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### **Something Worth Living for? Acts 14**

What do you have that is worth giving your life to? Even if you had to let go of everything else, what would you continue to pursue with focused determination, regardless of the opposition, regardless of the difficulty? It certainly would have to be something that was very significant, extremely worthwhile. And I believe God created humans with a desire, a longing to be a part of something that is worthwhile, significant and makes a difference and are willing to make sacrifices to see it through. I am amazed at the dedication some athletes will go through to gain an edge and get better at their sport. What some women will go through to produce the beauty they desire. What many mothers sacrifice for the welfare of their children. What some men will batter their bodies and sleep to be successful in business. The hours of study students will endure to obtain the coveted A grade. What do you have in your life that has lighted a passion within you that you are so determined to pursue regardless of how difficult? Regardless of how hard or ridiculed or laughed at you may be? Is there something in your life that you cling onto even if you had to let go of everything else? Think with me honestly now. How high would your commitment to following Christ make it on that list. Number 5? Number 3? 2? God will settle for no less than number 1. He is not interested in a part time position. He does not relish being relegated to Sunday morning star status. He will not be mistress or a side dish for He calls us to pursue Him with a Holy passion that is supreme and incomparable above all the other loves in our life. Without such focused determination to follow him a pursuit of God and His purposes grows increasingly stale, and dull and boring. It will soon seem very clumsy and irrelevant giving way to the real passions

of your heart. I begin this morning with a challenge for us to think about our own pursuit of God and His purposes, because I see such an incredible focused determination in the life and actions of Paul and Barnabas, the first missionary team that was sent out from the church in Antioch. Neither the peaks of popularity nor the swamps of failure could alter their resolve to complete the mission that God had called them to. They had become so convinced that God had called them to share the good news about what God had done in Jesus Christ, that they kept on keeping on, kept trusting that God is God and He knows what He is doing and will keep providing the strength and grace to continue.

Chapter 14 I see a strategy for effectiveness that I think we would do well to study and follow in their example. We learn some things about who God is and how He works and that's always of value to think about. We see an example from the apostles of how they pursued God's purposes and we can learn from them as well. For those of us who long to be connected with doing something worthwhile. and my assumption is that pursuing the purposes of God are worthwhile there are several things we need to know. One, I need to actively engage in the conversation, involve myself in the process. Two, I need to expect that suffering and opposition is going to be part of the deal. Third, I need to keep close and accountable to others who have the same passion that I am pursuing.

Turn with me to Acts chapter 14 where we see the apostles, first called such here in this chapter actively engaging in the conversation about Jesus. Point one. Actively engage in conversation. The standard strategy for sharing their faith was to go to where there were people who had some sort of hunger for God. People who went to the synagogue, Jews had all the background knowledge of God and the Old Testament so that is where they usually went to first. If followed the pattern Jesus set out for them. To the Jew first and also to the Greek. They had been run out of the last town they were in, but that didn't discourage them

from keeping on doing what God had called them to do. They come to Iconium in v.1 of chapter 14 enter the synagogue and preach the gospel. Great results and many believed, Jews and Gentiles responded to the message. In v.27 we see that Paul and Barnabas realize that at every place they stop to preach, its God who opens these door of faith in people. He opens the doors of faith for the people back then and opens doors of faith in the people we talk to at work, in our neighborhoods. We need to be expecting them to open and then need to see an open door well enough to walk through it when God opens it up. Then we share the good news about Jesus.

What happens next. When the truth about Jesus gets laid out in conversation, preaching, it always demands a response it will either be belief or disbelief. If we tell the truth accurately and fully and confidently without leaving out any of the hard parts, then we are going to see both acceptance and rejection. Most of us would like to share the gospel in such a way that those with ears will hear us and believe and the rest of the people will at least walk away respecting us. But the option of being faithful to the truth of the Word and being accepted and approved by everyone simply does not exist. We have to be willing to be opposed for telling the truth. That is part of the deal...I must get used to it. And if I am not ready for that piece, then I will never actively engage the conversation. I will not be willing to risk, to stick my neck out, to tell the truth about Jesus whether or not it gets accepted or bitten off. I will stay in my shell and hide at school, at work, with my friends because I fear the opposition. And while I keep myself what I think of as “safe” my life of pursuing Jesus continues to be devoid of the satisfying excitement that always comes from radically following him.

Opposition comes and we expect that v.2 The Jews who disbelieved, literally were “unpersuadable”. Would not listen. Would not give it a chance. Refused to believe. They felt so threatened by this message that they had to oppose it. We are not told how they did it, but

they stirred up the people. They may have assaulted the character of the apostles. They may have ridiculed their position. They may have appealed to the past precedent. "How dare they try to change our system" They may have tried the Home town argument. These guys are not from around here. They are not like us. They may have appealed to the authorities. Look at all the disturbance they create. Who are they to walk in here. I'm sure there was a pretty good reason our Jewish elders in Jerusalem backed the Roman governments execution of this man. We are only hearing one side of this story. You can almost hear the whispers of doubt and confusion and questioning that these want to blow poison in their ears. So v.3 Paul and Barnabas take their time. They stick around and build relationships. Ministering to others is all about building relationships and if we are going to actively pursue the conversation we must be willing to spend some time with people to do it.

