



# The Work of the Ministry

## Acts 14:21-28

1. Making Disciples (verse 21)
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3. Encouraging Believers (verse 22)
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For the past two months, we have been looking at the first missionary journey in the book of Acts. It began in Acts, chapter 13 with Paul and Barnabas being sent out to do the work of God: the spread the gospel to the ends of the earth. Each week that we have looked at this journey, we have looked at the map of where they traveled.<sup>[1]</sup>

They began in Antioch of Syria, being sent out by the church with fasting and prayer. They made the walk down to Seleucia, the nearby coastal town. From there, they boarded a ship and headed west, landing on the eastern shore of Cyprus at the city of Salamis. They proceeded to travel across the island, "proclaiming the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews" along the way (Acts 13:5).

Finally, they arrive on the western edge of the island in the town of Paphos. It's there that we have some detail as to what happened. Paul and Barnabas encountered two men. A false prophet named Bar-Jesus (Acts 13:6). He resisted their every move, trying to make crooked the straight ways of the Lord (Acts 13:10). They also encountered Sergius Paulus, an intelligent man with the proconsul (Acts 13:7). He believed in the message of Paul and Barnabas, and certainly made a lasting impact in Paphos.

After Paphos, Paul and Barnabas boarded another ship and headed north to Pamphylia. They landed in Perga and quickly headed north to Antioch in Pisidia. In Antioch, Paul and Barnabas entered the synagogue during a Sabbath meeting and sat down. In the course of the meeting, they were asked to share "a word of encouragement for the people" (Acts 13:15). Paul stood up and preached a sermon to the gathering (Acts 13:16-41). Telling them that God has always been faithful to Israel, even when they were unfaithful. But now, he has fulfilled his promise to them by sending them a Savior, through whom forgiveness of sins can be experienced!

This sermon caused quite a stir in Antioch. many Jews believed. people were talking about it all throughout the week. The next Sabbath "almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord" (Acts 13:44). The Jews were jealous of the Gentile crowd and so began to contradict what was spoken by Paul (Acts 13:45). So Paul turned to the Gentiles and told them that the light of the Messiah had come to them! They rejoiced at these words and "as many as were appointed to eternal life believed" (Acts 13:48).

Soon afterwards, Paul and Barnabas were persecuted and driven out of town (Acts 13:50). So, they headed east to Iconium. In Iconium, Paul and Barnabas had the same results. Many Jews believed in Jesus (Acts 14:1). Many Gentiles believed in Jesus (Acts 14:1). But many didn't believe. and the city was divided (Acts 14:4). When Paul and Barnabas learned of a plot to mistreat and stone them, they fled the city. And they went south to Lystra.

We looked at the events in Lystra last week. Paul healed a lame man. Because of a local legend, those in the city thought that the gods had come into the flesh. "Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes" (Acts 14:12). Those in Lystra began worshiping Paul and Barnabas. As much as Paul and Barnabas tried to stop them, they continued on (Acts 14:18). Eventually, some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and persuaded the crowds to stop the worship. But further, they persuaded the crowd to pelt Paul with stones! (Acts 14:19). They dragged him out of the city and left him there, supposing him to be dead (Acts 14:19). But Paul arose and returned to Lystra for the night. And on the following day, he went east to Derbe. And this is where we pick up our text.

### Acts 14:21-28

When they had preached the gospel to that city [that is, Derbe] and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, 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. 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. Then they passed through Pisidia and came to Pamphylia. And when they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia, and from there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had fulfilled. 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. And they remained no little time with the disciples.

Now, if you tracked correctly, you will see that these verses contain the record of the journey home for these missionaries. Verse 21 has them returning to through Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch. Verse 25 has them returning to Perga, and Attalia. Finally, verse 26 has them sailing

back to Antioch in Syria, from where they were originally sent out. They retraced their steps exactly, except for the island of Cyprus. they didn't revisit the island. they sailed past it on their way home.

Thus finished the first missionary journey in the history of the church. Paul and Barnabas traveled more than 1200 miles, much of which was on foot. From best we can tell, the journey took a year or two. Along the way, They preached the gospel to many people. Many heard the gospel in the synagogues. Many heard the gospel in their homes. Many heard the gospel in the open square. Many came to faith in Jesus through their ministry. With all of the new believers, they planted a handful of churches in the cities where the people believed.

