

Completing the Mission

Acts 14:21-28

Halifax: 23 September 2012

Introduction:

Today in our study in Acts we come to the conclusion of Paul and Barnabas's first missionary journey.

- A number of weeks ago, we saw that they began well when they were sent out by the church at Antioch of Syria with prayer and fasting.
- And today we shall see that they finished well, faithfully completing the mission that the Lord had given to them.

In this, they are an example to the modern church.

- There are many in our day who go out with the gospel, but who do not finish the work.
 - They get professions of faith, but they do not strengthen those who have professed faith that they might continue in the faith...
 - And even if they do a bit of that, they sometimes don't go on to the next step to see that converts are established in faithful churches with faithful elders...
 - And even if they do that, there are those who do not report back to the sending church with a view to strengthening them and to giving God the glory.
 - Missionaries who fail to do these things do not finish well.
- But Paul and Barnabas did finish well!
 - It will do us much good to see what they did so that we might follow their example in our mission work.
 - It is also helpful because it shows us what we need as those who are converted to Christ lest we be content with a bare profession of faith.
- We will look at what must be done to complete the mission under three headings.
 - But before I begin, I want to make a clarification...
 - And that is what I am saying here ought to be what missionaries aim for.
 - It is often the case that faithful missionaries are not able to complete the mission, even in their whole life time,
 - but that does not make them unfaithful...
 - Think, for example, of missionaries who went to places that were hardened and laboured their whole life without seeing a single convert.
 - They certainly did not complete the mission, but they may very well have completed the work that God gave them to do.

- Now it will be the task of others to come in after them and reap the harvest, and then, perhaps, another to come and establish churches.
 - The point is that overall intent should be to bring the work to completion and labour should be oriented in that direction.
- Let's begin with the first principle...

I. To complete their mission, missionaries should strengthen the converts

A. You can see that this was done by Paul and Barnabas in Acts 14:21-22:

- **Acts 14:21-22: And when they had preached the gospel to that city and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God."**

1. It is quite evident that they considered this follow-up work to be *very* important!
 - a. This is evident because they take the trouble to go back to the cities where they had ministered.
 - It was not necessary for them to go that way to get back to Antioch of Syria.
 - After having crossed the mountains to reach Pisidian Antioch,
 - they had been travelling mostly east across southern Galatia.
 - It would have been much easier for them to return to Syrian Antioch by going through Paul's home town of Tarsus.
 - The roads were easier and safer and there was far less danger from bandits—and the distance would have been shorter.
 - It was very deliberate on their part to return to the places where they had ministered.
 - b. But that they went back to these cities is even more striking when you consider how they had been treated when they were there!
 - 1) At Lystra, Paul had been stoned and left for dead.
 - And that was because he had made enemies at the other two cities—at Antioch and Iconium.
 - Angry Jews who hated the gospel had come in pursuit of him,
 - being so eager to stone him, and that they had done it!
 - 2) Anyone would understand if they had excused themselves from going back—and said,
 - “We wish we could, but it is just too dangerous—and besides, we are exhausted.”
 - 3) But they considered it so important to follow up these new converts that they ignore all the dangers and difficulties and go back anyway!

TRANS> Why did they consider it so important to go back?

- You can see why, can't you?

