

For the last few weeks, we've been following Paul and Barnabas on their missionary journey. And they've covered a lot of ground, and so have we. This missionary journey, v27 describes as God, in His grace, opening up a door to the Gentiles (it's a **new** thing that God is doing)... But it hasn't **all** been plain sailing... Town after town after town, they were thrown out of, and last week we saw how Paul was even stoned & left for dead at Lystra...

But despite this opposition, the grace of God was being poured out... Isn't God wonderful? Even when men reject God and persecute His children, God continues to pour out His grace... And not **everybody** rejects Him. Some **are** saved.

So, today, we're picking up the story, where Paul and Barnabas have gotten to the **end** of their evangelism trip. They've travelled over 1000km; they've preached the gospel in a whole bunch of cities – they've been thrown out of most of them; And now they find themselves at Derbe; And at this point, Paul is only about 150km or so, from His home town of Tarsus. And he could very easily go home.... But while it's the end of the evangelism trip, it's not the end of their ministry.

New Christians have a need, to be discipled... In fact, I'd take that even further – **All** Christians need to be discipled. We **all** need to be encouraged in our walk with Christ. ... And so Paul and Barnabas **didn't** go home. From Derbe, they turned back around, and went back through many of the towns where people had become Christians, and they went there with a purpose.

So what did they do?

1. Well firstly, they strengthened the souls of the disciples. Your soul is your psyche; the person; your life... It's not about strengthening your body by doing a few push-ups and chin-ups – it's about strengthening who you are...

So, how does a Christian become stronger????

- Do I get stronger by increasing my self-esteem – by believing in myself more??? No.
- Do I get stronger by starting out small and building myself up with bigger and bigger tests of character??? No.
- Do I get stronger as a Christian by studying hard, working harder, preaching harder, and trying harder??? No.

As a Christian, there is **one** way to strengthen your soul – it's with Christ... The more time you spend with Christ, the more you'll become **like** Christ, and the stronger you'll be.

You know, these new Christians – they really **needed** strengthening. Remember these towns – **most** of them, Paul & Barnabas were run out of town; one of them they were about to be stoned; and in another one, Paul was stoned... You reckon it's hard to be a Christian here today, well imagine what it was like for them in those places...

We can't be stronger in our self – we can only be stronger in God's strength.

When Jesus was being tempted by the Devil, he was at a very real point of weakness – He hadn't eaten for 40 days... and the Devil was tempting Him to turn stones into bread...

Matthew 4:4 **But he answered, "It is written,
" 'Man shall not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of
God.' "**

You know, even Jesus, when He was weak, didn't depend on His own human strength. He was strengthened by God's word (the "rhema" word; written word)...

And we are too. The Living word – Jesus Christ in our hearts, gives us strength. And so does the written word – the spoken word of God...

So, if you want to be a stronger Christian, don't depend on yourself – depend on Christ. Don't be filled with yourself – be filled with Christ – be filled with the Holy Spirit... And we all know that to be strong, we need to **eat**. Feed your spirit with the word of God.... I don't have any doubt that those apostles, as they were strengthening these baby Christians, that they did it with the word of God.

2. And as they strengthened them, they encouraged them to **continue in the faith**. –

Actually, it was more than that – they **exhorted** them to continue in the faith... Do you remember a few weeks ago, we talked about what exhortation means??? Exhortation is **not** just a gentle encouragement "Oh, you're doing so well. You're right. Keep going as you are."

"exhortation" (*paraklēsis*) can be much more than that. It is an urging, and exhortation, and that's what they did. They

urged them. They prodded them on. “Keep going. Keep on believing. Continue in the faith. Don’t give up.”... Now, those words are useless if you haven’t been strengthened. But when we **are** strengthened by God’s Holy Spirit inside of us – when we are strengthened by being fed on God’s word, then exhortation fits right in with that: Keep **on** believing. Keep **on** in the faith.

You know, some people will tell you that once God’s given you faith to believe in Jesus, you’ll be a Christian forever – they’ll tell you that you can never **stop** being a Christian (even if you want to)... what a load of rubbish... If that’s the case, a large part of the New Testament would be a whole lot of meaningless nonsense, and we know that it’s not...

Something that I’ve just delighted in, working our way through Acts... is the way we keep seeing glimpses of the teachings of Jesus, now being applied, by Christians, **in** the early church. And that shouldn’t come as a surprise to us. If you can remember back to the introduction (a few months ago), I shared how the book of Acts, is really the 2nd volume of Luke. In Acts 1:1, Luke (who wrote the book of Acts) begins by saying, **In the first book, O Theophilus** (referring to the Gospel of Luke), **I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach,**

Acts continues on from the work and the teachings of Jesus, and it still **is** Jesus who is at work, through His Holy Spirit... So, we shouldn’t be surprised at how we see teachings of Jesus now being applied in the early church.

And do you know what teaching I'm reminded of here? It's the parable of the sower – one of my favourite parables (maybe because I'm bred to be a farmer)

Luke 8:⁵ "A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some fell along the path and was trampled underfoot, and the birds of the air devoured it. ⁶ And some fell on the rock, and as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture. ⁷ And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up with it and choked it. ⁸ And some fell into good soil and grew and yielded a hundredfold." As he said these things, he called out, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

⁹ And when his disciples asked him what this parable meant, ¹⁰ he said, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God, but for others they are in parables, so that 'seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.' ¹¹ Now the parable is this:

The **seed** is the word of God. ¹² The ones along the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved.

