

23. The Pattern of Genuine Apostolic Mission

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Preacher: William Philip

[0 : 00] If you would, to the passage we read in Acts chapter 13, page 992. A passage all about the pattern of genuine apostolic mission.

Now we live in an age where there is a growth industry in methods of church growth and in mantras about what makes successful mission. One of our church staff was at a conference recently about exactly that, where the staff speaker spoke about how God had just given him, not his first, but his second Learjet.

Such was the mark of success upon his particular ministry. Well, I'm still on EasyJet, not Learjet, so I've still got a lot to learn about what successful ministry really is, obviously.

But that kind of prosperity idea of the gospel is rife in our world in the West. It's also rife in many parts of the developing world, in Africa particularly, perhaps.

Just as an instance of that, we had not long ago an application form for the ministry training course, the Corn Hill training course. And there's a question on that form which says this, and we ask it to everybody who applies.

[1 : 15] If failure was not an issue, what would you most like to achieve in your lifetime? Quite a penetrating question, I think. Well, the answer from this particular applicant, who in fact was from Nigeria, was this.

I quote, to be a world-famous multi-billionaire. That was on a serious application for a ministry training course.

You'll be glad to know that the director declined to offer an interview. At least I hope you'll be glad to know that. Well, if that is to be the pattern for mission, then it's easy, isn't it, for most of us to feel an extraordinary flop and a very great failure.

But of course, there are subtler pressures on us as well. Well, many, of course, would reject that kind of crass prosperity theology. Yet, nevertheless, they would measure the success of a church's ministry in terms of perhaps the acceptability of that church to the establishment, maybe the religious establishment, or perhaps the media, or the political establishment of a nation, and so on. A church that has a universally good reputation with those in high places is greatly revered by some. And by contrast, it's very easy for many people to feel rather queasy about a church that is the opposite.

[2 : 41] It's always very unpopular with the chattering classes. Many people don't want to be associated with believers who perhaps are vilified in the media, who are called extremists, or hardliners, or right-wingers, by the media, by the establishment, even by those in the religious establishment.

And so they don't want to be tarred with the brush of being called fundamentalists, or extremists, or things like that. They don't want the odium or the disgrace that comes along with that.

I suppose that's what the Apostle Paul is really speaking about in Philippians chapter 1, where he tells how other believers just dropped him when he became imprisoned for the faith.

They didn't want to be touched by the disgrace of an Apostle who was imprisoned by the state.

Well, Luke writes his two books, his Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, with the clear purpose, he tells us, that his readers will have certainty about everything that they've been taught.

And in this passage before us today, he wants to give us great clarity on what it means to have a pattern of genuine apostolic ministry.

[3 : 58] So that's our title today, The Pattern of Genuine Apostolic Mission for the Church. It's a long section, we're going right to the end of chapter 14, but we'll just summarize the main message in three points.

