

God's Building Project

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[0 : 00] Well, let's turn now to our Bibles and to tonight's reading, and we are in the book of Acts, Acts chapter 14, and you'll find on page 923.

So we're continuing to follow Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey, having been sent out by the church in Antioch at the start of chapter 13, and we pick up the story, and we're going to read from verse 19 of chapter 14, just at the end of Paul's time in Lystra.

So Acts chapter 14, verse 19. 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.

But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city, and on the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe. When they had preached the gospel to that city, 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 Poseidon and came to Pamphylia.

[1 : 52] And when they had spoken the word Empirga, they went down to Atalia. 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. Amen. May God bless to us his word this evening. Well, please do have Acts chapter 14 open there, page number 923.

And we're going to be looking at verses 21 to the end of the chapter there, which we read a little earlier. Keep those maps to hand, too. Have those in standby. Let me begin with a question.

Are you clear on what God is doing in his world? Are you clear on what God is doing in his world? To be clear on that is to be clear on what we're to be about, not just as a church, but as individual Christians.

[3 : 16] It's a key question, isn't it? Because the answer will shape what we devote our lives to. If we're clear on what God is doing in the world, we're going to want to align ourselves with that, aren't we?

The worst possible thing we could do with the precious time we've been given on this earth is to waste it. And so we do need to know, don't we, what is truly important and what is worth investing in.

We need to be clear on that, don't we? And it's a good thing that we have God's word. The only living God has spoken to us, revealed himself to us, so that we can know what is true and real and worth investing in.

Luke, who wrote the book of Acts, he's compiled his two-volume work, his gospel and the book of Acts. He's done that. He tells us at the very beginning.

So that we can have clarity and certainty about what really matters. We can have clarity and certainty about what God is doing in his world.

[4 : 23] And so we'd better line ourselves up with that, mustn't we? If he's clearly set out what he's doing, then we need to line ourselves up with that.

And what God is doing, as we've seen working through the book of Acts, he is in the business of building his church. That is what God is doing.

He is building his church. Look at how Luke describes the gathering there in Antioch once Paul and Barnabas have returned from their trip. Look at verse 27. When Paul and Barnabas arrived, they gathered the church together and they declared all that God had done with them and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.

Notice they're clear, aren't they? This is God's work, what God had done. And this was the program. They're reporting the advance of the gospel to the Gentiles.

This was always the plan. Back in chapter 1, verse 8, Jesus told his disciples what was going to happen. He told them the plan. They were to be his witnesses, starting in Jerusalem and then spreading out and out to the ends of the earth, to the Gentiles, to all the nations.

[5 : 41] And Luke has shown us from that point on, through this account, that God is achieving his aim. The gospel advances. It's unstoppable.

We've seen that again and again, haven't we, as we've gone through the book. You get these little marker points all through the book as Luke pinpoints to us the progress that the gospel is making. The first one comes in chapter 6, verse 5. You get this little summary. It says, starting in Jerusalem, the word of God increased and the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem.

Time goes by. And chapter 9, verse 31, the church, we read throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up.

It multiplied. And then again, in chapter 12, verse 24, beginning to spread into Gentile territory, we read that the word of God increased and multiplied.

[6 : 39] Later on, chapter 16, verse 5, we see that Paul has completed his first missionary trip. And we read there that the churches were strengthened in the faith. They increased in numbers daily, we're told.

So at various points, Luke is careful to note the progress of the gospel. And the way he describes it is the word increases, the church is built up.

The word increases, the church is strengthened. That is what God is about. That is what he's doing, Luke is showing us. He is reaching the world. He's going to the nations through the gospel word being proclaimed and gospel churches being built up and established.

That is God's task. That is his building project. He is building churches and churches that will take the gospel to the very ends of the earth. That is what Luke is showing us in his book of Acts.

And we see here in this short passage, this little bit at the end of chapter 14, we see that the apostle Paul was crystal clear on what God was doing. And he committed himself to the real core of gospel mission work.

