

INSPIRED MISSION & ENDURANCE (Acts 12:25-15:35)

As the church in Antioch followed the Spirit's lead, mission became the mission. Paul and Barnabas were set aside to fulfill a calling and carry good news.

Their first stop in Cyprus involved a showdown with a sorcerer who was intent on keeping the gospel from advancing, but the Spirit proved more powerful and an important political leader came to faith.

As Paul and Barnabas continued along the way, they developed a habit and a strategy for sharing the good news of Jesus. They routinely started in the local synagogue, the center for Jewish life in these communities far from Jerusalem. When asked to speak, they would address those united by a common faith to consider Jesus as the long-promised Messiah.

The good news in a nutshell: What God promised, He has delivered. His name is Jesus.

The results were mixed, some communities eagerly embracing this good news, others violently opposing it, but nothing deterred Paul and Barnabas from the mission.

When the Jewish religious leaders opposed them, they became a light to the Gentiles.

In Pisidian Antioch, they found success when their message was warmly received until jealous Jewish leaders incited leading men and women of the city to resist them. Forced out of town, they carried the good news to Iconium.

In Iconium, they experienced success too, but the city was divided again by Jews who resisted the good news, and a plot developed to stone them. They escaped and fled to Lystra and Derbe.

Paul and Barnabas were welcomed as gods there when they worked healing for a lame man. Of course, they refused the worship, and again Jews who followed them from Iconium and Antioch stirred up the crowd to resist them. They stoned Paul, dragged him out of town, and left him for dead. But the disciples gathered around him, he got up, and walked back into the city.

Moving on to Derbe, they continued preaching and winning converts, then returned to the cities they had visited, strengthening and encouraging the new Christians there with the promise they must endure many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.

When they returned to Antioch, they shared all the Lord had accomplished as they carried His good news in mission. They celebrated together, but the hard work of growing the family of God was just beginning.

Their growth was tested by religious Pharisees who demanded these Gentiles be circumcised to keep the law of Moses, but Peter and Paul together advocated for a better way. The apostles agreed to welcome the Gentiles without excessive restrictions, encouraging them only to leave behind the sexual immorality and ritual sacrifice of their idolatrous past.

Hardships for new Gentile believers would inevitably come, but those belonging to the Way wouldn't be their point of origin. This new people would be committed to making it easy for Gentiles to join the faith. The hard part would come as they committed themselves to faithfully walking it out.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Has the difficulty of following Jesus ever surprised you?

For those of you who have given your lives to the Lord, can you think of that first moment after your initial commitment to him when you realized, perhaps in a startling way, that following Jesus would not be easy?

As Paul carried the good news, he was met with both great joy and forceful resistance. Can you say that has been true in your life?

When have you been met with joy?

When have you been met with resistance?

As the angry crowd left Paul for dead outside Lystra, the disciples gathered around him, then he got up and went back into the city. We don't know what the disciples did as they gathered around Paul. Maybe they prayed. What we do know is that Paul wasn't left to die. Strengthened by the community of believers, he got up. What do you think this powerful image suggests about our life together and the resistance we face as we carry the good news of Jesus?

As Paul made his way back to the towns he had visited, he made it clear entering the kingdom of God and enduring hardships were a package deal.

That's not a fun thought, but it's an important one.

Have you accepted this reality?

Life in mission means both joy and hardship.

Is your life with Christ truly marked by both?

How can we, like Paul and those who believed with him even in the face of resistance, live with inspired endurance?

Humanity just broke the 2-hour barrier for the marathon.

It was truly a team effort, from the victorious runner to his pacers, innovators in shoe design, hydration, aerodynamics and more. Altogether, they achieved what was at one time thought impossible.

How can we live like this together?

How can we break barriers and carry the gospel with endurance as a group?

Pray for lives marked by inspired endurance.

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