2. They knew it was important because new converts (and old ones for that matter) are subject to many difficulties or tribulations.
 - These new believers had not yet been rooted and grounded in the faith.
 - They were like young plants that needed to be supported as they faced many things that might unsettle them and even uproot them.
 - a. The Lord does not lie to us about this.
 - 1) Jesus frequently told would be followers that if they wanted to follow Him, they would have deny themselves and take up their cross.
 - 2) He told His disciples that they would be hated by all men for His sake.
 - b. There are many examples of those who draw back given in scripture to warn us.
 - 1) In the Old Testament, there is the example of all Israel when they refused to go into the Promised Land the first time...
 - And there is the example of them not finishing the job that we read about in Judges 1.
 - They felt they had done enough and did not want the trouble of driving out the Philistines who had iron chariots or some of the Amorites who were the most stubborn.
 - 2) And in the New Testament, John speaks of many who had “gone out from us because they were never really of us” in his first epistle...
 - And in Timothy there are false teachers that have come into the church of Ephesus to draw away disciples after them.
 - c. The pressure can be very great...
 - The word *tribulations* in verse 22 means just that—to be pressed from all sides.
 - 1) You have temptations of the flesh—perhaps the thirst for drugs or porn or alcohol...
 - Maybe a temptation to nurse old resentments or to flare up in anger and cursing...
 - Or maybe it is just the flesh pressing you to be lazy.
 - This can be in everyday life...
 - Children, you can find it hard to do your schoolwork and your chores...
 - Mothers, you can find it hard to stay at your task around the home...
 - Men, you can sluff off in leading family worship
 - Disciples can neglect their work or church when it is more comfortable to stay at home.

TRANS> Our own flesh is one of our greatest enemies.

- 2) Then there are the temptations from your own family and friends...
 - Maybe your parents ridicule you for following Christ and try to prevent you...
 - maybe they try to pressure you to compromise in your morals or to neglect worship.
 - Or maybe your friends laugh at you and act like you are a simpleton for believing the Bible...
 - putting pressure on you to deny it.
- 3) And then there were those pressures from authorities...
 - Maybe your boss wants you to lie for him and you risk losing your job...
 - And there are false teachers who come as authorities and try to lead you into error.
 - Many believers have to face threats from the civil magistrate—
 - a doctor who refuses to perform an abortion...
 - or a government that threatens to imprison anyone who has a Bible or attends Christian worship.

TRANS> The pressure can be very great!

- Paul and Barnabas knew for certain that the pressure would be great for the new believers in Lystra, Iconium and Pisidian Antioch...
 - There was such hostility in every city.
 - And that is why they went back despite all the difficulties that were associated with returning.
 - And look at what they do!
- B. They go to all these cities, strengthening the souls of these new disciples...
- May your soul also be strengthened as you hear their words of strengthening...
1. First, you see that it says that they exhorted them to continue in the faith!
 - a. The word *exhort* is that word we have run into before—*parakaleo*...
 - Do you remember it?
 - It speaks of coming along side of someone to give them whatever they need—
 - whether it be warning, admonition, rebuke, comfort, encouragement, even a bit of pleading and begging—
 - It is help that is sensitive to the need.
 - b. And you see what the exhortation was—that they continue in the faith.
 - That they continue despite all the opposition.
 - You can be sure that they told them how excellent the Lord Jesus is!
 - How that it is a very great mistake to ever turn from Him!

- Here is the One that loves you so much that He gave Himself on the cross to atone for your sin!
 - Here is the One in whom you have eternal life and acceptance with the Father.
 - Where else can you go?
 - What else is there?
 - What could be better than to be loved by Him?
 - In Him, you have justification, sanctification, adoption, the hope of glory that you will see Him and be like Him.
 - Do not be so foolish as to draw back from such blessing.
 - How foolish we are to trade in glory for a little comfort, a little sin, whatever it is...
2. But you see that Paul and Barnabas fully admit that it will not be easy...
- a. As I mentioned, the Lord never hides this reality from His people.
- And neither do his faithful missionaries...
 - They say,
 - **v. 22: “We must, through many tribulations, enter the kingdom of heaven.”**

TRANS> What an encouragement!

- b. With these words, they point out that tribulations will not harm them.
- They are rather the pathway into the kingdom of heaven!
 - We may feel that we are being torn to pieces by them, but we are not—we are on the way to glory.
 - We must not think that something has gone wrong—it is God’s will that we suffer.
 - And besides,
 - The tribulations and the pressures, however great they may be, are nothing compared to the glory to which they lead!
 - Be assured that it will all be worth it in the end.
 - Be assured that Jesus has faced them before us and that He is there to sympathise with us as a great high priest...
 - Be assured that in all our affliction He is afflicted...
 - And that through your sufferings, your relationship with Him will only grow sweeter and deeper...
 - And be assured that as you look to Him, He will give you the grace you need to endure—He always does!
- c. So keep on going!
- Keep on running the race!