The true gospel word, the true gospel witness, and the true gospel way. First then, the true gospel word. The genuine Christian message, Luke tells us, will always divide. And it will divide eternally. Now that's seen all through this passage, but especially it's teased out in verses 43 to 52 of chapter 13. There is a great division following Paul's preaching in the synagogue. And nevertheless, though, the predominant note is one of joy and great rejoicing. Let's not forget that. Now we're reading here the reaction to Paul's synagogue preaching in Pisidian Antioch, which we saw last time, was a message clearly from beginning to end of the scriptures about grace. God's persistent grace all through his people's past, his present climactic grace in the coming of Christ and his resurrection from the dead, and his personal grace as he presses that message on the individual hearers and calls them to respond to the Lord Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world. [5 : 19] But precisely because his message is one of the climactic personal revelation of God's saving grace, then you see to reject that grace defiantly is to bring judgment upon yourself. That must be so. Because to refuse God's gracious forgiveness is the only unforgivable sin. By definition, that's so. To refuse forgiveness means that you are unforgiven. And just as the cross was the place where God's wrath and his mercy met, so also in the preaching of the cross, people are likewise confronted with the mercy and with the judgment of God. Because where that offer of God's mercy is refused, then those who refuse it are choosing judgment for themselves. In the words of verse 46, they are judging themselves, says Paul, unworthy of eternal life. And that is why the genuine Christian message always divides. Because the gospel is the sovereign instrument of God's judgment at work in the world now. [6 : 34] In the proclamation of the gospel and in people's response to that gospel, then the verdict of the last day, the verdict of the day of judgment, is being pronounced now, in the present. And is being pronounced permanently, forever. And either that verdict is justified, forgiven, freed from all that the law holds against you, and therefore you are pronounced as appointed for eternal life, in the words of verse 48. Or, if that forgiveness is refused, then the verdict is, and it must be, unforgiven, and therefore unjustified before God, and therefore still under the condemnation of all the guilt of your sin, and therefore refused eternal life, and barred from the presence of God for all eternity. In the proclamation of the gospel, you see, the verdict of that last day is being brought visibly into the present day. And since the last day, according to Jesus himself, is a day of great division, the sheep and the goats, the wheat and the tares, the just and the unjust, well, so then also, the work of genuine gospel ministry will also always be one of division. And I want you to be certain of that, Luke is saying. And Jesus, by the way, is saying. Because Jesus explicitly taught that also to his own disciples, so that they too wouldn't be discouraged, wouldn't be utterly despondent, when they were working out in their own life, this very mission that Jesus had called them to. [8 : 20] Thank goodness, Jesus did warn his disciples, and thank goodness, Luke has told us the same. Otherwise, surely, the apostles like Paul and Barnabas would have been very, very discouraged by the reaction of verse 45, when despite the whole city coming to hear the word, the Jews turned vitriolically against him. And we also might be deeply discouraged when we too see this same pattern of some turning against the message of life. It is just worth thinking back for a second to the Lord's own words that Luke records for us in his Gospel, to see how Jesus underlines all of this to his disciples. And indeed, Jesus' teaching is what underlies Luke's discussion here. Luke is telling us that what you see here in the apostles with this great division is not Christ's mission going wrong. It's not because the apostles haven't read the right church growth strategy or haven't been to the right urban mission conferences. No, this is mission exactly as the sovereign plan and purpose of God has determined it to be. You remember back in Luke chapter 8, don't turn it up now, but you might want to look later, Jesus tells his disciples what mission is going to be like, doesn't he, in the parable of the sower. You'll sow the seed, which is the word of God, he says, and you'll see all kinds of different responses. [9 : 44] And many of them will be responses of great disappointment. There will be joy, great joy, but much of that will be masked until the last day.

There will be, though, says Jesus, those who hear the word and holding fast bear fruit with patience, with perseverance. And therefore he warns people and he says, take care how you hear the message.

He says this, for to the one who has, more will be given, and to the one who has not, even that which he has will be taken away. You see, the response to the gospel now is what sets the future response of God to you on judgment day.

Whether you receive more, abundant life, eternal, or whether even that life that you have now is taken away from you forever. A bit further on, in Luke chapter 10, when Jesus, remember, sends out the disciples on a mission to prepare them for the pattern of the future, he tells them exactly that pattern of division is what they're going to experience.

He says, when you go into a town and they receive you as welcome, because they welcome you and your message, say to them, the kingdom of God has come near you.

[11 : 02] But if they don't receive you, he says, even the dust that clings to your feet, wipe off against them. Nevertheless, say this to them, know this, that the kingdom of God has come near.

In other words, God has been offering you salvation, but you have refused it. Jesus says to his disciples then, the one who hears you, hears me.

And the one who rejects you, rejects me. And the one who rejects me, rejects him who sent me, the Father himself. You see what Jesus is saying?

Rejecting the genuine Christian message of the gospel means rejecting God himself and his salvation. And that is to judge oneself unworthy of eternal life.

It's to write yourself out of the very book of life, says Jesus. And nothing could be more serious. And so when the gospel causes division, it's not a fault in the gospel or in the church.

[12 : 08] It's not a wrongly divisive message that stirs up needless trouble. It is the sovereign plan and purpose of God for eternity being worked out in advance in history.

Now. Because we're living in the last days and the days of God's judgment have begun with the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. And his instrument of judgment at work now in the world is the proclamation of his gospel as it's heard and as it's responded to.

And that's why the genuine Christian message will always be divisive. It will divide eternally and it will therefore be seen to divide in history.

Two things just to note about this before we move on. Firstly, the mystery of God's sovereign salvation. Verse 46, Paul says, it was necessary that the gospel come first to the Jews.

