

# Acts 14

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[ 0 : 00 ] My name's James, I'm on staff team here at St. Silas, and if you've tuned in for the very first time, an especially big welcome to you, to our regular Sunday evenings here at St. Silas.

Well, if you've just joined, we've been going through a little series in the book of Acts in Sunday evenings at St. Silas, and as we kick off, let me pray for us as we start. So, Father, we thank you for this time. Please speak to us as we consider your word now. In Jesus' name. Amen.

And as we start, let me ask you a question. How do you respond to hardship? How do you respond when the significant people in your life reject you?

How do you respond in the midst of suffering? Well, growing up, I had a friend called Bones, and Bones was a tall, good-looking chap.

He was a lifesaver. He had those massive swimming shoulders, and he had a cool truck that he used to drive around in. Bones' family didn't really go to church on Sunday, neither did mine for that matter.

[ 1 : 08 ] But later on, I became a Christian, and then a couple of years later, I was visiting a mutual friend of ours, and I walked past Bones' flat.

And I heard gospel music coming out of Bones' flat. And so I knocked the door, and I asked Bones, what's going on? You're listening to Christian music. What's going on there?

And he said, well, James, I've become a Christian, and we're delighted. I was rejoicing that I had a new brother in the Lord. And then he said, well, the sad thing is my wife left me because I became a Christian, because she couldn't agree with me becoming a Christian.

And so when we face hardship, it can be a great challenge to us. It could be the thing that's either going to build us up, strengthen us as people, or it's going to be the thing that's going to wipe us out, erode us, drag us down.

We might think, where is God in hardship and suffering? And God's answer when we face hardship and suffering is, I am going to save you.

[ 2 : 16 ] I am going to save my people. And that's the big message for us in the book of Acts. And by way of context, we're in a little section of Acts between a Gentile Roman, Cornelius, becoming a Christian in Acts 10, and the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, where the early church discusses who can become Christians.

And Dr. Luke, the author of Acts, he is trying to convince us that the gospel is not simply for one kind of people, the ethnic Jews of his day, but that the gospel is for all people, even for us here in the West End of Glasgow.

And Luke wants us to know that the big thing that God is doing in the world is saving people. That's God's big work, to save people. And we saw this last week, although we didn't really have enough time to look at it.

So I wonder if you might pick up your Bibles and just turn back to Acts 13 and look down at that reference to Habakkuk in verse 40. I'll just read it again. And Paul really quotes that.

He inserts two references to work there. That something there, a something is a work. And then again, that thing that you'd never believe, that's a work that you'd never believe.

[ 3 : 52 ] And then we have this work coming up at the end of our reading in verse 26. From Attila, they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been committed to God for the work they had now completed.

And in the context of Habakkuk, that work that God is doing there is that he is going to use the Gentiles to bring his people, Israel, to repentance so that they may be saved.

That's God's big work in the context of Habakkuk. And it's God's big work in the context of Acts. And so last week we saw that.

As Paul is rejected by the Jews, what does he say? He says, I'm going to be a light to the Gentiles. And it looks like a massive failure when God's people reject him.

But in God's purposes, that's happened so that both Jews and Gentiles, the whole world, all people of all ethnic tribes, may be saved and come in and worship the Lord.

[ 4 : 59 ] And it's a saving that comes not from something that you do, from living a good life, from being a goody two-shoes, but it's out of God being faithful to his work, out of his own mercy and faithfulness.

And so we remember that great quote from Habakkuk in verse 4 of chapter 2, that the righteous, those who are right with God, will live by faith, not by their works.

And we see there that it's not a universal salvation. It's not that God is going to save every single person that's ever lived, but that he'll save not all, but some from each tribe, nation, and tongue.

And that will be a representative of the whole world. But that will also mean that there will be a great division in those nations and tribes and tongues, as some people accept the Lord Jesus, but as others reject the Lord Jesus.

And we see that right at the start of our reading this evening in verse 1 and 2, that some accept the Lord Jesus and others reject the Lord Jesus.

[ 6 : 07 ] And the picture that Luke is painting for us here is, particularly in that miracle that we see a little later on in verses 8 and 9, is a picture of God's temple being expanded to fill the whole world.

So we see a similar miracle being done in Acts 3, which is done on the steps of the temple, outside the gates, beautiful. And it's if here, in describing this miracle in the same terms as the miracle that Peter did in Acts 3, Luke is saying to us that God's temple is being expanded to fill the whole world, and that you no longer have to worship God simply in a little temple.

God's presence isn't only reserved for that one mound in Jerusalem, but that God's presence is expanded to wherever people trust and obey in the Lord Jesus.

