

Place: Lurgan Baptist 25:10:2011

Reading: Acts 14:1-28

## **THE CHURCH ABLAZE**

### **24. THROUGH IT ALL**

One night in 1945 Captain Terry Simeral brought his crippled B-29 in for a safe landing amidst waiting fire engines and red flares, unloaded the plane, and entered the group headquarters tent. His face was white. He seemed to be in a state of shock, and it was several minutes before he could talk. An incredible feat had been accomplished as Captain Simeral piloted his Pathfinder plane toward the enemy coast in order to drop phosphorous smoke to mark the mission's target. On B-29s it was the radio operator's job to release the bomb through a narrow tube. *On this particular night Sgt. Henry Erwin received the routine order, triggered the flare, and dropped it down the tube.* But there was a malfunction, and the bomb exploded and bounced back into Erwin's face, blinding both eyes and searing off an ear. Burning phosphorus melts metal like butter, and the bomb was now at Sgt. Erwin's feet and eating rapidly through the deck of the plane toward a load of incendiaries. He was alone because the navigator had gone to the transparent dome on top of the plane to make some calculations.

Not having the luxury of time to analyse his situation, Erwin picked up the white-hot bomb in his bare hands, and stumbled toward the cockpit, groping along with elbows and feet. The navigator's folding table was down and latched, blocking the way. Sgt Erwin hugged the blazing bomb under one arm as it burned the flesh over his ribs, unfastened the latch, and lifted the table. He stumbled on, a walking torch. His clothing and hair were ablaze. Dense smoke filled the plane, and Simeral had opened the window beside him to clear the plane. *" I could not see Erwin,"* says Simeral, *" but I heard his voice right at my elbow. He said, ' Pardon me, sir,' and reached across the window and tossed the bomb out. Then he collapsed on the flight deck."* Amazingly, Sgt. Erwin survived and went on to regain the use of his hands and partial vision in one eye. Sgt. Henry Erwin is one of U.S.A. Congressional Medal of Honour Winners.

His story and that of the blazing bomb is one of the most amazing accounts of valour in recent years. It is a tribute to the human spirit. Yet there is a bravery that exceeds even that. It is not as dramatic, not as conspicuous, and not as likely to be remembered. It is the bravery that is called forth by consistent devotion to duty. For example, think of the bravery of a young mother as she devotes herself to the care of a handicapped child, think of the courage of men and women who endure the world's scorn as they pour out their lives for the abolition of a social evil. Now the supreme examples of Christian courage come to us from the early church. Here in ( Ch 14 ) we see the courageous attitude of the apostles in their loyalty to

Christ through thick and thin. “**Through it all,**” through peril, toil, and suffering they were faithful to their Lord. “**Through it all,**” is a moving song written by Andre Crouch. Do you recall the words ?

*I thank God for the mountains  
And I thank Him for the valleys,  
I thank Him for the storms He brought me through.  
For if I'd never had a problem  
I wouldn't know that He could solve them,  
I'd never know what faith in God could do.”  
Through it all, through it all  
Oh, I've learned to trust in Jesus,  
I've learned to trust in God.  
Through it all, through it all  
I've learned to depend upon His Word*

Not around it, not over it, but through success and failure, through joy and sorrow, Paul learned to trust God and depend on His Word. He says, “*I have learned to in whatever state I am, therewith to be content. I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: everywhere and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.*” ( Phil 4:11-13 ) My ... Paul and Barnabas had already demonstrated their courage on their first missionary journey. Paul and Barnabas against the world. My .... the challenge when undertaking a new venture is not in the launch. There is always great enthusiasm when taking first steps on a new road. The real challenge is developing persistence to overcome obstacles. *Is this not exactly what Paul*

*and Barnabas did ?* On Cyprus they boldly preached the gospel, with no response except indifference. In Paphos, they finally had a convert, but only after a fierce battle with a false-prophet. In brave obedience they set sail for Asia Minor, but it was all too much for John Mark, who returned home. In Pisidian Antioch, they again ministered the Word with great effect, ( 13:42-52 ) which brought persecution, so that finally they shook the dust off their feet and headed for Iconium. But

