

The Pattern of Mission

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 05 May 2024

Preacher: Jonathan de Groot

[0 : 0 0] Well, right now it is the SQA exam season, and so if you're a high school pupil, you'll be conscious that there's exams and you're in the midst of studying and you're in the thick of it.

So I thought I might start with a physics test, first of all, this afternoon. And here is the question, does anyone know what Newton's third law of motion is? Newton's third law of motion.

Okay, no physicists here this afternoon. Newton's third law of motion states that for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. Remember that from high school?

Yeah, all the nods now, a bit late, but glad you acknowledge now that's Newton's third law of motion. So his law basically states that in every interaction, there are a pair of forces acting on the two interacting objects.

For the size of the forces on the first object equals the size of the forces on the second object. So the direction of the force on the first object is the opposite to the direction of the force on the second object.

[1 : 0 3] Got it? Simple? Should be a physics teacher. And this law is often illustrated by trying to step off a boat onto the shore, where the force of you moving from the boat to the shore means that the boat is pushed out.

And of course, if you're not careful, you'll be falling into the water as you try to get off the boat. So this, of course, might be the way that the laws of physics work, and they do.

But God's got a very different law of motion. And we see this law of motion at work in the book of Acts. And we see it this afternoon in Acts chapter 14, especially.

And God's law of motion is different because when it comes to God advancing his kingdom or growing the church, for every action, there is always an opposite reaction, but the forces are never equal.

And we see this again and again and again in the book of Acts, where there's always opposition to the message of Jesus. There's always opposition to the messengers of Jesus.

[2 : 0 9] But that force is never so big that it stops the message of Jesus getting out and spreading and growing to the ends of the earth. Because when the opposition comes, the gospel of Jesus Christ, the good news of Jesus Christ is a far stronger force.

That means the church grows and the gospel advances. And we see this here in Acts chapter 14, which really is describing for us Paul's first missionary journey.

The apostle Paul, this is his first missionary journey. Because as the good news of Jesus Christ goes out into the world, the missionaries share this good news. Their mission is always accompanied by danger and division and disturbance.

And yet none of it ever stops the mission, the message of Jesus advancing or spreading. And this is really the normal pattern for mission.

And we need to know it if we belong to the church of the Lord Jesus. If we call ourselves a Christian, we need to know how his mission works. But if you're here this afternoon and you wouldn't call yourself a Christian, it's also good to know just what it means to be part of the church of Jesus Christ.

[3 : 21] To know what being involved in the mission of Jesus is like. Because what we see here is that it isn't always easy or plain sailing. It is hard and it is difficult.

And yet the mission of Jesus still continues to grow and expand. And so I'd like us to look at three points this afternoon. And the three points are these. First, mission creates division.

Verse 1 to 7. Second, mission causes disturbance. Verse 8 to 18. And then third, mission contains danger. Verse 19 to 28. So first of all, mission creates division.

Verse 1 to 7. Now this has happened before as the church has gone out with the message of Jesus. And now it's happening again in a place called Iconium. There at the beginning of chapter 14.

This place is in Turkey. So today the name for this place is Konya. And at the time it was the largest city in the region. And it was on a major east-west trade route.

[4 : 24] And so the apostle Paul, as he always did, would go first of all to the major cities with the good news of Jesus. Because that's where the people were. And the message of Jesus could then spread out from the city to other places.

So verse 1 tells us, chapter 14. So here's the opposition.

And yet it doesn't stop the mission. It only ups the ante. So verse 3. So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to perform signs and wonders.

So it was an amazing opportunity. But, verse 4, the people of the city were divided. Some sided with the Jews, others with the apostles. Okay, so the mission of Jesus Christ divides this city.

People took sides. Some people wanted to harm the apostles and even stone them to death. The haters are going to hate, hate, hate, hate, hate. According to Taylor Swift, people completely lose the plot over the message of Jesus Christ.