In building those relationships we need to understand who and where the people are at that we are trying to reach. We can compare Paul's' sermon in chapter 13 with the sermon here in chapter 14 that was given to a largely pagan audience. In chapter 13 Paul spoke of how God had worked in powerful ways in the Old Testament stories. Paul appealed to scripture and truth of God that they already knew. Here in 14 these people didn't know anything about those stories. They were non-religious people who had never been to church before. Paul knows where they are at and approaches them by what they have witnessed in creation. Behind creation Paul says in v.15-17 there is one living God. Not a myriad of powerless pagan idols. Nature bears witness to a one creator God who has demonstrated his common grace to all men by giving the rain and fruitful seasons and satisfying hearts with good things. This same God in His Sovereign plan has not made us robots, but has given man a choice. Man has the choice to choose to do evil v.16 and one does not have to look very far to see many have taken that choice. Know who you are talking with and engaging in truth revealing

conversation. Be willing to take the time to build that relationship. God is the one who opens the doors. Where are your friends at? Have you taken some time to consider what is the next thing they need to know or understand about God so they can be better prepared to hear the gospel message? Maybe they have had no church background at all. They may not have ever met a Christian that wasn't bizarre or caricatured on some TV show. Maybe they need to see a person who loves God and loves people and derives his view of the world through the eyes of God. Maybe the next step is in regards to the Bible. They may need to begin to understand that the Bible has truth for living and is from God and I derived great strength from that truth. Maybe they need to learn more about the Jesus of the Bible and the things He said and did and what His whole purpose was in coming. Maybe they need to hear of some of the proofs of the existence of Jesus. Point is that as I actively engage I the conversation I need to discern where they are at and what the next step is they need to take and how I can point them in the right direction and step through the open doors that God will open.

However I engage the conversation with those around me it will demand a response. Point two. Expect suffering as its part of the deal. Reading through this chapter and most of Acts it seems clear that God allows people who really want to follow him to be placed in difficult situations, dangerous situations. In fact, sometimes God calls people to go back to dangerous places. Sometimes He wants me to get out of there. Other times to stand there and take it. All this involves a whole bunch of faith and trust in a God that knows far more than I do about life. If I decide to fully follow God then I must anticipate that much of the time it will be difficult. V.2 The people who didn't believe stirred up the people against them. V.5 The verbal stirring must not have been as effective as they wanted so they resorted to violence and attempted to stone them. So Paul and Barnabas fled out of there. Later on in Lystra after an initial strong acceptance, the people dragged them out of the city and stoned

Paul leaving him for dead. V.22 Paul seeks to encourage the new disciples by telling them “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.” This is not a health and wealth gospel message. This is not a gospel of the easy life and healthy life and safe life. This is not a message that you may hear on the television that says “Sign up for Jesus and you will be wealthy. Send me some seed money and God will double it for you.” This is a message that says as Paul wrote reflecting back on his time in this area when writing to his young protégé Timothy. In his second letter chapter 3:11 “persecutions and suffering such as happened to me at Antioch, Iconium and Lystra; what persecutions I endured and out of them all the Lord delivered me. And indeed all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” They left Paul for dead on the garbage heap outside the city and the disciples come out and are standing over his broken body. Tears probably streaming down their faces and sad at such a waste of great gifting. Paul opens one eye and then squints open the next and says, “There will be no funeral today. He gets up and they walk back into town. What a witness to the people of the town to see the man they had stoned and left for dead outside the city walk right back in through the gates and start preaching the gospel again. Wow. Be encouraged if you are facing difficult times right now, because no one dies before its time. That doesn’t mean we go out and step in front of a train, but no one dies before its time.

Dave Howard tells about a fearless pastor named Lupercio Taba who ministered in Columbia. One Sunday Taba was preaching from his pulpit when a man appeared at a side window of the church and aimed a pistol at him and ordered him to stop preaching. The congregation seeing the danger all dove to the floor, however Taba went right on preaching the gospel. The man then fired four shots. Two shots went past the preacher's head., one on one side, one on the other, and lodged in the wall behind him. Two other shots went under one arm and then under the other. The would be assassin dropped his gun and fled. Taba, still

unmoved continued his sermon. Nothing would deter Paul and Barnabas from preaching their message either.