Jesus himself said, salvation is of the Jews. He's the Jewish Messiah. And yet, the extraordinary fact of history is that then and now, still for the most part, the Jews as an entity have not accepted the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[13 : 27] They thrust it aside even as they thrust aside and crucify the earthly Jesus. Now that is a great mystery. If God's whole plan of salvation was to involve his people Israel to bring forth the Savior to the world and to fulfill the promise to Abraham that through them blessing would come to the world, isn't it a sign of tragic failure that Israel has so badly fallen and rejected the Jewish Messiah?

Well, no, says Paul. It's all part of God's sovereign plan. It had to happen this way. That the Jews in rejecting Jesus as Paul would somehow thrust open the door of faith to the Gentiles.

Now, it is a great mystery for sure. But just as they rejected the Messiah and his death and how that brought salvation to fruition through God's amazing purposes, so also this pattern of the rejection of the gospel by the Jews is also, as verse 47 tells us, what opens the way to bring the light of salvation to the very ends of the earth.

Paul's quoting there from Isaiah 49 verse 6, words that God spoke to his true servant Israel, the Messiah, who will take up the mission that Israel as a nation so abjectly failed in to bring the light of God to all the pagan world.

And now Paul says that even though Jewish Israel for the most part has rejected the gospel, still God has called to himself a true Israel of believers, both Jew and Gentile, who will be a light to the ends of the earth through proclaiming Jesus Christ as the Savior to both Jews and Gentiles.

[15 : 19] So God's plan hasn't failed, he says. This is the mystery of God's way of saving the world. I want to read Romans chapter 11 later on, he says this in verse 11 of Romans 11, did unbelieving Israel stumble in order to fall?

By no means. Rather, through their trespass, salvation has come to the Gentiles. In other words, Paul is saying God knows what he's doing in his perfect sovereign plan of salvation. He's bringing people of every tribe and tongue and nation, even when it looks like everything's going wrong to you and to me. And that's a great word of comfort to us as well as I think a word of warning.

Later on in Romans 11 verse 25, he warns us as Gentile Christians not to be wise in our own conceits but to understand this great mystery of God's plan and purpose.

And I think a large part of understanding that mystery is not that easy to understand exactly. But part of that understanding is simply to accept that there is great mystery.

[16:37] That God does know what he's doing. Even when our mission doesn't seem to be going the way that it ought to be from our point of view. Even when there's many setbacks.

even when there are agonizing disappointments as surely there were for the Apostle Paul. When people who should be believers and follow Christ don't. When those who have been brought up with all the benefits of the scriptures and the promises and the covenants of grace turn away. We know and love people like that just as Paul loved and knew many people of his own like that. But God knows what he's doing. He knows what he's doing when we are facing extraordinary struggles and when many are scoffing when many it seems perhaps most are thrusting the message aside.

And we're angry with God and we're upset and we're disappointed with God and we say he's not doing what he should be doing. You see Paul is saying to us very often when just those things are happening God is opening bigger and more wonderful doors for the gospel of his grace throughout the world.

And so it was exactly here in Antioch. The mystery of God's sovereign salvation. He is sovereign and he knows what he's doing and verse 48 says amid great joy all those appointed to eternal life believed.

[18:10] That's the second thing to note here and it's the perfect justice of God's judgment. salvation, eternal life is absolutely the free sovereign gift of God's grace.

God alone calls people to eternal life. There is no merit whatsoever on their part. He appoints to eternal life. That word can mean to have your name inscribed in a book by someone else.

And he leads into life by giving his sovereign gift of faith and all the glory for that salvation must go to God alone. But notice that for those who forfeit eternal life it is not an exact reverse of this.

The blame does not belong to God says Luke. The blame belongs only to themselves. Verse 46 is plain. You thrust aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life.

We are all 100% responsible says Paul for our refusal of God's grace. It's men and women themselves who write themselves out of God's book of life by their deliberate refusal of his grace in Christ the Saviour.

[19:28] God's judgment is absolutely just and perfect. In passing by some to eternal life he withholds his mercy because that mercy is thrust aside.

he gives people simply what they ask for. When somebody says I want nothing to do with Jesus Christ and his salvation God absolutely justly says then you shall have what you ask for.