“**Through it All,**” they maintained an unflinching devotion and singleness of purpose in following and preaching Christ. President Calvin Coolidge is famous for these words on persistence. “**Press on. Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not, nothing is more common than unsuccessful individuals with talent. Genius will not, unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not, the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent.**”

My .... quickly the ups and downs of life can come upon us. Have you ever gone from being on top of the world one moment to being at the bottom of the heap the next ? Did either of these extremes topple your balance ? Your faith ? Your composure ? Did you feel like giving up ? My .... when the winds of change gust and swirl around us, we need firm footing to keep our balance. Such steadiness comes through the stability of relying on the Lord, “**Through it all.**” Now ( Ch 14 ) depicts Paul and Barnabas completing their first missionary journey, travelling through Iconium, Lystra,

and Derbe, and returning to home base in Antioch. I have divided the study into 4 parts. Notice,

### (1) THE WORD THAT WAS PREACHED

Luke refers to it in ( 14:3 ) as “ *the Word of His grace.*”

You see, the message of the gospel is about God’s grace granted to unworthy sinners so that they might be reconciled to Him. That grace is the heart of the gospel. Notice that the message was confirmed by “ *signs and wonders,*” and these were the missionaries “ *credentials,*” that they were indeed the servants of the true God. The “ *signs and wonders,*” worked in Iconium were for one purpose to authenticate the gospel. The power to work miracles was given to the apostles and others in the early church to validate their spoken message. They had no completed Bible that could be used as a reference point for what they were preaching or teaching, so God gave them power as a mark of their authority in their ministry. Now that we have the completed Bible all teaching can be measured by the Word as to its authority, and “ *signs and wonders,*” are no longer needed. ( 15:12 Gal 3:5 Heb 2:4 )

Now Iconium where this message was preached, was about eighty miles to the southeast of Pisidian Antioch. This city, more Greek, than Roman, was in the Roman province of Galatia. It was governed by an assembly of citizens called the Demos, which held itself aloof from the Roman representative. Here Paul and Barnabas met with immediate success and immediate opposition. In other words,

### (a) **THAT WORD BROUGHT DELIVERANCE:**

Can you imagine Paul and Barnabas having a discussion along the way to Iconium. “ *Well, Paul what are we going to do when we get to Iconium ?*” “ *Brother, Barnabas, we're going to the synagogue.*” “ *Is that wise ? Look what happened at Antioch. The Jews turned against us. We'd still be there if it wasn't for the Jews.*” “ *Some believed.*” “ *Yes, but the leaders didn't. They stirred up the city against us. Things were pretty serious when we left. Maybe we should go to the Gentiles.*” “ *We'll still do that, Barny, but its ' the Jew first.' That's my motto. The synagogue is our Jerusalem. If you're nervous, you do as the Lord leads. I'm going to the synagogue.*” So “ *they went both together.*” Do you recall the Scripture ? “ *Behold, how good and pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity .... There the Lord commands the blessing, even life for evermore.*” ( Ps 133, 1, 3 )

My .... their ministry in the synagogue was singularly blessed and a multitude of Jews and Gentiles believed. ( 14:1 ) “ *They so spake that a great multitude .... believed.*” God so energised the words of His servants, that conviction and conversion followed. Do you recall how later Paul came to Corinth, he says “ *My speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power.*” ( 1 Cor 2:4 ) My .... do we “ *so speak,*” like that ? Do you know what it is to preach the gospel with power ? But look, trouble followed, for

