

Strengthening the Disciples

- Acts 14:19-28
- Paul and Barnabas are in Lystra, a pagan town that worships the mythological gods, Zeus and Hermes. But Paul has healed a man lame from birth and has preached a sermon encouraging the people to turn from vain things to the living God. But the people still want to worship Paul. Until they want to kill him. Look at verse 19: the Jews from Antioch and Iconium have come to town and have “persuaded the crowds.” The same people who a few days earlier were ready to make sacrifices to Paul and called him a god, now stone him and drag him out of the city. What is THAT all about? It points to the fickleness of the human heart and to the dangers of listening to an angry mob. The people who shouted to Jesus, “Hosanna, blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord” on Sunday, are the very same people who shouted, “Crucify Him!” on Friday. We see it here with Paul, as well, and notice that his character is such that he was not swayed by their flattery or dismayed by their opposition. Which is more dangerous to our bodies, to be flattered or to be violently opposed? To be violently opposed! But which is more dangerous to our souls?
- **Body life: The disciple gathered around him.** (vs. 20) Paul has been stoned, certainly is unconscious, because his assailants believe he is dead and they drag his body out of the city. There is no indication by Luke in this story that Paul WAS dead and that the disciples gathering around him was the method by which God resurrected him. I love this picture of the body of Christ. The many come together to support the one who is suffering. They gather around him because they love him. They ALSO gathered around him to protect him from the angry mob, and so they could check his wounds, and so they could get him to wake up, to come back to consciousness. Wherever Paul went, he was all there. He invested in the lives of his brothers and sisters. And wherever Paul went, he had people who cared about him and were there for him. And listen. SO DO YOU! (ILLUS: body life)
- **Courage: He went back into the city.** (vs. 20-21) Paul demonstrates his courage by going back into the city where he had just been stoned. Then after he and Barnabas go to Derbe and preach the gospel, they start their return to Antioch, their home church. And where do they go first? Lystra. He goes back to the place where he had been stoned and left for dead. What did that do for the believers in Lystra?
- When I used to teach a freshman orientation class at Elon, Elon 101, I would do things every now and then to create a bond between the 15 freshmen. Nothing I did ever worked better than this. It was the first meeting of the class. And the first meeting for the freshman with ANY class they would be taking and with ANY professor they would be learning from. So, you expect them to be a little nervous. I decided to up the ante. I asked my TA, Barry, to play along with a little drama I had concocted. He loved it and was all in. You see, the 15 freshmen didn't know that Barry was my teaching assistant. For all they knew, he was just like them: a nervous freshman showing up for his first class. But Barry showed up late. He was five minutes late for the class, just as we had planned. We were all sitting in a circle in the classroom, which happened to be Yeager Recital Hall, so we were on the stage, and the aisles slope down to the front. Barry comes walking in, late, and is sauntering down the aisle, like he doesn't have a care in the world. I stopped him with an icy glare and said, “What are you doing?” He stopped sauntering and said, nervously, “Coming to class.” “Right. Coming to class five minutes late. This is your first college class with your first college professor, and you walk in here five minutes late, looking like you own the place....what is your name? Wait! Where is your name tag?” Barry looked down at his shirt. No name tag. “You were told to wear your name tag all the time during orientation, and here you are, in your first college class, late, without a name tag.” Out of the corner of my eye I saw the fifteen freshmen around me, some in a dead panic, looking for THEIR name tags! I took a quarter out of my pocket and flipped it to Barry. “Here's a quarter. Go call your Mama, and ask her to come pick you up. You are not ready for college,

young man. Maybe next year.” Barry looked like he had just heard a death sentence. He turned and walked very slowly out of the room, with every freshmen following him with their eyes and looking horrified. Then I said to the class, “I have other quarters in my pocket. Anybody else want to go call YOUR mama?” They all shook their heads, looking down. So I started calling the roll, very slowly, and about two minutes in, Barry walked back into the room and stood at the top of the ramp. The freshmen saw him and looked at him like, “No!!! Don’t come back! Run! Get away! Pleeeeease don’t come back in here.” I looked at them. Then at Barry. Barry smiled. I smiled back. Barry grinned. I chuckled. Then the freshmen caught on that the whole thing was staged, and they visibly relaxed, they sighed, and then they started to laugh. They realized that Barry’s college career was NOT over. They realized that their professor was NOT Attila the Hun. And do you know what else happened? They became a team that day. They were united in suffering, and they became best friends. I heard from them for years afterward about how much they loved each other and that class.

