

Tusculum Hills Baptist Church
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THE PURSUIT OF SUCCESS

Acts 14:21-28

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This message has three points:

- The apostles returned to areas of persecution.
- The apostles passed the torch to other leaders.
- The apostles reported to the disciples.

THE APOSTLES RETURNED TO AREAS OF PERSECUTION

SCRIPTURE: Acts 14:21-22

They preached the gospel in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, ²² strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,” they said.

EXPLANATION: When Paul and Barnabas completed their first missionary journey, they did not head straight for home. Instead, they took the long way back, stopping in many of the locations they had already visited.

- They went to Lystra, where Paul was stoned.
- They stopped in Iconium where people plotted against them.
- They went back to Antioch even though city leaders had thrown them out.

The apostles completed the task the Lord had given them. They had shared the gospel with the people in these cities. Some believed and received Christ into their lives. Many rejected the message and persecuted the messengers. Still, at great risk to themselves, Paul and Barnabas went back to the very places where they had been betrayed and abused. Why?

The first time that Paul and Barnabas visited each of these locations, they were on a mission to share the gospel with the lost for the first time. The second stop was to

encourage those who had chosen to believe. By facing the risk of more persecution, they demonstrated a great love for their brothers and sisters in Christ. They also provided an example of how these new believers should appropriately respond in the face of persecution.

Occasionally, we'll read a story where a parent risked his or her life in order to save one or more children. The protective love that a parent feels for a child is greater than the risk required to rescue the child.

Paul and Barnabas were not afraid of danger. In fact, they lived on the edge. This was not a result of some misguided desire for an adrenaline rush. They were not thrill-seekers for the sake of seeking thrills, but they did not let danger deter them from doing the job God called them to do. To them, the threat of not encouraging new believers was greater than the threat of more persecution, or even death. They knew that their lives and well-being were in the hands of the Lord. They trusted his protection and his will.

APPLICATION: How often do we run from hardship? How often do we fail to do the right thing, the thing that God has asked us to do, because it puts us out of our comfort zone, because it causes us to sacrifice something, because it's unpleasant? Sometimes success comes with a price.

The apostles returned to areas of persecution, and...

THE APOSTLES PASSED THE TORCH TO OTHER LEADERS

SCRIPTURE: Acts 14:23-25

Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust. ²⁴ After going through Pisidia, they came into Pamphylia, ²⁵ and when they had preached the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia.

EXPLANATION - Paul and Barnabas were intentional about how they spent this time. They helped facilitate the organization of the church by appointing leaders. They prayed with them and for them. They fasted together, and then Paul and Barnabas turned the reigns over to them.

ILLUSTRATION: A little boy required hernia surgery when he was one year old. On the day of the surgery, the parents woke up very early and transferred their sleeping son into the car. They arrived at Vanderbilt Children’s Clinic and helped put the little boy into a tiny gown. Finally, a nurse came in and held out her arms to take the sleeping child to the operating room. In that moment, mom had a hard time letting go. She said, “As parents we constantly tell our children not to trust a stranger. Yet, here I was handing my son over to one.” Of course, the mom knew that the doctors and nurses were there to help him. Still, it was not easy to let go.

EXPLANATION: Paul and Barnabas must have felt that way. In many ways, these new believers were like their own sons and daughters. They had ushered them into a new life in Christ. Now, when they were still infants, they had to hand them over to someone else. Of course, they knew that God was working in these leaders through His Holy Spirit. They hoped that the leaders would make decisions with the best interest of the church in mind. They prayed that they would stand firm in the face of persecution and guide their congregations well. Still, it must have been hard to let go.

APPLICATION: There is a sense of pride when a task is well-done. When we meet an objective, complete a project, or reach a goal, we want people to recognize it. We enjoy the pat on the back. We take ownership, and that’s not a bad thing unless we hang on too tightly.

Let me ask:

- When there is someone else who can do the job better, OR
- When you have too much on your plate, OR
- When God is ready for you to do something else, OR
- When someone else could benefit from the experience,
- Do you have trouble letting go?