And so God is still at work. And in Acts, when Luke says God is still at work, he means that the resurrected Jesus is still at work through the Holy Spirit.

And so if Luke was a painter, he would be painting this magnificent picture of this great multitude of people coming into God's kingdom. People, the strangest sorts of people you could ever imagine.

[ 7 : 27 ] So you might imagine a Jamaican with dreadlocks coming in, or a Scotsman in a kilt, or a German in Leverhousen, or Inuit with his snow coat, and yes, even a South African with a rugby ball and bride tongs coming into God's kingdom to praise Jesus as God's resurrected king.

And the means that God is going to save his people, that we see Jesus working in this passage, and throughout the book of Acts, is as his word goes out.

And in particular, we see Paul as God's spokesperson. And so we see him doing exactly the same type of miracle that Peter did in Acts 3.

So we're picking up in verse 8, if you could grab your Bibles there. I'll just read that again for us, that section. In Lystra there sat a man who was lame. He had been that way from birth, and he had never walked.

He listened to Paul as he was speaking. Paul looked directly at him and saw that he had faith to be healed. And he called out, Stand up on your feet.

[ 8 : 35 ] At that the man jumped and began to walk. And Luke describes that miracle in exactly the same fashion as the miracle that Peter does in Acts 3. It's a man who's been lame from birth.

And then we see how the man responds. He jumps to his feet. He's leaping and dancing, as it were.

And so what Luke is trying to say to us there is that Paul is God's spokesperson, and that Jesus is acting through his word as his word goes out through his Holy Spirit, and Paul is his spokesperson.

And so in Acts we've seen a lot of preaching, and we see a lot of preaching in this passage that we've looked at tonight. So verse 1, preaching. Verse 3, preaching. Verse 7, as the word goes out.

And I think that the bit that shocked me in this passage, that was a real surprise to me as I looked at this earlier, and I wonder if it was a surprise for you as well, was then when I think about the section of Acts and the missionary journeys going out, I think, whoa, Paul and Barnabas, they're like super Christians.

They're extraordinary. They're doing these great things, preaching the gospel wherever they go. But then I realize that Paul and Barnabas were actually simply local church pastors who had been sent out by their church.

[ 9 : 58 ] And we see that in verse 28 of our reading. And they stayed there a long time with the disciples. And that place where they stay is where they've left from earlier, where they were teaching the word in Acts 11, verse 26, and that's Antioch in Syria.

And so Paul and Barnabas are really nothing more than local church pastors who've gone out to preach the word. And so what we see in this section of Acts is the work of the local church as they've been led by the Holy Spirit in Acts 13, verse 2, to preach the gospel to the nations. And it's a church with the word at its heart. Have a thirst and a hunger to see the gospel proclaimed to all nations. It's a church that has been planted from another church, from the church in Jerusalem.

And now they're planting and establishing other churches. And so the pattern that we see here is really our pattern.

It should be the pattern that we should follow because God is still at work. And so having thought a bit about what God is doing in the world, let's go on to consider what God asks us to do and what it's going to look like for us to live the victorious Christian life as we come to trust and believe in the Lord Jesus.

[ 11 : 23 ] And so I'm going to have two main points for the rest of the talk. And the first one is the living God who calls us to repent in verses 11 to 18. And then secondly, the kingdom of God that is reached through hardships, verse 19 to 28.

So our first point there, the living God who calls us to repent. And last week, we had an example of a sermon given to a particularly Jewish context.

But here we have a little sermonette, a tiny miniature talk, a gobbets, as it were, given to an outright pagan people. And so right at the start in verse 8 of our reading, we read, In Lystra there sat a man. And Lystra is really the backwards of the Bible world. It's a bit like Basingstoke or Fort William or if you're South African, Kwakwa or Inverness or some other random backwater place.

Hope I haven't offended anyone there. And we see that because there's no synagogue mentioned in Lystra. Normally, Paul and Barnabas would go to the synagogue and preach. They don't do that in Lystra because presumably there was no synagogue.

[ 12 : 34 ] And then we see in verse 11 that the locals there, they don't preach, they don't speak any well-known language. They don't speak Latin or Greek or Aramaic. They speak the Laconian language and that's a local dialect.

And then we see that in their polytheism. They think Paul and Barnabas are Hermes and Zeus. They're not monotheistic. And so what happens there is they arrive in the city.

They see this man called lame. They make him walk again and instantly the local townsfolk think that they are gods. And they start proclaiming them as gods.

And Paul and Barnabas are shocked by this. And so they preach this little sermon to the local pagan people. And it's a sermon with two quick main points.