Verse 46 there is really very chilling but it's simply reiterating the words of the Lord Jesus himself from John 3 verse 36 where he says whoever believes in the Son has life whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life but the wrath of God remains on him.

Why? Because he thrusts aside and refuses the grace of God. The genuine Christian message will always divide.

And wherever the true gospel is proclaimed alas there will be harbingers of judgment. There will be people thrusting aside the way of eternal life.

[20:39] But there will also be joy tremendous joy joy that overshadows even the solemnity of verse 46 the joy of verse 47 where crowds of Gentiles believe and are rejoicing in following the true God the God of Israel by faith in Jesus Christ and the joy of verse 52 of the Holy Spirit poured out we're told in the hearts of everyone who believes.

these two things together are always the hallmark of genuine apostolic mission.

Judgment but great joy. And that's Luke's message. Secondly he points us to true gospel witness.

And verses 1 to 21 of chapter 14 make it very plain that genuine Christian ministry will always be despised and will be despised by everyone in every culture.

And that's because the message of God's sovereign grace that alone can save that that message is an offence equally to the Jew and to the Greek. We might say to the person of a religious mindset as well as to the hedonistic pagan just the same.

[21 : 59] That's very obvious here in this long chapter. We can just look at it briefly. But if you look first at verses 1 to 7 in Iconium we see in verse 1 a repeat of the pattern at Antioch.

They go first to the synagogue. And a great number notice of both Jews and Greeks believe. Luke's telling us that that's becoming now the normal pattern. The gospel goes directly to Jew and Gentile together on the same basis in exactly the same way.

And they preached in such a way we're told that the message of the genuine gospel offered to them was plain to everyone and many believed. But verse 2 so was the opposition mixed.

Both Jew and Gentile together opposed the gospel although we're told they're stirred up primarily by the Jews. So once again verse 4 the city was divided. The same pattern.

And notice not just a divide between Jew and Gentile but now the divide is clearly between those who believe the gospel and those who reject it. Who reject verse 3 the word of his grace.

[23 : 08] Thrusting aside the grace of salvation. But notice also how verse 3 begins. That message we're told is opposed vigorously so they carry on preaching exactly that divisive and despised message.

isn't that striking? They didn't say our message is not cutting it in this culture here. We need to change. We need to adapt it. We need to have the kind of message that people in Iconium can accept.

No. And why did they say? Ah, this method of just proclaiming the gospel, it doesn't work in this culture. We'll have to try a different message. No, they persisted in the same genuine Christian ministry, proclaiming a divisive message that was despised by everybody.

But not forever, verse 5, the time came when, as Jesus had also warned them, they should no longer cast their pearls of the glorious gospel before swine.

And so they depart, no doubt doing exactly as they did in Antioch, shaking the dust off their feet.

And they went elsewhere, verse 7, and continued to preach the same message.

[24 : 30] Now at Lystra, verse 8, we're told it was rather different. It was a completely pagan place. It seemed there was no synagogue to go to. But they do preach undoubtedly the same gospel, verse 9.

Paul is speaking just the same. There's no doubt it's the same message as of verse 3 and verse 7.

And one of those totally pagan Gentiles we're told in listening to Paul's preaching came to faith.

Verse 10 says, Paul saw that he had faith to be saved. Well, faith comes through hearing. This poor man could hear the gospel even though his feet were damaged and he couldn't walk.

But into the bargain we're told that he experienced the most wonderful visitation of power upon him so that his bodily health was also restored. It was a demonstration we're told of the power of the Spirit, a demonstration also of the authority of Paul as an apostle.

And that then led to an extraordinary turn of events. The whole city rushes out in a religious fervor and they think their pagan gods have visited them in human form so they rush off to the pagan temple to offer sacrifices.

[25 : 44] And we should just note in the passing that it's another example, isn't it, from Acts that great signs and wonders are not necessarily the be-all and the end-all of successful evangelism. Remember back in chapter 4, Peter, when he healed a lame man like this, he didn't convince the Jewish authorities in the slightest, even though they couldn't deny the miracle right in front of them.

And in this particular case, in fact, the result was a massive hindrance to the gospel. So we shouldn't miss that fact. But apparently, in this place, there was a local legend that in a previous generation, the gods had come down, the pagan gods, and had visited these cities in human form. And what had happened was they'd been rejected and rebuffed and nobody had given them any welcome or any help. And as a result, they put a curse on these cities. So no doubt when this happened, all the people were determined that at least in their generation, they weren't going to let that happen.