[5 : 53] How is that? And notice, this is not just irreligious people who lose the plot. It's religious people who lose the plot. They refuse to tolerate the message of Jesus or even tolerate the messengers of Jesus.

And yet such a negative reaction doesn't mean the message has been misunderstood. It's actually a sign that the message has been clearly heard. And this is no different today.

An extreme reaction to the Christian message doesn't mean that people don't get it. It actually means people do get it.

It's just that they don't like it. And so in Iconium, they're essentially saying, It's the intolerance of tolerance, isn't it?

And we see it today. So while we're, of course, all for free speech, if you're too public about your faith in Jesus, then, well, that's not the speech we really want to hear in our society.

[7 : 10] And it could even be construed as hate speech. So whilst our society will basically tolerate anything that anybody says, some of Christianity's claims will not be tolerated.

They'll be seen as extreme or fundamentalist or even dangerous. And so people will always reject the true message of Jesus.

And what we see here is they'll even behave in really strange and odd and bizarre ways as they reject it. Because did you notice who was behind the cancelling of the Christians here?

Verse 5, it was the Jews and the Gentiles. They joined together. Now, Jews and Gentiles themselves culturally were so divided. They would never associate with one another.

They hated each other. They would never talk with one another. And yet here they are joining forces in some kind of unholy alliance against Jesus's followers. And doesn't the devil love to create these strange alliances to oppose Jesus and his people?

[8 : 17] And you see it when different groups join together to attack the true church of Jesus Christ. Whether it be rival political parties who are so different, but they end up coming together to join forces, perhaps against a particular Christian candidate.

Or maybe even the media siding with the liberal church because both are pro-gay marriage. And so they push that agenda.

You see, the mission of Jesus always creates division. And it must because it forces people to choose where their allegiance lies.

The message of Jesus, when it's clearly heard, actually stops people sitting on the fence. Where there's a dividing line and we've got to decide whether we are for Jesus or whether we are against him.

Because it's impossible to fudge it with Jesus. And yet still some people will try. Perhaps by claiming that, well, they can't believe the message of Jesus because it's just too hard.

[9 : 27] Or there's just not enough evidence. And perhaps that's where you're at. And you reckon that, well, if you just saw a miracle, or if something made you believe that this was more reasonable, then, well, you'd believe.

And it doesn't work like that. Just look at Iconium here. The people heard the message and it was confirmed with miracles, with signs and wonders. And yet that still made no difference to them.

The city was divided despite this. And so it's not that people can't believe. It's more that they won't believe.

It's actually a matter of the will rather than the intellect. And so if you wouldn't call yourself a Christian believer, then I guess I'd encourage you to honestly ask yourself, do you not believe because you don't understand?

It's an intellectual thing. You can't just grasp it. Or in reality, is it a matter of your will? Do you not believe because you just don't actually want to believe in Jesus Christ?

[10 : 39] Because if you did believe, then it would mean a massive upheaval in your life, in all sorts of areas, and you're really not prepared for that. You see, the message of Jesus, when it comes to us and we clearly hear it, it pushes us off the fence that we like to sit on.

And that's why division always comes with the message of Jesus. And yet, that's how Jesus builds his church. And so that's the first thing. Mission creates division.

Secondly, mission causes disturbance. And so Paul and Barnabas here went to this place called Lystra, verse 8, a place mainly populated by Gentiles, non-Jews.

And they performed an amazing miracle where this lame man stands up and he walks, just like the kind of miracles that Jesus did in the Gospels. And yet, this sparks off this fanatical reaction from the crowd.

So verse 11, So can you see how the crowd just went absolutely wild?

[12 : 02] And now there could be a reason for this, because a number of years earlier, the Roman writer Ovid, he wrote a legend that was set in this particular area.

And it was a legend of how the gods, Zeus and Hermes, came down to earth, to this very area, and they were disguised as mortal men. And they went round asking people if they could have hospitality for the night.