And it's a really simple message. And the first one there is that the living God has shown kindness to you all in creation. And we pick that up and we see this in verse 17.

[ 13 : 34 ] I'll just read it for us. In the past, he let all nations go their way. That's God. Yet he has not left himself without testimony. He has shown kindness by giving you rain from the heavens and crops in their seasons.

He has provided you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy. And I guess the challenge for us is we're actually thinking about this this week, thinking about God's testimony.

And that many of us think that we live in a neutral space. And that God's world has been designed by chance. And it's got no relationship to who God is.

And that we just wander through the world. And that if we are to know God, then we must act. And we must kind of work our way up to God. We must climb the ladder up to where God is living, in heaven.

But Paul says the exact opposite is true. He says in this verse that we are living in God's world. And it's as if we are aliens who've landed on a foreign planet.

[ 14 : 42 ] And we're really looking at God's world that's a reflection of who God is. And everything that we see in our world, everything that we experience in life, is meant to point us to God.

And so, God has not left us without testimony, without a witness in the everyday things and kindnesses that we get from God. All the good things, the rain, the crop, the foods, a good meal, rains, joy.

So growing up, I grew up surfing in South Africa. And it was wonderful. Beautiful. You'd wake up in the morning, you'd go down to the beach at five o'clock and you'd see this glorious sunrise, beautiful, coming over the Indian Ocean.

And you'd spend about two hours surfing with your mates and the water's warm, you're only wearing a pair of baggies and there's no wind. And once you're done with that, you'd wander up the beach, you'd put your surfboard down and you'd go and have a fantastic breakfast, a cooked breakfast with your best mates.

And I could look at all that and say, well, that was just nice. That's a chance. But what I'm meant to do is I'm meant to look at all that and see that that is really God's kindness to me and see that that's a picture of who God is, that he's diverse, that he's enormously creative, that he loves beauty, that he loves friendship, that he loves fellowship, that he loves the excitement of rushing down a wave.

[16:14] The next thing that Paul says to these folk in Lystra is that they are to turn to the living God from idols. In verse 15, I'll just read that again for us.

Friends, why are you doing this? We too are only human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from the worthless things to the living God who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them.

And the point that Paul is trying to drive home for them there is that God is the creator and that he's remarkably different to us. He's nothing like us at all.

You see, many of us when we think about God we think that God must be a lot like us, that he must agree with us before we can believe and trust in him. trust in him.

He must agree with us that he's only one God amongst many. That he must agree with us with our morality and how we think we should live our lives.

[17:18] And lots of us think that, don't we? And that's a way of thinking about God from the bottom up. But what does Paul say here? Look there, right at the start of verse 15, we too are only human.

What's he saying? We're human. We're nothing more than God's creatures. We've been created. And then right at the end of verse 15, he says, God who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them.

God is the creator. He made everything. And you can't have more than one creator. He's the only God in the universe. He's monotheistic.

He's one God. God. And that he is the living God. What does he say? Turn to the living God. He is still living and alive and active. So if you want to know God, then you must see the world as God sees it.

You must start from God's perspective. You must start from looking down and seeing the world, how God sees the world. That he is the creator. And that we live in his world.

[18:31] and that he is still acting and that there are no other worlds, other gods, and that he is the only living God. And the temptation for us is for many of us to worship non-living things, to worship inanimate idols in the language that Paul uses.

And that is to put our hope in something that will bring us joy and satisfaction in this life. And so we think, if I get that house in Mulgai, then I'll be happy.

If I get that car, then I'll be happy. If I get a bit more money, then I'll be happy. If I have a family that is 2.3 kids or marry the right person, then I'll be happy.

If I concentrate on being mindful and being a good person, then I will be happy. And the message that Paul tells us here is that we need to turn from that trusting and non-living things and turn to the living God who created us, who made us, and that we need to repent.

And to turn there, to repent, is simply to do a 180 degree about-face turn from everything that draws us away from God and come into and believe and trust in the only living God.

[19:49] Well, if that's our first point there in our talk, that the living God calls us to repent, what's life going to look like for us if we do trust and believe in the Lord Jesus?

And this is our second point there, that the kingdom of God is reached through hardships, verses 19 to 28. And throughout the book of Acts, we've seen the gospel going out through God's unstoppable word, but we've also seen hostility and opposition to that word, to the gospel from Jews and Gentiles.

And so our reading this evening is really bookended by this opposition. So in verse 5, we read, there was a plotter among both Gentiles and Jews, together with their leaders, what?