- Don't slack off as you may be tempted to do when you are in the pressure cooker!
 - Do not draw back, but press on to the end.
 - Do not even make those little changes and compromises that only serve to dry up your relationship with the Lord.
 - Be fervent and press on in the battle no matter how hard it gets.
 - Hold your sword and keep fighting until your hand is stuck to the your sword—the way Eleazar of Dodo did—
3. You can imagine with what force these exhortations must have come to these new believers!
- Here were these men that were risking their lives to deliver this message!
 - They were living examples of what they were saying.
 - There was no doubt that even if they were wrong, they fully believed what they were saying!
 - This is one of the beauties of suffering for Christ as a minister...
 - It gives you the advantage of showing everyone how much you love Christ because you don't give up when it is hard.
 - Yes, brothers and sisters, following Christ in times of tribulation enables you to glorify Him in ways that you would not be able to if you had it easy.
 - So let the message of Paul and Barnabas come to you with its full force...
 - They still speak today when we hear the exhortation to continue in the faith through many tribulations at the very time when they were being pressed from every side!

TRANS> How faithfully these missionaries strengthened the new converts that they had made!

- No mission work is complete without such strengthening!
 - Indeed, provision must be made for continued ministry to the converts...
 - And that brings us to our second main heading...

II. To complete their mission, missionaries should establish new converts in faithful churches.

- A. The church was instituted by Christ for the ongoing encouragement of His people.
1. A lot of people back in the 60s and 70s began to shy away from the institutional church.
 - This trend has continued in our day.
 - Many believers are content to be Christians at large without aligning themselves with any particular church.

- Some wander about from one church to another, and others align themselves with various para-church ministries.
 - They are quite happy to come and go as they please.
 - And sadly, there are many Christian leaders that do not discourage this kind of loose affiliation...
 - Oversight is hard work and it is never pleasant when you have to exercise church discipline...
 - so many are content to leave everything open and loose.
 - To add to the difficulty, there are many who have been hurt by apostate churches or abusive leadership in churches,
 - and these memories make them very reluctant to commit anywhere.
2. It would be just fine to reject the institutional church if it were not for one simple fact—
- Abandoning the church is not an option because Christ instituted it!
 - He is the one who said, “I will build my church,”
 - and He described it as an institution that would have elders that would remove erring members and receive those who make a credible profession.
 - Organised churches are found everywhere in the New Testament.
 - Most of the epistles are written such churches—the church at Ephesus or the church at Corinth...
 - And if not to churches, they are written to leaders who are overseers in the church.
 - Converts are instructed not to forsake the assembly and the members are told to obey those who have the rule over them in the Lord...
 - Instructions are given about the kind of men that are to be chosen as elders and deacons...
 - In Psalm 22, Jesus declares that He will call His church together to praise God for receiving His sacrifice on the cross.
 - And this is repeated in Hebrews 2.
 - We are those who are called out by Him into the assembly.
 - The very word *church* (ekklesia) means the assembly of called out ones...
 - It speaks of an organised assembly with members who are accountable to elders who are appointed to be their overseers.
3. Jesus has appointed the church for our mutual encouragement, accountability, prayer, praise, fellowship, and for the ministry of word and sacrament.
- Right from the beginning, we are told that the new believers were baptised and added to the church...