But not all was rosy in their travels. They also faced some persecution. They were driven out of several cities. Paul was stoned and left for dead. But through it all, God was faithful. The Spirit led them throughout their journey (Acts 13:2, 9, 52). God was working through them, opening a door of faith to the Gentiles (Acts 14:27).

My message this morning is entitled, "The Work of the Ministry." because, that's what we see Paul and Barnabas doing on their return trip. they are doing the work that God had called them to do. What they were doing is exactly the same thing that we are called to do as disciples of Christ. What is the work of the ministry?

## 1. Making Disciples (verse 21)

### Acts 14:21

When they had preached the gospel to that city [that is, Derbe] and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch,

Now, the only reason why this is significant for us is that many today think that "discipleship" is optional for the believer in Jesus Christ. That is, when you come to faith in Jesus, he becomes your "Savior." You are eternally secure in him. You will enjoy eternal life in heaven with the saints. It's done. But, they say, it takes a later act, to make Jesus "Lord of your life." That's when you enter into a serious commitment to the Lord. This is called, "Discipleship." It's optional, they say. Oh, sure, it's something that every believer "should do" but not something that every believer "must do."

I make this point this morning from verse 21 to say that such teaching simply doesn't match up with the Biblical record. A "believer" in Christ is a "disciple" of Jesus. There is no distinction in the book of Acts between a "believer" and a "disciple." They are one and the same. Further, there is no discussion in the book of Acts (or anywhere in the Bible) about how believers are to attain to a level of discipleship-like commitment, which is more than a "believer."

As Paul and Barnabas were on their missionary trip, they were calling people to faith, making disciples of Jesus. That's what Jesus calls us to do. Do you remember the great commission? Jesus told his disciples, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:18-20).

That's exactly what Paul and Barnabas were doing. When you sum up their work on the mission field. It was this: They were making disciples.

This is the work of the ministry. And that's what we are called to do as well: Make disciples. By telling them about Jesus. By seeing their response. By teaching them to follow after the Lord. It all begins with the theme of the book of Acts, when Jesus calls us to "Be My Witnesses."

It happens in your conversations. This past week, I had a conversation with a man I know, who isn't a Christian. We were talking about the new casino that's in town. He knew that I was a pastor, and so, he asked me, "What do you think about the casino?" And so, I said, "I think it's bad news. Gambling destroys people. It takes away money from those who can't afford to lose it. Did you ever wonder why the buildings in Las Vegas are so nice and ornate? They were built on the back of those who lost their money gambling. You can win in the short term. But in the end, the casinos always win." I continued, "I have seen and heard of those whose lives have been destroyed by gambling." He said, "Do you think people like that ever change?" I replied, "Yes." He questioned me, saying, "I don't know. People just don't change." I replied with the gospel, "The only way that they will ever change is through belief in Jesus. I have many people come to believe that Jesus died for them on the cross. I have seen many people experience forgiveness of sins. And that changes people. That's why I do what I do. Because I have seen people change. And I know that in Jesus, there is power to change, if you but believe that Jesus died on the cross for your sins." He was pretty quiet after that. And the conversation changed to other things.

This is where making disciples begins, by being a witness for Jesus. The work of the ministry is not only making disciples (verse 21). It is also, ...

## 2. Strengthening Souls (verse 22)

As Paul and Barnabas returned through Lystra and Iconium and Antioch, they were ...

### Acts 14:22

... strengthening the souls of the disciples.

The idea here is really simple to understand. Our souls are like our bodies. As we pass through life, it's good for us to have bodies that are strong. It's good for us to eat right. It's good for us to exercise. It's good for us to drink enough water. So also for our souls! As we pass through this life, it's good for us to have souls that are strong. We need to take in spiritual truth like food. We need to exercise our souls through loving others.

We can do that ourselves, by reading the Scriptures. Or we can seek the aid of others, who can help us, by teaching us and training us. This

is what Paul and Barnabas were doing. They were teaching and training those in the churches, to strengthen them. much like a personal trainer, they were “strengthening” the souls of the disciples.