To mistreat Paul and Barnabas and stone them. And then, towards the end of our reading, verse 19, then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won over the crowd.

They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. And that's one of the big themes that Luke wants us to understand in the Christian life and that he wants us to gather from the book of Acts.

[ 21 : 09 ] And it comes out in verse 22, that we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God. And when he says we must go through many hardships, he's not saying we need to beat ourselves up, be ascetic with a whip or something, but that hardships, suffering, persecution for the gospel are part of the normal Christian experience.

For many of us, those hardships and those suffering are very real for us at the moment. as we go through the struggles with coronavirus, we think of our friends and our family who might be affected, who might be suffering with coronavirus.

We might be cut off from those normal ways that we might be encouraged in the gospel, from Sunday church, from visiting with our Christian friends, from reading Bible together with friends. Our family situations where we're self-isolating might be quite tough. Our families might be opposed to the gospel. We might be the only Christian in our household, in our flat share, wherever we are. A number of my Christian friends are having to live their Christian lives in hiding, as it were, almost in their own homes as they go through self-isolating with coronavirus.

[ 22 : 30 ] And Paul tells us this. He warns us in verse 22 that we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God because if we don't recognize this, then when we come up against hardships, that will be a big shock to us.

So if you're listening and considering becoming a Christian, don't think that when you become a Christian, all your troubles will disappear and go away.

Yes, you will discover the joy of knowing God, but with those will come the hardships that come from following King Jesus. And I think that for us as Christians living in Britain, living in Glasgow, this is something that we're particularly bad at dealing with.

Any mild inconvenience becomes a great struggle. Our world tells us that we're all victims of something or other and that we shouldn't really be a victim.

And so when we face hardship and suffering, that becomes quite hard to deal with. We're not geared up to deal with it well. But Dr. Luke and Paul helpfully warns us here and he corrects us that we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.

[ 23 : 46 ] And we see in this verse our present experience. Hardship now. Suffering. Things aren't going to go brilliantly in life for us as Christians.

We might be going through a really tough time now. But we also see this future hope. It's a very well balanced promise in verse 22 that if we go through those hardships, go through those sufferings, then we will enter the kingdom of God where there will be no hardship, where there will be no tears and no suffering.

And we will be with King Jesus forever. And Luke highlights that this is a major theme, that he wants us to understand this because this is the only statement that is said to ordinary Christians in the book of Acts.

That's the thing that he wants the ordinary person in the pew to hear and understand, that we must go through hardships if we are to enter the kingdom of God.

And so it might be helpful for us as we think and meditate and reflect on this. what are some of our attitudes to hardship and suffering?

[ 25 : 01 ] Are we massively averse to hardship and suffering? Do we avoid it at all costs and try and make like an ostrich when hardship comes and hide our head in the sand?

Are we overly addicted to comfort and convenience? And I get that picture in my mind of the humans in that movie, that Disney movie, WALL-E. You know how they wander around and they so used to be served hand and foot and mouth.

Are we like that? Or are we striving and struggling for the gospel and for the Christian life? You see, at the heart of the gospel is a God who has inconvenienced himself for us, who went through great hardship for us.

And we've seen that in our reading tonight, how God has shown kindness to those who have rejected him, to his enemies. He sends them good things. He sends them rain. He fills their hearts with joy, gives them food.

And we see that in the person of the Lord Jesus, how although he lived with God perfectly in heaven, had the best relationship ever, perfectly loved by God, what did he do?

[ 26 : 09 ] He left heaven and he came down to earth. And as he lived on earth, amongst our squalor, amongst our hardships, amongst our struggles, it broke his heart.

And then he was rejected and persecuted by people. In Luke's gospel, we see the religious leaders of Jesus' day hating Jesus.

And they hated him so much that he suffered and he died a humiliating death on the cross for us. A great hardship. A huge inconvenience.

But then the glorious hope of the gospel that Luke draws our eyes to is that that Jesus who went through that hardship has been resurrected and now rules and reigns in the kingdom of God.

And now he invites us to join him there by going through the great hardships of life and persevering until we reach that heavenly kingdom where there will be no sufferings and no trials with the Lord Jesus.

[ 27 : 12 ] Let me close for us in a word of prayer. So Father, we look forward to that glorious day when we'll be with your Son in heaven. Where we'll be with his presence in a way that's more full than we could ever experience in this life.

Father, please help us to keep persevering on that course. Please help us to turn from idols and turn to the true and living God. Please help us to turn away from those things that distract us from you.

And that pull us away from you and help us to turn to the true and living God. Help us to trust and obey the Lord Jesus.

Amen.