

# Strengthening Souls

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Acts 14:21-28

Sermon Series:  
God's Big Story

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**W**e are in the middle of God's big story, and Acts 13 and 14 mark a shift in the expansion of the gospel. After fasting and praying, Barnabas and Paul are "set apart for the work God called them to do." In their first missionary journey, they take the gospel to regions of the Gentile world that have not been influenced by Judaism. Our passage this morning is the conclusion of their journey.

As I was writing the sermon this weekend, I remembered a movie called *Peter and Paul* that I saw when I was in college. There was a particular scene that was so inspiring that I remembered it. We have the movie in our library upstairs, so I checked it out to watch it again. Paul was stoned by the Jews and left for dead. The scripture says, the next day Paul and Barnabas left for Derbe. For 20 years, I have thought about that scene in which Paul was so determined to fulfill the mission God had given that even a near-death experience could not stop him. What was his mission? What was his passion?

This passage makes abundantly clear that Paul and Barnabas's central mission was making disciples of all nations, as Jesus commanded in the Great Commission. A "disciple" is a learner, a student, an apprentice.

Unfortunately, there are many today who believe they can be Christians—believe things about Jesus, but not be disciples. We don't see that kind of distinction in the scripture. Acts—and the entire New Testament—is a book about disciples, by disciples, and for disciples of Jesus Christ.

In his book *The Great Omission*, Dallas Willard talks about the church's failure to fulfill Jesus' command to make disciples and teach them all that he commanded. He goes so far as to say that "the greatest issue facing the world today, with all its heartbreaking needs, is whether those who, by profession or culture, are identified as 'Christians' will become disciples—students, apprentices, practitioners—of Jesus Christ, steadily learning from him how to live the life of the Kingdom of the Heavens into every corner of human existence."

This passage makes clear that Paul and Barnabas not only proclaim the gospel but make disciples. As they circle back to places they have already been, we see follow-through care being done. I love what the NRSV says: They strengthened the souls of the disciples. What does this involve? I think most of us know better how to strengthen our bodies—eat right, do some sort of cardiovascular and strengthening exercises. Whether we do these things or not is another question.

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The same kind of training is important in the spiritual realm as well, and Acts 2:42 shows what a basic training routine looks like as it describes the practices of the early disciples, who were engaged in teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayer. Or, to summarize: word, prayer, share. Please understand, spiritual disciplines like reading God's word and praying are not an end in themselves—they are a means of grace. They are the ways we arrange our lives so that our souls are strengthened for our life in God.

Soul strengthening will include time in God's Word. As food is to the body, so the truth of God's word is to the soul. One of the features of Acts that grabs me is how well the early disciples knew God's Word. Not only did they read it but they assimilated it into their lives. They thought about it deeply and related it to their experience. They talked about the word, taught it and shared it with others. They really believed that God fed and nurtured them by His Word. And my friends, I say with grief, there are many Christians today whose souls are starving to death.

We have a challenge in our day, because there is so much information to know and assimilate, but we have to accept the truth that we simply cannot know everything. And we have to make choices about what we will prioritize. Amid all the changing voices of our generation, we need to listen to the eternal word that does not

change. Whether you are a scientist, teacher, or stay-at-home parent to know, to know his will, by knowing his word, is absolutely necessary for your life. The strength of your soul depends on it.

Soul strengthening will include time in prayer. In the movie *Peter and Paul*, someone says to Paul, "People say that this Jesus talks to you." And Paul responds with a big smile on his face. "Yes, yes, he does. Jesus does talk to me." We often think of prayer as our to-do list for God of what we want or need. But Paul understood the delight having a conversation with God. Prayer is all the ways in which we communicate with God, and, even more, the ways we commune with God. It's a way of being with God and cultivating intimacy with him.

Prayer is the way we open ourselves to God and allow him full access into our lives, and as we do that, our capacity to experience his love is expanded and our capacity to express that love through our words and deeds is expanded. As we learn to pray without ceasing, we learn to live in the presence and power of God in every moment of our day, in the midst of every activity and every interaction with others. As Henry Nouwen says, prayer is the way of the heart, and the strength of our souls depends on it.