[7 : 55] And we see here that Paul's work was not only speaking the gospel, but also strengthening disciples and setting apart leaders. Paul was all about building churches for the long term.

Paul was clear, wasn't he, on what God was doing and what he had to do. And that work of building churches, that remains the task of God's people today.

That is how God is at work in his world. And so Luke would urge us, we ought to align ourselves with that, that task of building his church through the proclamation of his word, through the strengthening of disciples.

So we need to make sure, each of us, we need to make sure that we are clear on that, on what God is doing, and then committing ourselves to that great work.

Because only the fruit of that great work, only the fruit of what God is doing in this world will endure and last for all eternity. Isn't that right? Everything else will fade away.

[9 : 06] Only what God is building, his everlasting, enduring church, that is worth investing in. That is what God is doing. So let's look a bit more closely at these few verses then.

So verse 21, we see here that Paul's work was building churches. Paul's work was building churches.

Now verse 21 is a pretty extraordinary verse. It can perhaps wash over us. But just stop to consider the reality that this verse contains.

Yes, Paul is absolutely committed to proclaiming the gospel to the unconverted. We've seen that again and again, haven't we?

He goes to new places, proclaims the gospel to those who don't yet believe. That's what we've seen in the last few chapters. Paul breaks new ground. He goes to new places, sees great numbers, repenting and believing in the gospel.

[10:06] And he's shown great resilience doing that. Just look at the previous verse. Paul had to flee Lystra, having narrowly avoided death.

He was almost stoned to death. And he leaves there after that tough ministry in Lystra. Paul leaves there and he heads to a spa retreat to recuperate.

Is that what it says? No. He gets back on the road, heads to Derby and continues to preach the gospel. And wonderfully, people repent and believe the good news there in Derby.

Now here comes the extraordinary bit. They return to the places they've just been. Look at the end of verse 21. They go back. Paul goes back.

He goes back to Lystra, the place where he was almost stoned to death. He goes back to Iconium and Antioch. The very places we just read about in the previous chapter.

[11:02] Places where he'd been driven out from. He knew his life was in danger. He had to flee. The very places from which very determined Jewish opponents had followed him to Lystra and whipped up a crowd to try and kill him.

He goes back. Isn't that extraordinary? You can almost read that and just say, of course he did. But then you remember what he went through in those places. Why on earth would Paul go back? Well, Paul is clear, isn't he? He has understood the task the Lord Jesus had called him to. And the task was not hit and run evangelism.

He knew that there was more to it. He didn't just visit a place once and never return. No. Just look at the way that he articulates it a bit later on in chapter 15.

Just flick over the page to chapter 15, verse 36. So this is Paul and Barnabas there with the church in Antioch in Syria.

[12:12] So there's two Antiochs in this bit. Don't get confused. Antioch in Syria, that's ascending church. And there's Antioch Poseidon, which is the one he went to. So back in Antioch, Syria, you read this in verse 36.

After some days, Paul said to Barnabas, let us return and visit the brothers in every place, in every city where we proclaim the word of the Lord and see how they are.

Look on to verse 41. And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches. So Paul's concern, he wants them to go back, see how they are, strengthen them.

That was Paul's concern, to strengthen the churches, to revisit the places he's been, to see again those who had come to living faith. He went to strengthen the believers, to strengthen the churches. And he was willing to do whatever it took. He was willing to go back, to return to those places, to Lystra, Iconium, Antioch.

[13:21] And notice in particular the two things that Paul's willing and prepared to do here. First, he was willing to face great danger. Paul's willing to go back to places, to cities, where only recently he had faced great danger.

We've seen even threats to his life. And these weren't just threats in name only. As we've seen, he's been stoned in Lystra, left for dead. They thought he had died.

But he was prepared to go back. He was prepared to head into real danger for the sake of the gospel, for the sake of the young believers there in those cities. Now, we might think that that was reckless, foolish.