And no doubt that explains the great commotion here. They want to offer sacrifices to the pagan gods. But Paul had to rebuke very sharply their idolatry.

He didn't lap it up. He didn't say, yes, yes, I could do the Learjet, thanks, make your contributions here. What he said was, no, no, you are wrong. You haven't understood our message properly at

all.

[27 : 05] You need to repent. You need to turn away from this dreadful pagan idolatry, which is an offence to the true and living God who created the whole universe.

Turn, verse 15, from these vain things. That's the Old Testament word for idols. Turn from that and turn to the living God, the way of truth. But despite these words, verse 18 tells us that he could hardly get through to them at all.

But then, look at this extraordinary change from verse 18 to verse 19. Once again, the Jews pitched up and they joined with the pagans and together they took sides against the apostle and tried to stone him to death.

In the end, you have Jew and Gentile once again together united against God's true gospel witness. Genuine Christian ministry is despised by everyone.

Now, how do we explain that? You would think, would you not, that the Jews, at least in this instance, would side with the apostles against the pagans. The very central tenet of their whole faith was that there is one God and one God alone, the Lord.

[28 : 25] Why is it that they rather join the pagans in opposing God's message of grace in Jesus Christ? Well, the real answer is, of course, because at heart they also are idolaters, just like the pagans.

Because either you bow to the true gospel message of the grace of God alone for salvation through faith alone, or by definition, you are an idolater. You are worshipping a false god, you are seeking salvation somewhere else, from another source, from another saviour.

And at heart, all such idolatry, whatever its outward form, is just a manifestation of the primary sin that lies behind every other sin in the heart of human beings. And it's the idolatry of self-worship. You see, the gospel of true grace is an absolute challenge to all forms of self-worship. Because it dethrones our own self-rule.

It removes this sense of control that we want to have of our own lives. It demands that we bind on only to one authority, to the Lord Jesus Christ. It demands that we come to one place alone for salvation, only to Jesus.

[29 : 39] And that's why Jews and pagans alike could have common cause here. It was an unholy alliance of all idolaters against the scandal that is the gospel of the grace of God in Christ.

Now you see, some people worship themselves through moralistic religion. They want to be in control of their own salvation. They feel they want to be justified by their own merits, by their good works, by their worthiness, by their own morality.

Now they can be religious folk like that. The Jews, indeed, many of them were like that, very proud in their religious observance, very proud of their heritage, their pedigree and so on. But you needn't necessarily be outwardly religious to be like that.

There are plenty of people who say, well, I don't really believe there's a God at all, but if there is a God, he's bound to accept me because I'm a good person. I'm kind. I'm quite clear about what's right and wrong.

I live a moral and upright life. So I'll be alright. You see, the true Christian message that salvation is by grace alone and received only through faith in Christ, it's a scandal to somebody like that.

[30 : 56] Because it levels that person right down into the gutter, along with everybody else. Puts them right down with the lowest of the low, having to be saved by God's grace alone.

And that's an affront, they think. But you see, it's the truth. And it was a scandal, in particular in those days, to the religious Jew, just as it is a scandal to many a religious person today.

See, Jesus said to Nicodemus, who was a professor in the theological college of Israel, the teacher of all Israel, he said, you must be born again. Nicodemus thought, I don't need to be born again. I'm not a prostitute, I'm a professor of religion. And grace is very offensive to people who think like that.

But you see, other people's self-worship looks very, very different from that on the surface. They don't really care about mortality, although they might be quite interested in spirituality. Rather, like these pagans in Lystra, salvation for them wasn't really a matter of moral standards and self-righteousness, it was a matter of being free and being liberated, in their case, from the power of the gods to hold sway over their lives.

[32 : 11] And in some cultures it is that. So they offer to all the gods to appease them and to get enough favour so that you gain liberation, so that you have control over your own destiny, so that

bad luck and bad karma and things won't stalk you.

That's the way it was in Lystra. That's the way it is in many parts of the world today. In our Western culture it tends to be a bit different on the surface, but not in any substance.

We maybe don't use the language of salvation like that, but all around us we're finding people who are looking for the meaning of life. Somebody recently said to me they spent years searching for how to pass the exam of life.