- and that they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread and in prayers.
 - This was not just a voluntary institution—
 - They were called out into this assembly by the Lord Himself when they became His disciples.
 - It is not an option for a disciple.
 - That is why we do not allow those who are not members in good standing of a church that confesses Jesus to partake with us at the Lord's Table.
 - And that is why in our mission work, our aim is to plant churches.
 - That is Christ's plan for kingdom expansion and it is not for us to come up with a different plan.
- B. You can see here in Acts 14 how Paul and Barnabas, in returning to the cities where they had ministered, organised churches with leadership in every city.
1. That they did this is clearly stated in verse 23:
 - **Acts 14:23: So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.**
 - Their mission would not have been complete if they had not established churches with their own elders.
 - When Paul writes to Titus at Crete, he makes it clear that the work is not complete until elders are established in every church...
 - In Titus 1:5, he says:
 - **Titus 1:5: For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you—**
 - This makes it clear that appointing elders was not looked at as an experiment—something to try and see how it worked...
 - It was considered essential to the work of missions.
 - This means that our goal in evangelism and missions ought to be more than seeing men converted.
 - They are to be made disciples who learn to observe all that Jesus has commanded...
 - And that learning is to occur through the ministry of the church.
 - They are to be brought under the oversight of elders in an organised congregation.
 - Whenever someone tells me of their evangelism, and that someone has professed faith,
 - I always want to find out if that new convert has joined a church.
 - If they have not, the job is not yet done.

- If there is no sound church, then efforts need to be made to establish one.
 - Of course it is not always possible to do this—
 - but it ought to be what we aim for.
2. Now I want you to consider what Paul and Barnabas did to establish these churches—how did they go about it?
- a. Well we have seen that they appointed elders in every church.
- The word **appointed** means *to vote by stretching out the hand—to choose by vote*.
 - This indicates that as with the deacons in Acts 6, the congregation choose their own elders who were then ordained by the laying on of hands by those who were already ordained.
 - The laying on of hands is not mentioned here, but it is mentioned on many occasions in which men are set apart to ministry.
 - For example, it was done in Acts 13:3 by the Presbytery at Antioch when they sent Paul and Barnabas out.
 - We can only assume that the same pattern would be followed here.
 - This is confirmed by the fact that Paul treats the laying on of hands as the ordinary procedure when he writes to Timothy about appointing qualified men to serve as elders and deacons.
 - In 1 Tim 5:22, he says:
 - **1 Tim 5:22: Do not lay hands on anyone hastily.**
 - He takes it as a given that hands will be laid on men to ordain them to office...
 - He treats it as the standard, expected practice.
 - His instruction is not that it ought to be done, but assuming that it will be done, that be done with great care.

TRANS> And that actually leads us to our next point about appointing elders that we learn from Paul and Barnabas...

- b. They exercise great care in appointing elders—and so should we!
- 1) This carefulness is indicated by the fact that they appointed them with prayer and fasting.
- Fasting was added, not as a meritorious work, but as an aid to fervent prayer.
 - Our prayers are often cold and lacking in zeal, and fasting helps us to focus more.
 - From what we know in church history, most of the disciples in the early church fasted regularly,

- but it certainly seems to be something they did when they were ordaining officers because the work was so important.
 - We ought to follow their example.
- The men being chosen were entrusted with the heavy task of shepherding the Lord's people!
 - They were in a position of influence from which they could do much good or much harm!
 - Jesus had very strong words about unfaithful shepherds, but very rich promises for those who were honest and diligent shepherds.
- 2) In the Pastoral Epistles, instructions are given about what qualities to look for in the elders.
- This emphasises the point that it is not something that is to be taken lightly.
 - You can be sure that Paul and Barnabas took their time to examine the men and provide them with necessary training so that they would be well grounded.
 - It would have been very helpful that many of the new converts in these cities were either faithful Jews or God-fearing Gentiles.
 - Some of them were men that were already regenerate and who had immediately embraced the Messiah when He was declared to them.
 - Many of them were likely already elders in the churches of the Jews under the Old Covenant who now became elders under the New Covenant.
 - This made Paul and Barnabas's task easier, but it was still done with great care to be sure.
 - The health of the church depends on good leadership.
 - You all know that many churches have been led into apostasy because they put unworthy men in leadership.
- 3) Candidates must be carefully examined by the elders who are laying hands on them lest they become partakers in their sins.
- The rest of 1 Tim 5:22 says:
 - **1 Tim 5:22: "Do not lay hands on anyone hastily, nor share in other people's sins; keep yourself pure."**
 - Presbyteries are responsible if they do not use due diligence in this work.
 - It is a work that is to be undertaken with prayer and fasting.