But Paul was clear on the bigger picture. He was prepared to do what it took in order to strengthen the church. He was confident, wasn't he, in the sovereignty of God, knowing that he was immortal until his work was done, and the Lord called him home.

And Christians today must be prepared to face danger for the sake of the gospel. In recent months, we've heard from this platform about the very real and daily dangers believers face in North India and in Pakistan.

[14:49] Imran was here just a few weeks ago. He travels around Pakistan, visiting new believers, strengthening them, encouraging them, knowing that real danger may rear its head.

The churches there in Pakistan, they have to have armed guards on the front door, armed to the teeth, because there are real dangers, real threats.

Paul's willing to face great danger. And that is often the reality for Christian believers, as they seek to not only proclaim Christ, but also strengthen and encourage the church.

Are you willing and prepared to face great danger? It's just what the Lord Jesus called us to. He never promises any of us an easy ride in the Christian life.

He says, till the end there will be trouble. So Paul was so clear on what the Lord was doing, so committed to what the Lord was doing, he was willing to face great danger.

[15:54] And it wasn't foolish. It wasn't reckless. He was clear. So he was willing to face great danger, but also he was willing to travel great distances.

Time for the map. This is where GCSE geography comes into its own, or higher geography, or standard grades here. Whatever it was, geography at school was not wasted.

Now, I do love a good map, and you can't study Paul's missionary journeys without consulting a map. So you've got your maps there. So just trace with me Paul's journey, beginning in chapter 13. They set sail from Antioch. Hopefully, you've got the little thing in the box, starting point. So there we are in Syria. So Paul heads from Syria, and they set sail from the coast there in Seleucia, and they go to Cyprus.

And they spend some time there, and they go to Paphos. Remember, they have the issue there with the Jewish false prophet in Paphos. And then from there, they sail to what we would now call southern Turkey, landing at Perga.

[17:01] And then they travel inland to Antioch, and from there to Iconium, and from there to Lystra. That was where Paul, we've just seen, was almost stoned to death.

And then finally, to Derbe. Now, the obvious route back home to Antioch and Syria is by the mainland, going, you see those little dots on the map?

Those are main roads. The obvious thing to do would be to travel by those main roads, travel 200 miles back to Antioch, overland. He could even swing by mum and dad and toss us on the way home, couldn't he?

But he doesn't do that. Instead, he travels a great distance, going back through all the places he already visited. Notice verse 21.

He goes all the way back. And then verse 23, he continues his journey back to Perga, and then sails from Attalia back to Antioch. Talk about taking the scenic route.

[18:02] So instead of traveling 200 miles, Paul opts for the 700-mile route. Not only that, but we've seen great danger as he goes this great distance.

And Paul was willing to do that for the sake of strengthening the churches in all those places he already visited. He was prepared to take that huge detour in order to strengthen the church.

And that is, I'm sure, a great challenge to you as well as to me. When you think about all that's involved, he could have a week-long journey by land, back home, or take the 700-mile week-long, very, very dangerous journey, and he opts for the latter.

And so as we, as each of us, thinks about our role in Christ's church today, we are to be prepared, as Paul was, to endure great danger, to travel great distances in order to strengthen the church, to encourage the church.

The Christian life is hard work. It involves great sacrifice as we partner together, as we side, side by side, for the sake of the gospel. There are no passengers in the Christian church.

[19:24] We all have a role to play in the building of the church and encouraging other believers. All of us have a role. It's not something for the minister alone or for the staff team or the elders or the small group leaders.

No, all of us, we all have a role. Even as we sit here this evening, we have a duty to help one another to grow, to be encouraged.

We have to take our role in encouraging others seriously. Be prepared sometimes to go great distances. Be prepared to go even short distances.

When Wednesday afternoon rolls around, you've had a busy afternoon, the kids are about your feet, you eventually wrestle them into bed, will you travel a short distance and get to the prayer meeting so that you can encourage and strengthen others who are there?