**(b) THAT WORD BROUGHT DISPLEASURE:**

“ *But the unbelieving Jews ....*,” ( 14:2 ) Once again, the unbelieving Jews stirred up hatred and opposition. How did Paul and Barnabas react ? They stayed around for a long time, and continued to speak boldly. They had just been run out of Pisidian Antioch, but they were not about to run at the first sign of trouble. My .... such pluck and spunk has always been true of God’s servants. *Boldness is that essential quality without which nothing can be accomplished for the gospel.* Boldness is what enables believers to persist in the face of opposition. John Wesley once encountered a village bully when their carriages met on a narrow road. The bully knew Wesley and disliked him and would not give him any leeway, staying in the middle of the road. John Wesley cheerfully gave the man the entire road, even though he had to turn into the ditch. As they passed the bully said, “ ***I never turn out for fools,***” and Wesley all five feet two of him retorted, “ ***I always do.***” Paul once wrote, “ *We are troubled on every side yet not distressed, we are perplexed but not in despair. Persecuted but not forsaken, cast down but not destroyed.*” ( 2 Cor 4:8-9 ) In other words, Paul says “ *we may be knocked down, but we are never knocked out.*” Yes “ ***the Word of His grace,***” (a) (b)

**(c) THAT WORD BROUGHT DIVISION:**

For look if you will at ( 14:4 ) says, “ *But the multitude of the city was divided ....*,” My .... it must have been very trying, very hard on the nerves, to continue on

with the Lord’s work when tensions were mounting , when all it would take would be a spark to explode the whole powder keg of opposition. You see the Demos, the town council, was divided, and this assembly had the power to condemn and execute the missionaries without Rome” involvement. So Paul and Barnabas had once again come from high to low, from delight to disaster. But they did not despair. Rather, “ *they spent a long time there speaking boldly with reliance upon the Lord,*” My .... their response shows us the key to remaining stable during winds of change. They relied upon the Lord. My .... is this what you do during times of crisis and winds of change ? Do you focus on God and His Word and not on people and circumstances ?

**(d) THAT WORD BROUGHT DANGER:**

And when Paul and Barnabas became aware that matters were coming to a head, they decided that discretion was the better part of valour. Rather than face the heat, Paul and Barnabas wisely left the city. My .... God’s servants were brave but not foolish. They were born-again, not born yesterday. Sure, the Lord protects His children, but He wants us to use common sense. So the missionaries departed. ( Matt 10:23 ) They had now been booted out of two cities back to back, but they kept serving Christ and proclaiming His gospel. *Undoubtedly, they felt some discouragement.* Some of the things that were said to them hurt. They may have been worried about leaving baby Christians behind. Yet, when we read Paul’s life accounts we also find an underlying sense of anticipation and joy. Paul

was a realist but also an optimist. One preacher described an optimist as an eighty-five old man who marries a thirty-five year woman and moves into a twelve-room house next to a primary school.

My .... an optimist does not allow the “*facts*,” that surround him to take away the belief that great things can happen. ( Phil 4:12-13 ) So Paul and Barnabas moved another twenty-six miles out into the wilds to a place called Lystra. Now the action became intense. For notice,

## **(2) THE WORSHIP THAT WAS PROHIBITED**

You see here, Paul and Barnabas faced a new danger, the danger of deification. The apostles were looked upon as gods because of the miracle wrought on the lame man. Look at they say in ( 14:15 ) My .... what a temptation this was for Paul and Barnabas, and Satan knew it. I mean they had been kicked out of Pisidian Antioch and Iconium and now they were being deified in Lystra. It would have been so easy for the apostles to rationalise and say, “*We will accommodate these poor savages and then point them to God. This sure beats stoning.*” My .... it is to their eternal credit that they did not receive worship by men for even a split second. How did this all begin ? Well, the ministry in Lystra got off to a flying start. There was,

### ***(a) THE MIRACLE THEY SAW:***

It’s likely that Paul was simply conversing with some of the citizens in the marketplace, telling about them

the Lord Jesus, and the lame man overheard what he said.