TRANS> But was the prayer and fasting for the selection of the men, or for the men after they had been selected?

- I am quite sure that they earnestly prayed for both.
 - The men brought into office would need God's help and that is to be obtained by fervent prayer.
 - And that brings us to the third thing that Paul and Barnabas did in establishing churches...

c. v. 23: "They commended them to the Lord in whom they believed."

- 1) This means that they placed them before Him—for His protection and care!
 - They recognised that unless the Lord builds the house (or the church) they labour in vain that build it...
 - And that unless the Lord keeps the city (or the congregation) the watchman stays awake in vain.
 - They essentially said,
 - "Lord, this is your church, these are your people, these officers are your ministers, and you are their shepherd..."
 - Keep them or they will not be kept!"
- 2) Sadly, for many, this is seen as just a little formality that is tacked on at the end of the service when a church is established.
 - That is because we often operate in our own strength.
 - But not Paul and Barnabas—
 - They truly did turn these congregations over to the Lord that He might keep them.
 - We need to learn to take such things seriously.
 - It is an essential part of the work of organising churches which is an essential part of completing the mission.
- 3) And of course the prayers for the churches and their leadership should not end once the congregation is organised.
 - We were commended to the Lord when we organised,
 - and that ought to stir us to keep on looking to Him now for His grace and help.
 - We are before Him and if we do not have His aid, we will land in destruction as so many churches have done.

TRANS> So now we have seen two things that are essential for completing the mission...

- Strengthening the New Converts
- And establishing them in faithful churches

- And now we come to our third main point...

III. To complete the mission, missionaries must return to those that sent them to report what God has done for His glory.

A. You see how they do return to Antioch of Syria.

- In verse 26 it says:
 - **Acts 14:26: From there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work which they had completed.**
- 1. This is the church, you will remember, that sent them out on this mission in the first place.
 - They had done their commending of elders to God—
 - They had commended Paul and Barnabas to the Lord for the mission to which they had been called.
 - We saw that back at the beginning of chapter 13...
 - The church at Antioch had become a whole presbytery with multiple churches and some very noteworthy leaders...
 - And the elders and perhaps others were meeting together and the Lord instructed them to send out Paul and Barnabas to minister to the Gentiles.
 - With prayer and fasting, the church did send them, thereby commending them to the Lord.
- 2. You can be sure that this church continued to pray for Paul and Barnabas and whoever else had gone with them.
 - They were very eager for this work and wanted to see it prosper.
 - They were the sending church.

B. Now see what Paul and Barnabas do when they return to those who sent them.

- Verse 27 says:
 - **Acts 14:27: They gathered the church together and reported all that God had done with them.**
- 1. That they gathered them together indicates what I mentioned before—that there were many churches at Antioch.
 - If there had been only a single congregation, there would have been no need for a special meeting...
 - but as it were, they probably did as Israel did when they were in the wilderness and had their elders assemble to hear the report of Paul and Barnabas and then in turn report to their individual congregations.
 - Can you imagine how excited these brothers at Antioch must have been to hear what had happened with them?
 - Paul and Barnabas have probably been gone for about two years and it is likely that they did not hear very much from them during that time.