Your very presence will be a great encouragement, let alone your prayers. Few things encourage me more than walking to the prayer meeting on Wednesday night and struggling to find a seat because there's so many other people there.

[20:37] And if you're not regularly there, if you're not there Wednesday by Wednesday, putting work or unavoidable family commitments aside, then you are missing out.

I have to tell you. Both in terms of the encouragement that you can receive, but more importantly, the encouragement you can give. It's a great place to go to give great encouragement to others.

Now, there's more to say on that later about how we encourage one another in the Christian life. But we do need to see here, don't we, the great cost that Paul was willing to pay. Danger and distance were hurdles that he was prepared to overcome. Well, let's look on then to the next couple of verses where we see what it was that Paul did when he returned to those places. He went to great efforts to go back and visit these places. What did he do when he was there? Well, verse 22, Paul's church building work meant building up the disciples. [21 : 42] Paul's church building work meant building up the disciples. Three things in verse 22. So firstly, Paul strengthens the souls of the disciples. It's the first thing.

Paul strengthens the souls. Now remember, these are young converts that Paul is visiting. Not probably more than a few months since Paul was last there. Young converts. And Paul is visiting and he knows that they would no doubt need strengthening. Christians constantly need strengthening. I doubt there's anyone in this room who doesn't need strengthening in the Christian walk from time to time. Probably most of us, most of the time, need strengthening. And notice the very personal, grounded, down-to-earth nature of this. He strengthens the souls of the disciples. That is, he strengthens the individual believers in terms of their inner lives, their very souls. This wasn't some sort of trite, superficial work. [22 : 44] This was no slap on the back and get on with it sort of thing. No, time was spent speaking with real people, strengthening them, helping them to remain upright, to keep standing in the Christian life.

And this must be a necessary part of mission, of establishing churches, of building healthy churches, to strengthen the souls of disciples. This is a necessity in any work of evangelism. It's not just hit and run. It involves strengthening the souls. The need is not only that a decision of faith is come to you, but also to maintain it, to continue in the faith, in the face of every possible discouragement and opposition that might come to assail them. It's not only the decision, it's also to maintain them in their Christian walk in life. And that is a responsibility that each of us have to one another. That task of encouragement and strengthening. Just think about the person that sat next to you here this evening. Just think, what areas of their life might they need strengthening in the Christian life? [24 : 01] Are they recently bereaved? Have they endured some other loss or disappointment? Are they struggling in their studies or their work?

Are things difficult with family? How might you ask after them? How might you strengthen them tonight? Could you pick up something that's been said in one of the services today? Get into a good chat. That's why we developed these cards. You maybe saw these at the membership service recently. It's got the vowels on the front. And on the back, it's got a series of questions.

And they're designed so that we can help one another. So that we can help one another live as faithful followers of Christ. So questions like, how are you getting on with your small group? What's encouraging you or discouraging you in terms of your witness with your friends and family? Just little questions to get you going, to get you talking about something of substance. ways that you can encourage each other.

[25 : 12] Now talking about things like this, it doesn't come all that naturally, does it? If you're anything like me, you've got to really step out of your comfort zone to ask a question like that. But what a benefit it is to one another if we do that.

If we do that more and more. If we just ask someone, how are you doing with this situation or that? What's troubling you at the moment? What's troubling you at the moment? So I'd encourage you, take a deep breath after the service and dive in.

How might you encourage and strengthen the soul of your brother or sister sat next to you tonight? Ask that question. Well, that's the first thing that Paul does as he goes to visit these places, strengthening the souls of one another.

Secondly, see, also verse, I'm in the wrong chapter here, where am I? So also verse 22, the second thing he does, strengthening the souls of the disciples, but also encouraging them to continue in the faith.

He encourages them, secondly, to continue in the faith. So he encourages them not only to keep going, he says don't turn back.