Soul strengthening will include time with others sharing the journey: Fellowship is the way the earlier Christians described time together. They were not Lone Ranger Christians. They spent time together, supported each other, held each

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other accountable. We need people to do the same for us through the ups and downs of life.

Notice how Paul and Barnabas share this missionary journey. And wherever they go, they are not simply seeking individual converts, they are cultivating community. Even when they return to Antioch, they gather with the church to report what God had done. After such a long and hard mission, Paul and Barnabas's souls needed to be strengthened in the fellowship of other believers.

While I understand the time constraints and the pressure we all have, cultivating healthy, loving, supportive Christian relationships is necessary for the health of our souls—especially in our individualist and independent culture. We need to follow Christ together. The strength of your soul depends on it.

Please don't tell me you don't have time. God does not give us more to do than we can do. We do that to ourselves. We make the time for the things that matter. So I urge you to make time in your daily schedule to feed your soul by spending time with God and learning to live in His presence through prayer. Arrange your life to spend time with other believers. As fall begins, take time to look through the bulletin and prayerfully consider how God is calling you to strengthen your soul with others through a learning or study opportunity listed there—a small group, an adult education class, a CenterPoint class.

Paul and Barnabas strengthened souls by encouraging disciples to continue in the faith. Paul was concerned that these new Christians remain Christians in a very unChristian environment. There was a lot that could pull them away from Christ. And the same is true in our day. What Paul seems to be implying is that it may be easy to begin to follow Christ, but to continue to follow him is harder.

In his book *Crazy Love*, which I highly recommend, Francis Chan writes, "Following Christ isn't something that can be done halfheartedly or on the side. It is not a label we can display when it is useful. It must be central to everything we do and are.

"If life is a river, then pursuing Christ requires swimming upstream. When we stop swimming, or actively following him, we automatically begin to be swept downstream.

"Or, to use another metaphor more familiar to city people, we are on a never-ending downward escalator. In order to grow, we have to turn around and sprint up the escalator, putting up with perturbed looks from everyone else who is gradually moving downward.

"I believe that much of the American churchgoing population, which is not specifically swimming downstream, is slowly floating away from Christ. It isn't a conscious choice, but it is nonetheless happening because little in their lives propels them toward Christ...the fact is that nothing should concern us more than our relationship with God; it's about eternity and nothing

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compares with that. God is not someone who can be tacked onto our lives.”

Now this kind of living upstream is not easy. It's not comfortable. It's not cultural. Following Christ is hard, and no one knows that better than Paul. That's why he says in verse 22, “It is through many persecutions or hardship that we must enter the kingdom of God.”

Not only did Paul and Barnabas strengthen souls by encouraging disciples to continue in the faith, but also by warning them of hardship. Paul isn't just talking theory here. He has just experienced a lot of persecution, as I mentioned before, which is probably why hardship is on his mind. Paul was beaten and stoned, and while the physical pain must have been great, think of the anguish of mind and soul and the humiliation Paul suffered to be treated so horribly by his own Jewish people.

When Paul came to Christ, the Lord said, “I will show him how much he must suffer for my name's sake.” Paul's listing of his own suffering shows how inconvenient Christian ministry was to him as he spoke of “troubles, hardships and distresses...hard work, sleepless nights and hunger” (2 Corinthians 6:4-5).

We may think, well, that's Paul—he was a great man, a great leader with a special calling from God, which is true. But here's the thing, the clear testimony of scripture is that all Christians must suffer in some way if they are true believers. Paul says in 2 Timothy

3:12, “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” And as Christians, we will all have struggles just like everyone else. The struggle may be with a temptation, sickness, a difficult relationship, economic reversal, or the costliness of taking a stand for Christ.

Like it or not, hardship is a key ingredient of discipleship, though we don't want to admit it, let alone talk about it much. You see, God's desire for every follower, every disciple, is to transform our character into the likeness of Christ, and as Romans 5 says, suffering produces perseverance, and perseverance produces character—proven, tested character—and character produces hope. Just as resistance training strengthens the body, so hardship strengthens our souls. In the midst of difficulty, we must turn to God more than we ever knew we needed to. And we learn to trust His grace and power to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

Paul understood this truth. And you know, it's remarkable to think that Paul could have avoided a lot of his problems, but he would have been disobedient to his calling to preach the gospel to the Gentiles.