Paul and Barnabas knew that any success they achieved had come as a result of the Lord’s work in and through them. Therefore, the praise actually belonged to the Lord. The responsibility was his as well.

So, the apostles returned to areas of persecution, and they passed the torch to other leaders...

THE APOSTLES REPORTED TO THE DISCIPLES

SCRIPTURE: Acts 14:26-28

From Attalia they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed. ²⁷ On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. ²⁸ And they stayed there a long time with the disciples.

EXPLANATION: After they made their visits and appointed the new leaders, the two apostles headed back to where they had begun - Antioch. Antioch was where a revival had broken out among the Gentiles. Barnabas had been sent by the church in Jerusalem to check it out, and seeing a great need for leadership, he went and fetched Paul. The church in Antioch is what we today would call Paul and Barnabas's "sending church." The leaders there were the ones who had, upon sensing the movement of the Holy Spirit, sent Paul and Barnabas on this missionary journey.

While we cannot know for sure how long they had been gone, it's very likely that this journey took place over the course of a year or more. Without the benefit of modern communication, the believers in Antioch would have known little about their experiences until they arrived with the information themselves. It was, therefore, fitting that Paul and Barnabas return and give a report of all that had occurred. However, I think this was probably more than just a presentation for the curious.

The apostles were, of course accountable to God, but they were also accountable to their brothers and sisters in Christ. Paul and Barnabas wanted the Antioch church to know that prayers had been answered and that, to the best of their ability, they had fulfilled the assignment. Now get this:

- After Paul and Barnabas evangelized the areas to which they had been sent...
- After they returned to the areas to establish leadership and offer encouragement...
- After they reported to their sending church...
- Then, they rested.

Does the Bible say that? Not exactly, but it does say that “they stayed there a long time with the disciples.” While I doubt that they were sitting around with their feet propped up eating chocolate all day and reading novels, I believe they were resting. No longer were they surrounded by people who were suspicious at best and hateful at worst. No longer did they have to worry about being run out of town or stoned for their words. No longer did they move under the weight of reaching the lost or loving the saved. For a time, they were able to bask in the love and encouragement of other believers. They were able to study with and learn from the disciples. They were able to rest.

APPLICATION: In today’s culture, there is a backlash against authority and accountability. In the United States, we take independence to such an extreme that we often see any authority in a negative light, but authority is not evil. The Bible tells us that God established authority. Authority, when properly exercised, does not diminish success. It actually contributes to it. Authority gives us a framework in which to live our lives.

Paul and Barnabas were not intimidated by authority. They did not balk at accountability. They wanted to be in fellowship with other believers who could help them grow and develop, who loved and encouraged them the way they loved and encouraged others.

CONCLUSION: C.S. Lewis wrote, “It is not your business to succeed, but to do right; when you have done so, the rest lies with God.”

In the book of Colossians, Paul tells believers that they should work as if they are working for the Lord and not men. In other places, he compares our Christian walk to a race. He encourages us to train hard and run well in order to get the prize. By examining his credentials as a Pharisee, we can see that Paul was an over-achiever. Both before he came to know the Lord and afterward, Paul tried his best at whatever he did. Paul wanted to succeed. And, while the world may not have seen it as such, I’m confident that in God’s eyes, Paul and Barnabas were very successful ministers of the gospel on that first missionary journey.

How do you measure success? If we want to be successful in God’s eyes,

- We cannot be afraid of hardship.

- We cannot be resistant to change or to sacrifice.
- We cannot hold back when God calls us to give up power, positions, money, or security.
- We cannot live in comfort and complacency.
- We must do life with other people.
- We must work well with others, submit to authority, and allow ourselves to be held accountable.
- We must have a teachable and humble spirit.

Paul and Barnabas were not successful because of the miles they traveled, the number of churches they started, or how many people they led to the Lord. Paul and Barnabas were successful because they obeyed God. How successful are you?

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