- And there is Paul with some new scars on his face and arms...but with a rejoicing spirit...
 - The sending church needs to hear!
- We are very blessed to live in a time when communication is fast and easy,
 - but sadly we don't care as much as we ought about missions.
 - It is not necessarily something we can all give a lot of attention to, but it would be good if there were a few that did.
 - We try to keep you updated with the prayer requests in the bulletin and I hope you remember to pray for some of these things at home.
 - If you have a large family, get your children to help you keep up with missions...
 - If you are single or don't have small children, you may be in a good position to devote more time to this matter...
 - but whatever the case, giving and receiving reports on mission work is part of the church's task.
2. Now I want you to look at how Paul and Barnabas give glory to God in their report.
- In verse 27, it says:
 - **Acts 14:27:** [middle of the verse] **they reported all that God had done with them, and that He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles.**
- a. They do not boast about their techniques or their clever methods or their faithful labour...
- 1) Their emphasis is rather on what God did **with them**...
- They knew that it was His work and that they were only His instruments—
 - instruments in the Master's hands.
 - instruments in the hands of the one that said, "I will build my church"
 - They did not make the mistake that Nebuchadnezzar had made when he looked at Babylon and said,
 - **Dan 4:30: "Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for a royal dwelling by my mighty power and for the honor of my majesty?"**
 - Do you remember what happened to him for boasting like that?
 - The Bible says:
 - **Dan 4:31-32: While the word was still in the king's mouth, a voice fell from heaven: "King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is spoken: the kingdom has departed from you! And they shall drive you from men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. They shall make you eat grass like oxen; and seven times shall pass over you, until you know that the Most High**

rules in the kingdom of men, and gives it to whomever He chooses."

- Recently, we saw how Herod was eaten with worms for not giving the glory to God.
 - I wonder that some missionaries have not had such a fate...
 - Like the preacher I told you about who said that if the Apostle Paul had known his techniques for saving souls, he would have saved many more...
 - But Paul and Barnabas make no such mistake...
 - They know that they are instruments in God's hands.
- 2) They tell how God opened the door of faith to the Gentiles.
- They recognised that this was His doing.
 - They knew how the Gentiles had been closed to the truth of God until now because now was God's appointed time to gather them into His kingdom.
 - This was a new thing that had not been done before!
 - It was a fulfillment of the ancient promise to Abram to bless all the families of the earth through His seed.
 - It was the ancient promise that had been the subject of many prophecies,
 - and now it was being done before their eyes!
 - We should not miss what a great wonder this was!
- b. Paul and Barnabas's purpose in reporting this is clear...
- They were filled with praise and thanksgiving for what God had done and they wanted more praise to redound to God's glory through their report!
 - What a splendid thing it must have been when these elders went back to their congregations and reported to them what God had done!
 - What a sweet aroma of praise and thanksgiving must have risen to God!
 - Oh my brothers and sisters,
 - We are here for the glory of God!
 - Jesus gathers us together to give thanks to His name in the assembly!
 - Be sure you join in the praises and the prayers of thanksgiving!
 - And admonish those who have been negligent in this great work.
 - It is so sad when professing Christians skip church!
 - It is only one day a week that we gather, and we need to come here to lift up our praises to God!

- He is worthy of all praise and honour and glory and blessing!
 - Let us be sure that we give thanks to Him when missionaries come or we receive reports about what God is doing with them...
 - and let us constantly give thanks and praise to God for the salvation we have in Jesus Christ that has spread into all the world!
 - Let no believer be silent!
 - Missionary work is not complete until praise is lifted up to God from the sending church for what He has done!
 - We have a duty to complete the work by our praises!
 - What a great and awesome God we serve!
3. And look, there is one more thing that Paul and Barnabas did...
- They stayed with the sending church for a long time.
 - **v. 28: So they stayed there a long time with the disciples.**
 - Surely their labours were more beneficial than ever as they no doubt went around and preached in the different congregations...
 - They had learned many things through their labours (as we have just reading about them)
 - and this surely enriched them as teachers.
 - There was the power over Satan that has been revealed in Paphos,
 - There was the gracious gospel that reached so many Gentiles at Pisidian Antioch,
 - When it was preached in its purity, they so spoke that many believed,
 - And there was the overcoming of poisoned minds at Iconium through extended labours,
 - And there was the silly devotion to idols at Lystra followed by the raising up of Paul from stoning,
 - And then there was the final work of establishing churches with their own elders on the return trip.
 - Paul and Barnabas had experienced so much and learned so much...
 - And they did not deprive the sending church of their labours,
 - but remained with them as faithful shepherds ministering to them for a long time.

Conclusion:

- How thankful we should be for all that we have learned from God's work through them!
 - They completed their mission...
 - Let us endeavour to follow their example and complete whatever God has given us to do!