The Word produced faith, and faith brought healing. ( Rom 10:17 ) Now although today’s believers do not possess healing power as Paul did, my .... the principle is instructive, God’s power is absolutely necessary if God’s work is to be accomplished. ( Eph 6:10 ) But can you picture this scene ? The ex-cripple dancing in front of the people and crying out, “*Is it really true ? I have never walked in my life before. Look Mom .... no cane.*” Now Paul could give them the goods, a little on the doctrine of sin, the story of the Incarnation, the atoning work of the cross, the necessity of repentance and faith. A great harvest followed. There was just one problem,

### ***(b) THE MISTAKE THEY MADE:***

“*And when the people saw ....,*” ( 14:11-14 ) You see these half-wild Lycaonians had an ancient legend that Zeus and Hermes had once come to the hill country disguised as mortals seeking lodging. Though they asked a thousand homes, no-one would take them in. Finally, at a humble cottage of straw and reeds, a poor elderly couple, Philemon and Baucis, freely welcomed them and feasted them with what meagre means they had. In appreciation, the gods transformed the cottage into a temple, making the couple priest and priestess. And when they died, they were immortalised as a great oak tree and linden tree. The inhospitable homes, however, were destroyed. My .... these poor Lycaonians were determined not to make the same mistake again.

Barnabas evidently, had a more noble presence, so they called him Jupiter ( Zeus, the chief god ) and they identified Paul with Mercurius, ( Hermes ) the messenger of the gods.

The Devil was having a hay day. What had started out with such promise, was about to be ruined. It is difficult to say which was worse , having stones thrown at them in Iconium, or this blasphemous attempt to worship them as gods at Lystra. My .... does this story not expose one of our great weaknesses ? ***We find it easy to exalt the messenger instead of the message.*** We want to make men and women, rather than God our sense of security. So we have our own Christian pantheon, our own Christian matinee idols. My .... who are we really worshipping ? Ourselves ? Our favourite preacher ? Writer ? Singer ? A Christian entertainer for there are a lot of them about. Or are we worshipping and serving the Lord Jesus ? Lloyd John Ogilvie says,

**We put the communicator on a pedestal and evade the communication. We have a seemingly limitless capacity to give the honour that belongs to Christ to the people who seek to introduce us to Him. Pastors, parents, friends and teachers who have brought us the good news are often made the source of our security. We elevate them to supersainthood and miss for ourselves the dynamic that has made them admirable. We make matinee idols out of Christian leaders and forget that the greatest honour we can pay them is to become what we admire in them. The reason there are so many prima donnas in the**

**pulpit is that we have given the messenger more honour than the message.**

What a temptation this was for Paul and Barnabas and Satan knew it, and so seeking to draw the people's attention away from themselves, look at,

### ***(c) THE MESSAGE THEY HEARD:***

Now remember that the crowd at Lystra was a pagan, Gentile crowd unversed in the Old Testament Scriptures. Consequently, Paul's message was very different from the ones he preached in the Jewish synagogues at Iconium and Pisidian Antioch. Paul's sermon in the Jewish synagogue was full of Old Testament references , tracing the history of the Jews. That would never have worked at Lystra, so Paul took a different approach. He began with the Creator and spoke about,

### **(1) THE POWER OF GOD:**

( 14:15 ) Paul launched into a fearless condemnation of paganism. He called their gods “ *vanities.*” Though they tore him to pieces he would tell them the truth. No dialogue with error for him. And he turned their attention to the true and living God, pointing to creation as evidence of the power of the living God. Paul later evangelised the pagans on Mars Hill in Athens, from the same starting point. Creation. (1)

### **(2) THE PATIENCE OF GOD:**

*“ Who in times past suffered all nations to walk in*

*their own ways,*” ( 14:16 ) God could have made a swift and sudden end of it all as He did in Noah’s and Lot’s day. He could have visited the world with His wrath, but this was not His way. My .... God’s patience with the human race is beyond our comprehension. Men blaspheme and curse Him. They blame God for the consequences of their own sins. They accuse Him of coldness and callousness, and God looks the other way, turns the other cheek, goes the extra mile. Such is the patience of God. (1) (2)

### **(3) THE PROOF OF GOD:**

Look if you will at ( 14:17 ) The goodness and graciousness of God is evident from the good things in nature. My .... this was Paul’s message before this pagan audience. No doubt he would have gone out to explain the gospel of Christ, but the excitement generated by the miracle, rendered that impossible. Indeed ( 14:18 ) says “ *And with these sayings .... them.*” My .... do you see the **humility** of God’s servants here ? You see, to be acclaimed a god was the highest honour imaginable in the Greco-Roman world, and was much sought after. ( 12:22 ) Yet God’s servants disavowed any such notions about themselves, and pointed the pagan people to the Creator God. They successfully handled the temptation to pride. I mean had Paul and Barnabas yielded to that temptation, it would have destroyed their usefulness. Those who seek glory for themselves are on the path to spiritual weakness and impotence.

