Jesus. Everyone is either for Him or against Him.

—"they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead":

- Jesus was killed outside the city. Stephen was killed outside the city. Now, Paul is left for dead outside the city.
- The author of Hebrews interprets this symbolically of our calling: *"We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat. For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned **outside the camp**. So Jesus also suffered **outside the gate** in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore let us go to him **outside the camp** and bear the reproach he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come"* (Heb. 13:10-14).
- To suffer "outside the camp"—or gate or city—is to "bear the reproach he endured." Human history is a battle between two cities, the City of God and the City of Man. Our "citizenship is in heaven" (Phil. 3:20), where Jesus reigns from heavenly Jerusalem. We have no "lasting city" here on earth, but Jerusalem endures forever. One day, the City of God will descend to earth, and the two realms will become one (Rev. 21:1-3). In the meantime, citizens of God's City bear the reproach of the City of Man. Put differently, earth's inhabitants collectively employ their synergy against heaven's citizenry.
- Stott: "The stoning which had been plotted in Iconium (5) took place now in Lystra. It was not a judicial execution, but a lynching."

20 But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city, and on the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe.

—"But when the disciples":

- Apparently, the apostles' preaching led to more converts in Lystra than it seemed earlier. These disciples supported Paul in his weakest moment.
- Laborers in the harvest begin by supporting the harvest. Ultimately, the harvest supports them also, as the relationship becomes healthy—interdependent.

—"gathered about him": implicitly, they "gathered" to pray. This is a healing miracle. Paul had not technically died; they only supposed so (14:19). But it was a miracle nonetheless.

—"he rose up": Patrick Schreiner sees in this a parallel to Christ's death and resurrection. I agree with him. In both cases, Jesus/Paul are hated, opposed violently, expelled, and raised up.

—"entered the city": talk about courage! Paul reentered the city that stoned him.

—"next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe":

- Paul had courage but was also smart. Boldly, he entered the city; wisely, he didn't stay.
- "Derbe": 93 miles east of Lystra.

21 When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, 22 strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. 23 And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

—"preached the gospel to that city... made many disciples":

- They didn't just preach in a church; they preached to a city. What would it look like if we set our sights on our cities, not just our churches? I'm reminded of John Wesley, who began preaching in open fields and said, "The world is my parish."
- I am also reminded of Charles Spurgeon's remarks on open-air preaching:
 - "Go ye into the highways and hedges and compel them to come in,—albeit it constitutes part of a parable, is worthy to be taken very literally, and in so doing its meaning will be best carried out. We ought actually to go into the streets and lanes and highways, for there are lurkers in the hedges, tramps on the highway, street-walkers, and lane-haunters, whom we shall never reach unless we pursue them into their own domains."
 - "I am persuaded that the more of open air preaching there is in London the better."
- To be honest, I have never practiced open-air preaching. I've always associated with crazy men, bullhorns, and signs that read, "The end is near!" It doesn't have to be that way, though. Jonah, Jesus, and the apostles practiced open-air preaching, and great revivals have been sparked by it throughout history.
- They did not just preach; they made disciples. These are not the same, but they are related. We preach to make disciples. We evangelize, not to win converts but devoted followers of Jesus who will continue in the Way.

—"they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to [Pisidian] Antioch":

- Schnabel: "Luke briefly notes the journey from Derbe in a westerly direction to Lystra, Iconium, and Pisidian Antioch (vv. 21d-f), a distance of about 200 miles, or thirteen days of walking."
- In 14:19, antagonists from these cities joined the citizens of Lystra to stone Paul, almost to death. Now the apostles circle back through these dangerous cities. This is all the more remarkable, considering they could have journeyed straight to Antioch of Syria, their intended destination, and it would have been shorter. Despite the longer distance and greater danger, they retraced their steps. The following verses explain why.