Suffering. Persecution. Difficult times. Get used to it. God may use opposition to move around his missionaries. Opposition didn't stop them from preaching, it just spread it around. I am encouraged not to give up because I am encountering some difficulty. These guys here kept on keeping on because they had such a strong faith and trust in a big God. They didn't give up after one rejection even when the enemies were so angry and threatened by them enough to chase them down from city to city. Sounds a lot like what Paul used to be like huh?

When God does do some great things and moves people we need to be godly enough to realize it's not about us. We must make sure that when others look at us and are impressed we direct them to God. In v.8 they are preaching in the town of Lystra and a man who has been lame from birth is listening to Paul's preaching. Paul can sense something of strong faith response in this man and is impressed by God that God wants to heal this man. So Paul says get up and walk and the guy in obedience does just that. He leaps up and begins to walk. For those who have ever had a leg cast removed you know there is more than one miracle taking place here.

The people of Lystra see this miracle and are amazed. V.11 they think they are gods come down from and they are ready to worship them. Even the priest of the pagan temple hauls down an oxen with garlands all ready to offer sacrifice to them. Why? Well it may be because of a myth that was propagated in that area. Ovid's book called *Metamorphoses* held a story about Zeus and Hermes once visiting a valley near Lystra. They went door to door but people refused to take them in. Finally they came to a poor house occupied by a man named Philemon and his wife Baucis. These elderly people received them and they stayed the night there. In the morning the gods took the couple up out of the city to a mountain and when they looked back on the valley

they saw that the gods had flooded I, downing everyone. Then while they were looking on the couple saw that the gods had transformed their poor hovel into a great temple with a glittering gold roof. The story must have been know in Lystra so that when Paul and Barnabas did this miracle, the people thought that Zeus and Hermes had returned and the people of the city certainly were not going to miss it again this time remembering what they thought had happened the first time.

Now I think this may have been a vulnerable time for the apostles having been just run out of the last town. They may have thought. Well now this is more like it. This is the kind of treatment I deserve. But they didn't allow the evil one to knock them off their mission by a huge amount of success. Be aware, Satan can use opposition or adulation in order to distract up from communicating the message of God. The people were talking excitedly in their own Lycaonian dialect so I think it took awhile before Paul and Barnabas fully understood what was going on. But when they saw the oxen and preparations for sacrifice they knew these people had missed the point entirely. The apostles ripped their coats, not very godlike to do, and empled the people. Don't do this. We are men just like you. The whole reason we came. Our whole message is to try and convince you to turn away from these vain, lifeless idols. Don't do it. Hell hath no fury then a worshiper scorned. And the ever fickle crowds quickly turned on Paul and started to pick up stones.

What can we learn here? Popularity is not a great determiner of truth. The crowds will tend to latch onto the communicator and ignore the communication. The people get excited about the supernatural and having God around...as long as he fits into their box. Let me be very clear this morning. God will not be fit into our box. God Almighty will not be domesticated by us. He does not change his time schedule to accommodate us. He does not creatively adjust the truth so that I will feel more comfortable. He does not shave a truth here and there so that as many people as possible will come and listen and be happy. Many

people don't mind worshiping God as long as He is willing to fit into our own terms. Do you think same sex marriage is Ok no problem just cut out those parts of scripture and keep right on going. In fact, go ahead and appoint a homosexual to lead your church. Hello! What are you thinking? That is like the private first class coming up to the general before the big battle. They need to synchronize watches and so the private says. 'Uhh general. I have this watch here and I really like it. My mother gave it to me but the little stem that changes times..well...its' kinda like broken. How about if you just change your watch to adjust to mine. You've got to be kidding? That guy would get his tush kicked so fast out of there. We adjust to the generals time. He sets the plan and objectives and directions. If we've got a problem we have better change it to get in line with His truth because God will not be fix into our box.

At the end of this chapter we see the end of the first missionary trip. The apostles retrace their steps back through the cities that they preach the good news in. v.22 they strengthened the believers and encouraged them. They set up some leadership so that the churches had godly direction in place. They continued to pray and fast and seek God's guidance. And then sailed home to their sending church Antioch. Here they reported all that God had done. V27 Here we see a final strategy for effectiveness and that is in sharing what God has done. Note they don't talk a lot about their experiences or what they were able to pull off. Their report centered about what God had done and how God had reached out in a powerful way to the Gentiles.

Do you spend time with believers sharing what God has done? That can be most encouraging in the face of the battle. If I pull my coal away from the fire too long it can grow cold. But if I keep my ember close to the rest of the fire I can keep glowing in Gods grace as I strengthen and am strengthened. As I encourage and am encouraged. As I persevere and see others persevere. I am encouraged and get to see the benefits on the backside of the difficult and demanding. I Peter 5:10 "And after you

have suffered for a little while , the God of all grace who called you to his eternal glory in Christ will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you.

Sit down this week and think of one difficult situation you are going through right now. Verbally tell God out loud that you trust him in this situation and then ask Him what he wants you to do about it. Expect him to answer and then do it.