As an elder, deacon, servant how are you handling this

temptation ? Is your usefulness for God being destroyed by pride ? Is your effectiveness for the Saviour being dulled by arrogance ? Listen again to the Word of God,

“ *To this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at My Word.*”

( Is 66:2 ) How quickly the ups and downs of life can come upon us. One moment it was, “ *Hail Zeus, Hail Hermes,*” the next moment it was “ *Stone him. Stone him.*” Look at,

### ***(d) THE MALICE THEY REVEALED:***

For notice how quickly the crowd changed. ( 14:19 ) As the rocks crashed against Paul’s skull I wonder if his mind flashed back to Stephen’s execution, in which he had participated. Soon there he lay a blood spattered broken frame beneath the rubble of Lystra. Maybe this is when he experienced the ecstasy of being caught up to the third heaven as described in ( 2 Cor 12:1-4 ) To the Galatians he would later write, “ *From henceforth let no man trouble me, for I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.*” ( 6:17 ) My .... as Paul lay there, the disciples stood around deciding what to do with his body. Tears streamed down their faces. “ *What a pity .... he was in the prime of his ministry. If only he could have lived longer.*” Suddenly, Paul popped one eye open, then the other. “ *It’s all right, brothers and sisters. No funeral today. Let’s get out of here.*” What a man. What a witness. Can you see him caked with dirt and blood, heading off to Derbe 40 miles away to preach the gospel ? I tell you nothing could deter these men from preaching Christ. Indeed,

### (3) THE WORK THAT WAS PROMOTED

By these men was amazing. Look at ( 14:21-23 ) Now this part of the missionary journey is easy to overlook, but it was a crucial aspect of the spread of Christianity. While the first part of their journey, had been for evangelism, this last part was for edification. You see, these new believers had no seminars on the Christian life to attend, no commentaries to read, no CDs to listen so Paul and Barnabas retrace their trail of blood through Lystra, Iconium, and Pisidian Antioch to give the new churches vital spiritual instruction. Some have speculated that by this time new Roman magistrates were in office. Even if that were true the Jewish communities in all three cities remained implacably opposed to the gospel. Paul and Barnabas knew, however, that it was far more dangerous to the gospel cause for these new flocks not to be strengthened. Did you notice there was a four fold ministry here ? There was the ministry,

#### (a) OF ESTABLISHING:

“ *Confirming the souls of the disciples .....*,” ( 14:22 ) or if you like, “ *Strengthening the souls of the disciples,*” We might say “ *to beef up,*” .... to add strength to what is already present. These new believers have only had appetisers of truth for their nourishment, they now need a full-course meal to put meat on their spiritual bones. So Paul and Barnabas devote themselves to teaching them the Word of God. ( 20:31-32 1 Jn 2:14 ) My .... what part are you playing

to “ *beef up,*” new disciples ?

#### (b) OF ENCOURAGING:

“ *And exhorting them to continue in the faith,*” ( 14:22 ) Barnabas the son of encouragement must have been at his best at this point. I mean who better for the task of exhortation and encouragement than Barnabas ? Now notice that they don’t paint a rosy, trouble-free future, they are preparing these believers for battle. These raw recruits need to understand the harsh reality of persecution. They need to know that tribulations will come, but that with the Lord they can persevere. “ *Hang in there,*” Paul and Barnabas are saying. “ *You can make it. Don't give up when the going gets tough.*” My .... Paul stated a principle of the faith that we rarely tell new Christians today. There are many tribulations along the road to the kingdom of God. David Jeremiah says, “ *The contemporary Western church lacks a theology of adversity because we live such comfortable lives.*” How true that is. How little we suffer for the gospel. So there was the ministry of (a) (b) Notice there was also,