[26 : 29] Keep going. We've seen in every place, in every place that the gospel goes, we see that there is division. Some hear the good news, they repent, they believe.

Others harden themselves. They oppose, sometimes fiercely, the gospel message and in particular the gospel messengers. We've seen that in all these places that Paul's been.

there is division. But that division, it wouldn't somehow magically dissipate the moment that Paul walked out of town. Those who professed faith still lived in Lystra and Iconium and Antioch.

They still had to rub shoulders with those who had rejected the gospel. They still had to do business with them. Real pressure would have been felt, I'm sure, by those new Christians to turn back to their old ways.

To go back to the synagogue. To go back to their pagan idolatry. Great pressure, don't you think, from those around them to turn back. Great pressure to give up.

[27 : 41] Hence the need for Paul to go and encourage them to continue in the faith. Keep going. And that is a necessary part of mission work, isn't it?

It remains so today. The Christian life is not a short sprint. It's a marathon. It's an endurance race. Now it is full of great joys.

There's no greater privileges there than to serve the living God. It's a great joy, but there are tough times. There are great temptations to give up, aren't there? Temptations that lure us away because they seem to offer more.

A relationship, perhaps. A more exciting commitment that trumps church or small group. A small decision here or there and a trajectory is set.

No, Paul would say, don't do that. Don't turn away. Continue in the faith. Temptations that push us away because the Christian life seems too hard.

[28 : 47] The costiness of standing for Christ in a post-Christian society. The costiness of holding to the Bible's teaching on a whole range of issues.

Sexuality, gender, abortion, euthanasia, you name it. Great pressure to turn away, to turn back. No, Paul would urge you, continue in the faith.

Don't turn away. Continue. Continue. So how can you help others tonight to continue in the faith? What is it that people are feeding the push on?

Where are the dangers for folk to turn away? Continue in the faith. That's the second thing that Paul does. He knows their temptations to turn away.

He says, continue. And then thirdly, Paul teaches them, see, end of verse 22, he teaches them that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.

[29 : 48] So as Paul went round, as he went back to all these places, he's encouraging them, strengthening them, urging them to keep going, but he's also clear, isn't he, on the reality of Christian life.

There's no glossing over reality here. There's no pretending the Christian life is otherwise. Paul's clear, you must be prepared to endure hardship, tribulations, persecution.

Now don't you think those words, as Paul talks about this, those words would have come with quite some force, don't you think? The sight of Paul there in their midst on his return to them, no doubt, battle scarred, marked by the sufferings for the gospel.

Stoning is a brutal thing. The bruises was probably still there. And people just seeing that, Paul there, speaking these words, that would have proved a huge inspiration to these new disciples.

Added weight, don't you think, to his exhortation that they must continue through tribulation. To see someone passing through tribulation triumphantly is the best incentive to bearing itself.

[31 : 05] to see somebody who's been through it. That is a great incentive, isn't it? To bear it oneself in the same way. It's so very humbling to hear about the suffering endured by persecuted Christians around the globe.

But it also gives us great courage, doesn't it? To see them stand, to see them endure. wouldn't that have given them great courage, seeing Paul in their midst, saying to them, keep going, endure tribulation.

Isaac Shaw was here a couple of months ago, and he was sharing that in India, every week, ten churches are burnt down. Two Christians are killed every week.

but he also reminded us that our God is sovereign and that suffering has led to church growth. And he asked us to pray that believers in India would remain faithful in the face of suffering because if things get worse for the church, he said, it will get better for the gospel.

And he asked us to pray in that way because he knows that the Christian life is cross-shaped. He knows what Paul is talking about here.

[32 : 27] He knows that because he knows his Bible, but also because he's lived it. Isaac's seen it over and over again there in North India. He knows it. He's seen it.

He's lived it. Now, suffering doesn't always look like that. But there is always a cost.

Now, we need to be clear about that here in Glasgow. Clear on the cost of following Christ. To pretend otherwise is simply anathema to Paul's gospel.