I love the Greek word that is translated “strengthening” it sounds like “steroids.” Steroids increase muscle mass and strength. That’s the work of the ministry. In the book of Acts, we will see this idea come up again and again. Consider the following verses:

Acts 15:32 And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words.

Acts 15:41 And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

Acts 16:5 So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily.

Acts 18:23 After spending some time there, he departed and went from one place to the next through the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples.

This is the heart of Christian ministry: strengthening souls! All of you can do that with each other. When our service finishes, you can do this, by talking with others about the Scriptures. Moms and dads, you can do this with your children. as you open the Scriptures and pray with your children, bringing the source of spiritual nourishment into your home, strengthening them for their lives.

The work of the ministry also includes ...

### **3. Encouraging Believers (verse 22)**

Again, this comes in verse 22. Paul and Barnabas were traveling through Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, and ...

Acts 14:22  
... encouraging them to continue in the faith.

The idea here is that of “building up” other believers. You see this idea in 1 Thessalonians 5:11 Encourage one another and build one another up. This is closely related to the idea of strengthening others. But this word isn’t so much focused on being “strong” as it is encouragement to “keep going.”

Rather than the picture of a personal trainer that trains you for strength, the picture here is more one of a coach, who comes alongside and helps to improve performance, especially in the midst of a game! Or, even a cheerleader, who comes alongside the team and encourages. “Two, four, six, eight, who do we appreciate!” “Let’s go Tigers, <clap> <clap>” Now, this word isn’t all “rah, rah,” these are just pictures to help the idea of what encouragement mean. but it is words that help others press on.

Again, like “strengthening souls,” we all can do this. In fact, encouragement doesn’t take much. It’s simply the timely word spoken in season. Dads, it’s the word to your son, “I’m proud of you.” Moms, it’s the word to your daughter, “I love you.” Church family, it’s the word to your friend in the pew, “I’m praying for you.” These are the encouragement that we need to keep going.

This is what those in Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch especially needed to hear. We see this in my fourth point. The work of the ministry includes ...

### **4. Warning of Tribulation (verse 22)**

Again, look at verse 22, Paul and Barnabas were strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, ...

Acts 14:22  
and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.

Fundamentally, this is why Paul and Barnabas were strengthening the souls of the disciples. This is why Paul and Barnabas were encouraging them to continue in the faith, Because, there was everything pulling on their lives to make them quit and turn back to their previous ways of life. This is because life as followers of Christ was going to be difficult for them.

Think about the experience of Paul and Barnabas with each of these cities: Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch. There was great success with the gospel. There were many who came to faith. But in each of these cities, Paul and Barnabas were kicked out of the city. They didn’t leave on their own terms. They left when it was clear that they were no longer welcome.

In Antioch, “the Jews incited the devout women of high standing and the leading men of the city, stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district” (Acts 13:50). In Iconium, “When an attempt was made by both Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to mistreat them and to stone them, they learned of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe (Acts 14:5-6). In Lystra, “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” (Acts 14:19). Those in these cities saw the tribulation that Paul and Barnabas experienced. Paul and Barnabas were telling them that these things are necessary, not only for Paul and Barnabas, but for every believer in Jesus.

In fact, it’s necessary if you want to enter the kingdom of God. Here it again, “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.” Jesus said, “In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). That’s where we find our confidence and our hope: in Jesus. He overcame the world. Through faith in him, we also can overcome the world.

You need to hear this warning. The work of the ministry includes giving people this warning. I love what Brian Borgman says about these words, "We don't do anybody, any Christian, any favors when we tell them that the only thing that they have to look forward to is escaping tribulation. We strengthen their souls when we prepare them for tribulations." (15:45 mark)

I love how this is the message that Paul gave to these new believers straight up front. It does no good for us to call people to faith without the understanding of the hardship that lies ahead, especially if you are at all aggressive in sharing your faith. If you are bold in sharing your faith, you will be rejected for your message. You will be despised for your message. If you can't handle that, you won't enter the kingdom of God. Jesus said, "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" (Luke 9:26). Just as Jesus was hated in this world, so too will we be hated.

But this is all part of the tribulation that we must endure. So, church family, let's be (1) "Making Disciples by (2) "Strengthening Souls" and (3) "Encouraging Believers" as we warn each other of the cost of following Jesus, "through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God."