People are searching for satisfaction, for self-discovery, for fulfillment in life. Go across the road into Borders Bookshop and you'll find dozens of books offering just that. Spiritualities, philosophies, meditation, different ways of life, health foods, yoga, organics, all kinds of things.

Seeking for salvation in these things. Fulfillment, meaning, although that word might not be used. More often than not in our common culture of sheer degradation these days, it just is plain hedonism.

[33 : 30] People seeking these things in sexual gratification or in drugs or in some other kind of pleasure seeking. Now these things are all just different forms of worshipping idols.

Different ways to be seeking salvation and meaning, liberation and control over your own life and your destiny. And it's seeking them in something or some person or some belief in this world. But those things are your idols. And if that's you, you're looking for them to be your saviors, but in fact the reality is they are your masters. Just as these pagan gods were the masters of the people in Lystra.

And the true Christian gospel, you see, is a scandal to somebody who thinks like that because it says to you, no, you're wrong. Your idol is a vain thing. It can't save you.

And all your devotion to it is just vain and worthless and absolute folly. Only the grace that is in Jesus Christ can really liberate you from what is in fact an enslavement to these things.

[34 : 39] The freedom you seek can only be found there. But that liberation, you see, comes at a price. It means that you need to give up those vain idols.

It means to give up the idea that you yourself can somehow control your destiny by controlling these gods and appeasing them. Forgetting the idea that you can make these things work for you just by dishing out plenty of spiritual experience and outward ceremonies.

You need to realize that that is all wrong. That is all just self-worship. That it's idolatry of the worst kind. And you need to turn, says Paul, away from that sin and repent before the living God, the one Lord who demands control of your life through Jesus Christ.

And you see, that was Paul's message to the people in Lystra, just as it's the gospel message to people today. And that is a huge assault on the human heart. The offensiveness, especially in a modern relativistic world like ours is, just as it was in ancient Greece.

The offense of a unique authority that demands that you bow the knee alone for his moral authority over your life. So you see, the pagan, the relativist, the hedonist who loves to think that they can be free and self-determining, and the religious person, the moral person who loves to think that they can be righteous and they can be worthy of God's favor, they're both passionately, when faced with it, are opposed to the gospel of free grace through the only Savior, Jesus Christ.

[36 : 27] Because the grace of God always will shatter every vain idol, whatever kind, and it will show it to be worthless and powerless, utterly helpless, in the face of a salvation that must come only from outside ourselves and only from one place, through Jesus Christ.

And our human pride hates that. And so genuine Christian ministry that preaches that message will always be despised everywhere and in every culture, from Jewish synagogues to Greek temples, to Buchanan Street in Glasgow today.

And the religious, therefore, of whatever hue, and the pagan will join forces to try and kill off the witness to the true gospel of Jesus Christ. And is that not just what we see in our culture today? We see it in so many ways. We saw it just recently in the controversy we've had in the Church of Scotland, where those within the professing church, in the religious body, opposed to the true gospel of Jesus Christ, where they had the unanimous support of all the secular media of the nation.

Isn't that so? Quite significant, don't you think, when the revisionist lobby within the visible church is getting explicit support from the website of somebody like Richard Dawkins? You'd think it might just give you a hint as to which side in the church God's truth was actually on.

[37 : 50] Genuine Christian ministry will always be despised everywhere, by all kinds of apparently very strange alliances, because whether you're relativistic and hedonistic, whether you're pagan secularists, or whether you're a moralistic, religious, traditional person, all of us at heart are full of a vain idolatry that hates the humbling message of the grace of God.

God's truth is, which assaults our self-righteousness by magnifying our sin and showing us how far short we are, and which destroys our illusion of self-determinism by showing us just how enslaved and helpless we are to find the freedom that we want.

Always despise, but notice, not defeated, verse 7, they continued to preach the gospel. In verse 21, they made many disciples.

The true gospel will always be despised, but never defeated. Finally and briefly then, the true gospel way, verses 21 to 28, reminds us clearly that the genuine Christian life will always be difficult, and difficult for everyone.

We're told that after preaching in Derby, Paul went back to all the places they'd previously evangelized, despite the obvious danger to their life. Why did they do that? Well, because genuine apostolic ministry is never a hit-and-run affair.