—They returned for two reasons:

- For "strengthening the souls of the disciples" (22). They did this by "encouraging them to continue in the faith." This required them to know "the faith"—that is, the doctrinal convictions of the church. It also required them to know "that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." All this comprises how Paul and Barnabas strengthened the souls of the disciples. If we lack doctrinal foundations, our house of faith will crumble. If we the kingdom of God is a cakewalk, we'll tap out when things get rough. We must know that it's full of hardship, or we'll be disillusioned. This is why prosperity theology is so dangerous. It teaches people to expect comfort instead of a cross. The rude awakening leads many away from the faith.

- For appointing “elders for them in every church”: every church needs elders, and the elders exist “for them.” Elders do not exist to serve their own ego or increase their assets. They exist to serve the flock. When Paul and Barnabas depart, the elders will continue where they left off: teaching and exhorting the people as “disciples” of Jesus to “continue in the faith” despite “many tribulations.” To assume such a leadership role would have required tremendous courage. It still does.
- More on “elders”:
 - Elders are not just policymakers; they are “for” the flock, serving as shepherds.
 - Elders are local. This is why Paul had to return to each city to appoint them. They arose within the flock. Churches that are governed by non-local elder boards are unbiblical, producing environments conducive to abuse. I could cite examples.
 - Paul and Barnabas do not appoint a Senior Pastor in each city; they appoint elders in each city. Some elders (like the Senior Pastor) will preach and teach more than others, but all the elders govern together (1 Tim. 5:17). No New Testament church is ruled by a single person.
 - Elders are “appointed”—not elected by the church. In Acts 14, the apostles select the elders. This makes sense because the apostles planted the church. The text says nothing of what we do for a church that already exists.
 - Elders are “committed... to the Lord in whom they had believed” by means of “prayer and fasting” (14:23). True leadership does not micromanage. Paul and Barnabas entrust the elders to lead.
 - They do so by committing them to God’s leadership. Leaders who micromanage don’t trust people because they don’t trust God. They think, “It will only get done if I oversee every detail.”
 - Paul and Barnabas entrust the church to its leaders and its leaders to God. Trust towards God and trust towards others form parallel lines.
 - They commit these elders to the Lord not by official ceremonies or human rituals but by prayer and fasting. These spiritual disciplines acknowledge that we are powerless and God is powerful, good, and wise. Those who rely on God, not self, practice prayer and fasting.
- More on “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God”:
 - To “enter the kingdom of God” can refer to either initial salvation (conversion) or final salvation (when Christ returns). In context, Paul is speaking with believers who have already been converted. This verse refers to final salvation. Through “many tribulations” we survive the final judgment and enter the kingdom at Christ’s return.
 - Not just a few, but “many” tribulations characterize the believer’s life.
 - These tribulations go beyond ones that unbelievers experience. Heavy persecution lies in the background; likely, for these disciples, it also lies in the foreground.
 - I am reminded of John’s statement in Revelation 1, where the apostle introduces himself like this: *“I, John, your brother and **partner in the tribulation** and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus”* (Rev. 1:9). Tribulation marks God’s family in the present age (cf. Jhn. 16:33). Like Luke the physician, John the apostle associates “tribulation” with “the kingdom”, which requires “patient endurance.”
 - God fits us for His kingdom through suffering. Our egos won’t fit through the narrow gate that leads to salvation. Pain has a way of smiting egos.

—Schreiner: “Luke draws our attention here not so much to the personality or power of Paul as to the process by which early Christian communities came into being and were nurtured.”

—Stott (offering several quotations of Roland Allen): “The first and most striking difference between his [Paul’s] action and ours is that he founded ‘Churches’ whilst we found ‘Missions.’” “Nothing can alter or disguise the fact that St Paul did leave behind him at his first visit complete Churches.” “...in little more than ten years St Paul established the Church in four provinces of the Empire, Galatia, Macedonia, Achaia and Asia. Before AD 47 there were no Churches in these provinces; in AD 57 St Paul could speak as if his work there was done.”