#### (c) OF EQUIPPING:

“ *And when they had ordained them elders in every church,*” ( 14:23 ) They did not leave the new converts to fend for themselves. They brought structure to these new formed congregations and appointed elders. Elders, or in Greek, ( presbuteros ) were sometimes known as bishops or overseers, the office was the

same. ( 20:17, 28 Titus 1:5 ) These men had to be spiritually qualified according to the guidelines Paul later listed in

( 1 Tim 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9 ) Here were undershepherds who would faithfully lead and care for the flock when Paul and Barnabas were gone. My ... do you see the seriousness with which the apostles and church approached the selection of elders ? “ *And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting ....*,” My ... these elders were chosen only after they had prayed with fasting.

How different from the way we chose elders today. Finally, there was the ministry,

#### ***(d) OF ENTRUSTING:***

“ *They commended them to the Lord on whom they believed.*” ( 14:23 ) The Greek word for “ *commend*,” means “ *to deposit as in a bank.*” The apostles entrusted their priceless new born babes into the Lord’s hands for safekeeping. My ... such an attitude acknowledges the Lord Jesus Christ as Head of the church and the source of all truth and power. Exhausted by their travels and the hard work of proclaiming the gospel the two missionaries headed home completing their first missionary journey and,

#### **(4) THE WITNESS THAT WAS PRESENTED**

Was encouraging. Look if will at ( 14:24-26 ) You see,

#### ***(a) THEY RETURNED TO ANTIOCH:***

They retraced their steps back through Pisidian Antioch and to the Mediterranean seaport of Attalia, then they boarded a ship and sailed back to Syrian Antioch. Now scholar’s tell us that this first missionary journey documented in ( Acts Ch’s 13-14 ) was a journey that by ship and on foot covered 1400 miles on land and sea over the course of one year. The church at Antioch had sent them forth, and doubtless not a day had passed without the saints at Antioch praying for their missionaries. My ... do you pray for your missionaries ? Do you remember those who are standing at the forefront of the battle ? (a)

#### ***(b) THEY REPORTED TO ANTIOCH:***

Look if will at ( 14:27 ) Incidentally, Luke didn’t say that they gathered the Christians into the church, but they gathered the church. To the early church, the church meant the people not the building. What did they say to the church ? “ *They rehearsed all that God had done with them and how he had opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles.*” ( 14:27 ) This is perhaps “ *the first missionary conference,*” and what a conference it must have been. *Did you notice where the emphasis is ?*

Some may have boasted of all they had done, of the churches planted, of the converts won, of the miracles performed but not Paul and Barnabas. Like the Psalmist they say, “ *Not unto us O Lord, not unto us, but unto thy name give glory.*” ( Ps 115:1 ) “ *They rehearsed all that God had done,*” all the glory went to Him.

Is this not an essential perspective for a servant of God ? A church officer once said, “ *I don't care how much money you want for missions, I'll give it, but just don't make me listen to missionaries speak.* ” My .... is that your attitude ? Is your spiritual temperature so low that you can't listen to reports of what God is doing in other parts of the world ? (a) (b) And then:

**(c) *THEY RESTED AT ANTIOCH:***

Look at the closing verse. ( 14:28 ) Not only did Paul and Barnabas did a complete rest, but a dangerous storm was brewing in Jerusalem, and the Holy Spirit wanted His two best men in place when at last it moved north and broke on Antioch.

My .... Paul and Barnabas faced a lot on this first missionary journey. They came through peril, toil, and suffering. But “ **Through it All,**” “ *they learned to trust in God and depend upon His Word.* ” Is it not amazing that they did all that they did without the modern means of transportation and communication that we possess today ? Dr. Bob Pierce in Youth for Christ used to say, “ ***Others have done so much with so little, while we have done so little with so much.*** ” Paul and Barnabas announced that the “ *door of faith,* ” had been opened to the Gentiles. My .... that door is still open to Jews and Gentiles alike, to a whole world. Will you walk through that open door and help take the gospel to others ?