[39 : 22] It's not just about a commotion and an excitement and counting decisions and then talking endlessly about the victorious Christian life. No. They went back to teach the people.

Why? Verse 22. Because they knew they needed strengthening and encouragement to continue in the faith, to continue in the grace of God. Because they needed to persevere to the very end, just as Jesus said, if they're to be saved.

Why did they need this? Because the genuine Christian life is difficult. It's hard. Verse 22.

Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. And friends, if you're a new Christian, don't let anybody ever tell you any differently. Don't believe anybody who comes to you and says, look, we've got this great blessing which will free you from all the struggles of your Christian life and allow you to walk victoriously in the Spirit of God.

Don't listen to anybody who says that. Listen to what Paul says here. The true gospel way is hard, he says, for everyone. Yes, there's great joy.

[40 : 29] But there is also struggle right to the end. And that's the paradox of genuine Christianity. He received the word, says Paul to the Thessalonians, in much affliction, with joy in the Holy Spirit.

Always together. So notice the apostles' priorities in their mission. Not just to make converts, verse 21, but they made many disciples. And they left behind not just individuals, verse 23, but churches. Because you can't go it alone as a Christian. You need one another to be encouraged and strengthened if you're going to persevere to the end. And the church needs teaching.

That's why Paul appointed elders, presbyters in every church. In each of these cities, Derbe and Lystra and Iconium and so on, as Titus 1 and 5 also tells us. And the chief duty of these presbyters was to be teachers of the true gospel way so that the church would have the words of God expounded to them so that they might be encouraged and strengthened and persevere to the end. I hope you find that also a great encouragement. If you're finding the Christian life very hard and a struggle and full of tribulation, friends, that is not because your Christian life is a failure.

[41 : 49] It's a mark not of failure, says Paul, but of faith. The genuine Christian life is full of joy and also full of tribulation, both at the same time.

So don't despair if that's how you're feeling. But don't depart either, says Paul. Don't cut yourself off from the means of grace that God has given you to be kept in his grace because you need the church.

You need the fellowship of God's people and the ministry of God's word in the midst. And if you don't have that, you are in danger. And you won't continue in the faith. Believe me. So Paul risks life and limb to establish the means of grace in these churches.

But above all, and don't we need to know this also, as struggling Christians? Look at verse 23.

Above all, he commits them into the hands of the Lord himself.

God's grace surrounds these churches full of struggling believers. It was God's grace, says verse 26, that sent them out to give both their new families of faith, their churches all around Asia Minor, and to strengthen them.

[43 : 09] And it's God's grace, and to his grace, that Paul commends their future as he establishes them in the truth of the gospel. In other words, he's saying it's all God's doing.

And what confidence that must have given these apostles as they went back all the way to the praying church in Antioch, as verse 27 describes? What must that meeting have been like? Paul and Barnabas, perhaps shocking the believers as they came in and they saw the bruises and the marks on their bodies from the beating and the stonings.

And yet what joy as they heard tell of all that God had done through them, opening that wonderful door of faith to the Gentiles. We had just a little taste of that ourselves on Wednesday evening, as we heard from John Taylor, about just some of what God has been doing recently in that place in Japan where they've just finished and completed their ministry.

It was joyful. He didn't show us his scars, but there have been scars scars of plenty.

And there will be scars in every genuine apostolic mission. Because in genuine apostolic mission, the word is divisive.

[44 : 25] And the witness and the witnesses will be despised. And the way will be difficult always. As will be the experience of every single gospel servant of Christ, whether a missionary in the mission field abroad, whether in the ministry in this country, or every believer seeking to live out their own mission in the place where God has put them.

There will be scars. But you know, there are some scars, aren't there, that in the end you wouldn't want to exchange for anything ever. Because with them, and indeed through them, the doors of God's grace are being opened to the world.

And like the scars in the Lord Jesus himself that we sung about, the rich wounds yet visible above in beauty glorified, these are the scars through which the life of Jesus is being manifested in our mortal bodies.

To the praise of his grace. And to the making of many disciples throughout the world. There will be scars in genuine apostolic mission.

But there will also be joy. Great joy. Much joy in the Holy Spirit. So may God grant that we also, in so living and in so speaking, we also declare likewise all that God has done with us.

[46 : 00] Now he also, through us, has opened a door of faith in this city. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.