—Stott summarizes these verses by clarifying three foundational church planting principles. He says that every church plant needs these to thrive:

- **Apostolic instruction.** We need doctrines of “the faith” (14:22) handed down from the apostles to us through Scripture. Apostolic instruction includes proper teaching about “the kingdom of God”—namely, that we enter it “through many tribulations” (14:22). Churches founded on the prosperity gospel will not prosper for long.
- **Pastoral oversight.** The apostles appoint elders to shepherd the church in their absence (14:23), outlining many principles (above) for proper administration. Sheep without shepherds inevitably scatter. Believers must humble themselves to recognize, “I am not a lion or a grizzly bear. I am only a sheep. I need other sheep, and I need a shepherd.”
- **Divine faithfulness.** When the apostles leave, they entrust the elders, and ultimately the church, to God (23b). Stott quotes Allen again: “‘He [Paul] believed in the Holy Ghost... as a Person indwelling his converts. He believed therefore in his converts. He could trust them. He did not trust them because he believed in their natural virtue or intellectual sufficiency. But he believed in the Holy Ghost in them. He believed that Christ was able and willing to keep that which he had committed to them.’ He must therefore ‘retire from his converts to give place for Christ.’”

24 Then they passed through Pisidia and came to Pamphylia. 25 And when they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia, 26 and from there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had fulfilled.

—“Pisidia... Pamphylia... Perga... Attalia... Antioch”:

—“where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work they had fulfilled”:

- I have noted in other Study Guides how “commended to the grace of God” is common language in Acts to depict entrusting people to God’s care amid physical absence.
 - 15:40: “but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord.”
 - 20:32: “And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”
- When we commend people to the grace of God, we entrust them to the God of grace. Knowing God’s grace-filled nature, we trust Him to lovingly care for them in our absence.
- When churches send missionaries (14:26; 15:40), and when missionaries leave churches (20:32), both sides commend the other to God’s grace.
- We could apply the same principle to sending our children out into a world full of wolves once they reach adulthood. We cannot be there to prevent friends or college professors or bad churches from poisoning their minds. We cannot muzzle the snout of wolves, which will no doubt encircle them. Once we have raised them to love the Lord, we can only entrust them to God’s grace. It is an act of faith for mothers and fathers to entrust their children to the Father of us all. This is always true, but especially when we send them off. (I have not done this yet, but I know that day is coming soon!)

—“for the work that they had fulfilled”:

- In context, “work” (Gk. *ergon*) appeared in 13:2 (“Set apart Barnabas and Saul for the work I have called them to do”), and again here, as they finish their journey.
- That Luke uses the same word at the beginning and end of their missionary circuit, marrying the “work” to another important word—“fulfilled”—reinforces his theme of faithfulness, replete throughout Acts.
- First, Paul and Barnabas “completed their service” (12:25) of bringing the offering from Antioch to Jerusalem. Second, after faithfully fulfilling their divine duty, God entrusted them with a greater “work” (13:2), which they now “fulfilled” (14:26). The words “completed” (12:25) and “fulfilled” (14:26) are the same Greek word: “pleroo.” Luke is showing us how faithfulness looks like finishing. We don’t just start the task, like Mark (13:5, 11). We complete it. Soon, God will use Paul to convince the Jerusalem Council not to abandon the gospel, and he does so by reciting stories from the mission field (15:12). Faithfulness—faithfulness that finishes the work—opens wide doors for and more important work.

27 And when they arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. 28 And they remained no little time with the disciples.

—“arrived... gathered the church... declared”: sending churches must hear from their missionaries, and missionaries must share with sending churches. Without this connection, “gospel goodbyes” feel just like “goodbyes.”

—“God had done with them”: God was the primary agent, but He used the apostles. Similarly, Jesus “went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil for God was with him” (10:38). We work for God, but God works with us. God called the apostles to a “work,” and they fulfilled that “work”, but only because God partnered with them.

—God doesn’t send us alone. He sends us but goes with us.

—“how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles”: only God can open the door of faith. He is always the First Mover. Gentiles who responded to the apostles’ message only did so because He moved first on their hearts, as He also did with Lydia (16:14: “The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.”)

—“they remained no little time with the disciples”: true disciples spend their time with other disciples.