Let's move on to verse 23, which shows another aspect of the work of the ministry.

#### Acts 14:23

And when they had appointed elders for them in every church.

In this verse, we see Paul and Barnabas, ...

### **5. Appointing Elders (verse 23)**

That is, they were setting in place the leadership structure that was needed for the churches. Part of the ministry of Paul and Barnabas as they went out was to plant churches. As they preached in Antioch, many people came to faith. and churches were formed. As they preached in Iconium, many people came to faith and churches were formed. The same may well have happened in Lystra we simply aren't told. Further, we know that in Derbe, Paul and Barnabas, "made many disciples." They certainly began regular meetings together in churches that formed.

These churches were formed without any formal leadership structure in place. They were simply a gathering of believers. And as Paul and Barnabas swept back through these churches, they appointed elders. That is, they appointed those who would oversee the churches, guiding them, directing them and leading them.

How do you think that they decided upon who the leaders in the church? Did they take nominations and hold a popular vote? Did they appoint the oldest men in the churches as "elders"? I don't think so. I think that they looked to see how the church was functioning. Who were the natural leaders? Who were those with the heart to lead? Who were those who were gathering the people together? Who were those with the needed character qualities to lead? These were the ones that Paul and Barnabas appointed to lead the church. In other words, Paul and Barnabas appointed those who were doing the work already!

In a similar way, when it comes to leadership at our church, we do the same thing. We look for those who are doing the work already. of shepherding people, of caring for people. We look for those who spend the time with others at the church. We look for those who are reaching out to those at church. We are looking for those who have a heart for the ministry. We are looking for those who have the needed character to lead. In other words, we look for those who are already doing the work of the ministry, (1) "Making Disciples by (2) "Strengthening Souls" and (3) "Encouraging Believers" while (4) Warning of Tribulation. In sum, this is simply helping people through the issues of life. These are the ones that Paul and Barnabas were appointing as elders.

I love the practicals of how they did this.

#### Acts 14:23

... with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

Here is another "work of the ministry."

### **6. Trusting the Lord (verse 23, 26)**

Paul and Barnabas could not stay in Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch. They had to return to their mother church. But in returning, they prayed and fasted, and committed these leaders to the Lord. They were "trusting the Lord" to continue the work in the churches without them.

This is one of the things that I love about Christian ministry. It's all about God doing his work through his people. I'm not the savior of the world! Nor is anybody else. I don't need to be every place, everywhere to make sure that things go well with people. I can't be in every place being all things to all people.

When people move on, or when people move away from our church. I can simply pray, "Lord, I have done all that I can do with these people. I have labored to strengthen them and to encourage them. But I know that ultimately, it is you who are working in their lives." And I can trust the Lord to do his work in his people.

Paul wrote to those in Philippi, "I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:6). This is what Paul and Barnabas were doing with these churches. They were committing them to the Lord, to continue his work in them without them! This takes faith! This takes trust in the Lord.

Really, we have no other choice. Either we will seek to be all things to all people in our ministering to others, or we will entrust their souls to the Lord to bring about his work in their lives.

I'm greatly looking forward to when we get to Acts 20. It is Paul with Ephesian elders, those with whom he spent three years together with them. He was convinced that he would never see them again. He said this: "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" (Acts 20:32). After saying these things, "there was much weeping on the part of [Paul and the elders in Ephesus]" (Acts 20:36). because of the thought of never seeing each other again! So they embraced each other and kissed as they left. I'm sure that as Paul sailed on his way to Jerusalem, that he was trusting the Lord to do his work.

But this is ministry: trusting the Lord. This wasn't the only time that we see this. We also saw this when Paul and Barnabas had left Antioch. Let's read further in Acts 14.

Acts 14:24-26

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

Verse 26 is a retrospective look at what took place in Acts 13:2 when they sent out Paul and Barnabas for their missionary trip. When the church sent them out they were "commended to the grace of God for the work that they had fulfilled." They trusted in the Lord to do his work in his people. The church was doing the work of the ministry. They were trusting the Lord to do his work among his people

In verse 27, we see them returning back home.

Acts 14:27

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.