So don't get sucked in by those who say otherwise. Don't listen to those who promise life and health and wealth now for the Christian.

I don't imagine Creflo Dollar flying in on one of his private jets would get much of a hearing from the Christians in Rancho or Delhi. Do you?

[33 : 26] Do you think they'd listen for one second to Creflo Dollar? No way! Yes, one day, unimagined life and prosperity, one day in the new creation, when Christ returns, you will enjoy all good things in a restored world, but not until then.

Not yet. In this world, what does Jesus promise? He promises hardship and suffering.

In this world, says Jesus in John 16, in this world, you will have tribulation. And that is just what Paul said to these churches. End of verse 22, through many tribulations, we must enter the kingdom of God.

So, what does Paul do as he returns to these cities, as he visits these young Christians there?

Well, he strengthens, he encourages, he teaches that tribulations must be endured. Paul's church building work, that's what he was about.

[34 : 35] That church building work means, verse 22, building up disciples, building up real people. That, as well as speaking the gospel, is part of building healthy churches.

That is part of real mission work, both then and today. But there's one other thing that Paul does. We see that in verse 23, just as we finish.

Paul's building work, his church building work, meant setting apart leaders. Verse 23, Paul and Barnab appoint elders in every church. Paul is making provision for the future growth and stability of the church.

See, these churches, they couldn't be dependent on Paul for their week-to-week teaching and oversight and leadership, could they? Paul couldn't pastor every one of these churches. And so Paul sets aside particular elders for that task, knowing that the church would need constant teaching, constant encouragement, strengthening, because the Christian life is one of tribulation. Paul knew they needed to set apart elders in order to keep that church going. That is what's required for the church to be built.

[35 : 54] Churches need, Christians need, healthy churches to keep going. Don't you need that week by week? The Christian life is not a solitary one.

That is why Paul does what he does here. That is why he puts in place structures so that churches in those cities can begin to grow. He puts in place elders, teachers, so that as they are gathered together, they are encouraged to continue in the faith together.

It's no good starting out well and then fading away. Paul knew he needed to put in place long term plans, which is why he sets apart leaders.

So the task of Paul, the task of the church today, it is a long term task. Paul knew that. That is why he does what he does here.

This is why he returns to all these cities, spends time there. Paul was in the business of establishing communities of believers, of establishing churches which would endure for the long haul.

[37 : 05] This was no quick one stop show. He went back, he strengthened the believers years. Because this was God's program for the explosion of the gospel across the world.

This was God's church building project. This is how the gospel goes out and out and out through the book of Acts. Just read it later. Trace it through. The word goes out, churches are created and grow.

The word goes out, churches are growing. That is what God is doing and continues to do in his world. So let's all of us align ourselves with God's building project, his church building project.

Let each of us take up our responsibilities to strengthen one another, to encourage one another, to help each other persevere so that the church will grow and grow and grow to the ends of the earth.

His church is going to grow. Nothing will stop it. That's what we've seen over and over again in the book of Acts. Nothing will stop this growth.

[38 : 21] Think of the millions around the world today professing faith. Unstoppable growth. growth. That is what God is doing.

But what a waste it would be, an eternal waste, if you missed out on that, if you gave your life to something else. So don't, don't waste your life.

Throw yourself into God's building project, because only that will last for eternity. And that is what we see here in this last section of Acts 14.

Paul was clear on what God was doing, so let's us be clear to you. Well, let's pray, and then we'll close with our final hymn. Let's pray.

Our Father God, we do thank you that we belong to something that will never spoil or fade.

[39 : 34] We belong to your everlasting kingdom, your eternal church. And so please would you help us to see with great clarity what it is that you are doing in your world.

And would you help us, each one of us, to commit ourselves with the particular skills and characters you have given each one of us, help us to play our part as part of that living body, of that growing church.

So please help us to be clear, help us to commit ourselves to what will truly last, for we ask it, in Jesus' name, Amen.