- That story really did happen, but the suffering was artificial, though at the moment it felt very real. Paul’s story really did happen, and his story was very real, and that’s one of the biggest reasons he had authority and credibility to strengthen the souls of the disciples. In Lystra: he had suffered greatly there, and God had taken him through it. His courage gave THEM courage. (Encouragement) Here’s what he did, then, to strengthen the souls of the disciples:
- **Encouragement: continue in the faith.** We have already seen this in Antioch Pisidia, where Paul and Barnabas urged the disciples to continue in the grace of God. We see it again in 15:41, as Paul went through Syria and Cilicia, “strengthening the churches.” And in 18:23, when Paul went from one place to the next, “strengthening all the disciples.” We need to be strengthened, don’t we? The reason we eat is because our bodies need to be strengthened. The reason we exercise is because our muscles and ligaments and heart and lungs need to be strengthened. The reason we pray is because our communion with God and our dependence on Him needs to be strengthened. The reason we read and study the Bible and read good books about faith is because our mind, will and emotions need to be strengthened. The reason we gather every week, twice a week, is because our faith needs to be strengthened. We need to be strengthened. We need disciples around us who will help us get up when we are knocked down. And who will help us grow up. And who will help us make tough decisions. And who will help us see the idols in our lives and put them away. I think that was priority one for Paul and Barnabas in Lystra. These were former idol worshipers. They had trusted Christ, but had they replaced the idols? I heard about a state trooper who pulled over a man for running stop sign. Did you see that sign? Yes, but I haven’t stopped at that sign for twenty years. The next week the trooper got a call to go to a wreck, at that stop sign. Same man! He had been rear ended. The trooper asked him what happened, and he said, you need to ask him, pointing to the driver behind him. The trooper asked the second driver why he ran into the guy and the man said, “Because, I’ve been following him for 20 years, and he has NEVER stopped at that stop sign.”
- Colossians 1:21-23. See that? Continue in the faith, not shifting from the hope of the gospel. Hope is a powerful motivator. I read this week that “A mouse dropped in a pot of water will swim for a few minutes before it gives up and drowns. But if it is rescued, it will tread water for more than 20 hours the next time. Children rescued from Nazi concentration camps were clothed and fed, but they still could not sleep. A child psychologist hit on the solution: each child was given a slice of bread to take to bed. Not to eat, just to hold. With assurance that there would be food for the next day, they could sleep.” (Denison Forum)
- So, first Paul and Barnabas encouraged the disciples to continue in the faith. Then...
- **Encouragement: Jesus promised tribulations.** They told them that we enter the kingdom through many tribulations. Paul has just been stoned and left for dead, and he is right back where it had taken place, and probably still black and blue all over from the experience. He says, “You see, brothers and sisters,” pointing to the marks on his body, “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.” This is a fundamental truth about following

Christ. Jesus said Himself, "A servant is not greater than his master. If they have persecuted Me, they will also persecute you." (John 15:20). Then later Jesus said, "I have said these things to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world." (John 16:33) We MUST enter through tribulation. Think of a simple rubber band. What is it good for unless and until it is stretched? It has no usefulness, no power, no ability to hold things together until it is stretched out of shape! Where are you being stretched? Or, where are the storms in your life? A long time ago, this is how shipbuilders would prepare the masts for their ships. They would go to the forest and find an appropriate tree, then they would clear out all the surrounding trees and leave that one standing, leaving it exposed to the wind and storms. As the tree continued to mature, it would gain strength. The kind of strength it would need to be able to stand up in the storms at sea while holding a large sail. But that tree would never gain that strength if it was just left among the other trees. It developed strength because of the storms.

- There's one more way that Paul and Barnabas strengthened the souls of the disciples before they left. Do you know what it is?
- **Encouragement:** "They appointed elders for them in every church." (vs. 23) This might have been the most important thing the two missionaries did for the disciples, because it assured the church of future encouragement and future strengthening. Paul and Barnabas were leaving and would not be back for a long time. The churches needed the ongoing presence of leaders, specifically a plurality of elders, who would lead, feed, and care for the flock.
- It's been a two-year journey, and finally Paul and Barnabas have made it back to where they started, the church that sent them out: Antioch. (vs. 26) They gathered the church together to give a report on all that God had done *with* them. That word for with doesn't mean presence, but companionship, fellowship, union. They worked with God on the missionary journey, and He worked with them! He opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. They were there to walk through that door and deliver the message.