This is another aspect of the work of the ministry

## **7. Giving Testimony (verse 27)**

I have been on a handful of missions trips over the years. I have been to Nepal and India on 8 separate occasions. Every time, on the plane ride home, I have spent much time gathering my thoughts to share with all of you with my return. I have often arrived back home on Saturday evening, only to preach the next morning about all that I did and about all that I experienced.

This is essentially what Paul and Barnabas did. They were giving a report to the church about what took place on their trip. I love their perspective. They told of "all that God had done with them" (Acts 14:27).

I ask you, "Who did the work on their missionary journey?" God! God did the work!

This is similar to what Paul and Barnabas will later tell to those in Jerusalem in Acts 15 when they met with the apostles and elders to decide what requirements should be placed on the Gentiles who believed. When they initially arrived in Jerusalem, "they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them" (Acts 15:4). This was their perspective. It was God who did the work through them.

This same perspective carried its way throughout their time in Jerusalem. During the debate among the apostles and elders and those of the party of the Pharisees, Paul and Barnabas had a opportunity to describe their travels. We read that "they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles" (Acts 15:12). They saw their journey as something that God did through them.

Certainly, Paul and Barnabas did much work. I can hardly comprehend what it was like to travel 1200 miles without a vehicle. The boats they traveled on were certainly not luxury liners, but more like small sailboats. But much of their time was spent walking from town to town, managing along the way. Yet, it wasn't their labor that they reported. It was God's work that they spoke about, not only in Jerusalem (Acts 15:4, 12), but in Antioch as well (Acts 14:27).

This is the work of the ministry: to give testimony of the work of God in your life. You can do this as well. You can give testimony to your believing friends. You can give testimony to your unbelieving friends. Simply speak about God's work in your lives.

Now, the thing that most captured Paul and Barnabas is "how [God] had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles" (Acts 14:27). This will become central to us as we get to chapter 15, which deals the struggle of the Jews as they wrestled with bringing Gentiles into the church. But it was at the heart of Paul and Barnabas. When Paul and Barnabas traveled to Jerusalem, it was on their heart. They spoke about it everywhere they went. "So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers" (Acts 15:3).

When traveling to Jerusalem, they would have describe the moment while they were preaching to Antioch and the Jews rejected their message. Paul then quoted from Isaiah 49:6, "I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth" (as quoted in Acts 13:47). The Gentiles understood immediately! Acts 13:48 And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.

Paul and Barnabas couldn't stop talking about it! The Gentiles believe in Jesus! They have come into the household of God! They are part of the church! God has done it. All glory to God!

Finally, we see one more work of the ministry. It's ...

## 8. Spending Time (verse 28)

Acts 14:28

And they remained no little time with the disciples.

Now, we don't know exactly what "no little time" means. But the point is that they spent much time with the disciples in Antioch. This is the work of the ministry: time.

It takes time. It takes time to (1) Make Disciples. It takes time to (2) Strengthen Souls (verse 22). It takes time to (3) Encourage Believers. It takes time to be able to (4) Warn of Tribulation. It takes time to (5) Appoint Elders. It takes time to (6) Trust the Lord. It takes time to (7) Give Testimony.

This is where the work of the ministry isn't simply for the pastors and elders and deacons of the church. There simply isn't enough time for all of the work to place it upon leaders of any church. The church flourishes as we all devote ourselves in time given to others. This happens in the church, as we create reasons to be with each other as a church. This happens in the home, as we all work to make disciples of our children. This happens when we work at relationships with those outside the church to have a credible platform to tell them about Jesus. This happens inside the church when we work at relationships with those in the church.

Will you commit to the time needed to do the work of the ministry?

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on November 21, 2021 by Steve Brandon.

For more information see [www.rockvalleybiblechurch.org](http://www.rockvalleybiblechurch.org).

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[1] Here's a good online reference to follow along with the map: <https://www.thebiblejourney.org/biblejourney1/9-pauls-journey-to-cyprus-pamphylia-galatia-/paul-starts-his-1st-missionary-journey/>.

[2] Brian Borgman, "Pauline Evangelism and Discipleship," preached at Grace Community Church, Minden, Nevada on January 27, 2007 ( <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=1227071754157> ). This quote comes 15 minutes and 45 seconds into the audio recording.