We can avoid embarrassment in our workplace by remaining silent about our faith. We can avoid fatigue by not stepping out to assist a friend or neighbor who is sick and in need of help. We can avoid inconvenience by being too busy to help and serve others. We can avoid conflict by not confronting someone we know who is going astray by convincing ourselves it's none of

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our business. I could go on and on. It is possible to avoid some hardship, but at what cost?

In our comfort, convenience-seeking culture, it's easy to drift downstream. But to love Christ with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and to obey all that he commanded will involve inconvenience, sacrifice, suffering, hardship, and even persecution. But Paul puts it so well, I consider that our present sufferings are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to come. Friends, compared to eternity, whatever hardships we may encounter are but a blip compared with the glorious future we have been promised with the Savior.

Finally, we see that not only did Paul and Barnabas strengthen souls, but they strengthened communities by appointing elders—leaders—in these new congregations. This was important because these communities were the places where so much of the growth and life of the Christian took place, and they wanted to ensure the health and vitality.

What this passage makes abundantly clear is that leadership is an important function in the church. One commentator writes, “Sometimes we hear Christians proudly affirming that in their small groups, there is no one as a leader and all are equals. Leadership is actually not a factor that influences equality; rather, it is a matter of function...according to the Bible, leaders have an important place in the life of God’s people. For groups to be guided aright, they

must have leaders. The appointment of leaders was an important feature in the life of the early church.”

This passage actually makes clear the real evidence in fruitfulness in making disciples, and that is the multiplication of leaders. The end of the discipleship process is to so strengthen and nurture the souls of others that we, in essence, replace ourselves. Disciple-making is like parenting—it’s a process. We all begin as infants who need to be fed and nurtured, but as we grow and are transformed, we learn more and can do more. Our success as parents is the ability to launch a young person into adulthood to live faithfully and to be able to teach others, also. The true fruitfulness of ministry is whether a disciple (or apprentice) of Jesus is able to do what Jesus would do, and part of that means making disciples of others by loving, teaching, and guiding others. Our church has elders and deacons. But in a church this size, we need a lot more leaders than elected officers.

The church needs more and more leaders who will step forward to not only fulfill tasks but to assume the responsibility of making disciples of others. We always face the challenge of finding and training new small-group leaders for children, youth and adults so that more and more people can share the journey with God and others.

I encourage you to consider how God might lead you to lead others. Join me for the small-group training. Talk to Clare Maynard or Barry Hill about making disciples of our children and youth.

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I want you to know that I take to heart these words for myself. I have been challenged to consider the way my own soul needs to be strengthened in the coming year. What are the practices, relationships and experiences I need for my age and stage of faith to strengthen my soul?

As a parent, there is a lot I need to do to arrange for the development and care of my children, but my number one responsibility as a parent is to strengthen the souls of my children and to help them grow as disciples of Christ. That is not the church's job. That is my job, and if you are a parent, that is your job. You are the spiritual leader of your children. And here is a radical idea, in light of eternity, your children becoming like Christ is way more important than the grades they get in school or what college they get into or what job they secure.

As a leader in this church, I am challenged by Paul and Barnabas's example and priority of leadership. God is the one who causes growth and transformation, but we make choices as to how we will cooperate, and we as the church need to be about strengthening souls—not merely keeping people involved or busy in the church but truly strengthening souls and making disciples. Those priorities don't matter anywhere else. Becoming disciples and making disciples of Christ is why God sent his only son into the world. Jesus died so you and I could know him, become like him, and spend eternity with him.

I will close with these words from Dallas Willard's *Great Omission*. "Someone will say, can I not be "saved"—that is, get into heaven when I die—without any of this? Perhaps you can. God's goodness is so great, I am sure that He will let you in if He can find any basis at all to do so. But you might wish to think about what your life amounts to before you die, about what kind of person you are becoming, and about whether you really would be comfortable for eternity in the presence of One whose company you have not found especially desirable for the few hours and days of your earthly existence. And He is, after all, One who says to you, now, "Follow me!"