¹³ And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, **receive it with joy**. But these

have no root; they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away.

14 And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and **their fruit does not mature.**

15 As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, **hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience.**

Why were Paul and Barnabas encouraging them to continue in the faith??? Precisely because they could lose it – they could **dis**-continue in faith... Paul taught it. Jesus taught it. Right throughout the Bible, we continue to see exhortation to continue in the faith.

All sorts of things can make people abandon the faith... (and you've seen it happen – people make a commitment to Christ and begin to follow Him, but it doesn't last...)

Sometimes those who are the first to receive Christ, are also the first to fall away... Because they have no root, they believe for a bit, but in a time of testing, they fall away.

Conversions are **not** enough. Disciples of Jesus are called to persevere. We are called to **continue** following Jesus. Even at the threat of death, and even worse,,,,, keep going. Continue to have faith in Jesus. Continue to believe. Continue to bear fruit for God.

You know today (for us), it's probably not so much persecution that puts pressure on belief, but the **cares and riches and pleasures of life...**

And so it's critically important that new Christians (and new churches for that matter) are not just thrown into the deep to sink or swim... If you know a new Christian, don't let them drown. Get alongside them. Encourage them. Exhort them. Urge them to continue on in their faith, with Jesus. Because many **do** fall away, and that's a tragedy... It's a tragedy that Paul and Barnabas wanted to avoid, and we should too. So encourage one another, and especially new Christians, encourage them.

3. And part of this encouragement is what we talked about last week. They warned them that through many tribulations we must enter the Kingdom of God.

Faith is very different to politics, isn't it?

Politicians hide the truth, in the fear that the electorate would never vote for them. And you know what? They're probably right.

I reckon I could pretty much guarantee that if, next election, one of the political parties were to say "*We've got some tough news for all Australians. We've been spending more than we've been earning, for a lot of years now. So what my party can promise you, is we're all going to have to pull in our belts, because the right to entitlement is over, for everybody. We're going to have higher taxes (particularly for the wealthy). Higher GST. Pensions will not rise for the next 3 years. Welfare payments are no longer an entitlement, but a*

means of supporting the destitute. And most government subsidies (except for the most extreme of circumstances) will come to an end” How many votes do you think they'd get? Some people would appreciate their honesty (that it's going to be tough) and get on board, but not many... And so politicians generally hide the truth, because they know that nobody would ever vote for them. (and we wonder why politicians lie to us)

But Jesus was no politician. Jesus was very open about the trouble that His disciples would encounter: Luke 9:²³ .. he said ..., **“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.²⁴ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.²⁵ For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?²⁶ For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.**

Do you understand what Jesus is saying? Of course you do. In the negative, to deny Christ, (well that looks pretty ugly). (you distanced yourself from me) ... But in the positive – what Paul and Barnabas are urging them to do – to continue on in Jesus – oh the blessings...

There **will** be trouble. If you're obediently following Jesus, it **won't** be easy – you can count on it. But we talked about that last week, so let's move on. So they strengthened them, and exhorted them, and then they appointed elders...

Paul and Barnabas could not remain in each of those churches (obviously), so they appointed leaders in each of the churches, and with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

What sort of leaders were they? Well in the Greek, Luke calls them “πρεσβυτέρους” (presbuterous) Elders. And here he doesn’t say much at all about their qualification, except that they believed in the Lord (and you’d hope so, wouldn’t you?).

The topic of Eldership is a whole sermon topic for another time. But I will just say a couple of things now:

1. Firstly, a church needs leadership. Without leadership, (or with bad leadership) it’s very easy for a church to lose its way.
2. Secondly, the elders were appointed. There was no popular vote. Often a popular vote will result in the **popular** people being elected. The Bible gives us quite a few qualifications for an elder, and not one of them is popularity. And so they were appointed.
3. Thirdly, that leadership should be committed to the Lord (prayer and fasting)
4. And Fourthly: their responsibilities

If I had to sum it up in 1 word, the responsibility of an Elder, I’d choose the word that Luke did in Acts 20 “overseer”. The job of an elder in the church, is to oversee the church. Now, that’s quite different to most modern ideas of eldership. It

seems the modern idea of eldership, is “strategic planners; those who cast the vision; sometimes those who are responsible for pastoral care; sometimes those who run the business and property side of the church”... But biblically, it’s more an overseer.

In Acts 20, Paul is talking to the elders in Ephesus. And he says: ²⁸ Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. ²⁹ I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. ³¹ Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears.

Alright... So I’m not going to say any more about that now, - we’ll leave it for when we actually get to Acts 20.

For now: an elder is an overseer – someone who watches out for the congregation – cares for them; admonishes them; urges them ,,,, to continue in right teaching, and to continue in faith itself.

We’ve never really talked much about elders here, have we? But I guess I’ve taken on the role of an elder, and right at the birth of Bush Disciples, I asked John Phelps if he would also be an elder. And so at this stage, John and I have the role of

overseers in this little church, so if things are running amuck, it's our fault – let us know.

So, after strengthening them, urging them to continue with Christ, and appointing elders to oversee the churches, finally Paul and Barnabas headed home to Antioch. And when they got home, wow!!!, didn't they have some good news to tell their church. They'd been sent out on mission, and God had opened up the door to the gentiles. The Jews were becoming increasingly anti-Christian, and so God opened another door – God's plan of salvation was **always** to include the gentiles. And I'm glad, otherwise we wouldn't be meeting here today – if that door had not been opened.

Questions?