And the story tells of how they went round a thousand homes and nobody welcomed them in until they came to the home of an elderly couple. And the elderly couple welcomed them in. And so the gods then blessed the elderly couple and gave them rewards, but they destroyed the properties of everybody else in that place.

And so the legend could help explain why there's this abnormal reaction to Paul and Barnabas, where they're idolized and the people want to offer sacrifices to them.

Maybe it's because the people in the city just wanted the gods to be kind to them, or so they thought. And yet, this is a shock for Paul and Barnabas, but it gives them this great opportunity to share the good news of Jesus with this pagan crowd.

[13 : 17] And so what Paul does is he urges them to turn from their idolatry, their idol worship, to the living God, verse 14 to 17. And I notice this is a different approach to the one that Paul uses in places where there's lots of Jews and there's a synagogue because this crowd didn't have the Jewish scriptures.

And so Paul couldn't start there to explain about Jesus and point them to him. No, he starts where these people are at. And verse 15 tells us how he connects with his listeners.

He says, Friends, why are you doing this? We too are only human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them.

See what Paul does? He highlights what dominates their lives, what they live for and what they worship. And he tells them to turn from these things because they're idols and so they're worthless and instead to worship the living God because he says he's the God who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them.

And so Paul's saying, there is a creator God and he made everything and so if you don't worship the creator God who made everything including you, then you will worship other things instead of worshipping him.

[14 : 47] Because the reality is, for us as human beings, we were made, we were created to worship. It's how we're wired, if you like.

And so Paul's words here really apply in every age. And of course, worship, idol worship, might not be as blatant as it was here offered to Paul and Barnabas, but human beings have always worshipped and always lived for false gods instead of the one true and living God.

And here's how it happens. It happens when we put something else in the place of God in our lives. And it might be money, it might be work, it might be relationships, it might even be family.

And of course, we'd pull back from calling this idolatry, but we can make these things into our gods when we elevate them to such an extent in our lives that they become more important than everything else, including God himself.

You see, we can look to these things as our source of salvation. Not that we'd even call it salvation. We'd speak instead of, well, it's what we live for, or it's where we find meaning, or it's what we trust in, or it's what we put our security in.

[16 : 08] It's what we look to for joy and for satisfaction. Looking to those things instead of looking to God to provide all of that. And so whether it's a good thing or a worthless thing, it can become a God-like thing in our lives.

It becomes our Lord and Savior. It's what we live for, even what we sacrifice our time and our money for. And that's why all people, no matter how secular or how spiritual, need to recognize the false gods that we can look to for fulfillment.

That's what Paul is pointing out here. He's showing these people the worthless things that they're living for to encourage them to turn to the living God instead.

So verse 16 and 17, he says, In the past, he, that's God, let all nations go their own way. Yet he has not left himself without testimony. He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons.

He provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy. See, Paul's wanting them to see every good thing they have comes from God.

[17 : 25] So God's common grace is for all people, which means everything that we enjoy, whether then or now, all of the good things we have, food in our stomachs, joy in our hearts, it all comes from God because he is a good God and he is our creator and he knows what truly satisfies.

And it comes from him and is found in him alone. And so if we live in this world full of good things, Paul's saying, well, we should worship the God who gives us these good things.

And that's essentially what it means to be a Christian. It means to turn away from worthless idols that we can build our lives on and turn to God instead and build our lives on him.

To realize that he alone provides what we need, to realize that he alone is the one who will fill our hearts with joy. And so if we try to find what we need from other places or if we look for that joy from other things, we will only ever be dissatisfied because our greatest needs and our deepest longings, the longings of our hearts, can only be met in God, not in any other source.

And actually, we can end up being enslaved by the very things that we look to to set us free. And so we might think we master all of these other idols, gods, but in reality, they will be the masters of us, whether it's work or money or sex or relationships or power.

[19 : 08] We might think we're in control of them, but they can end up controlling us. And so it's a slavery that we need to be set free from so we can enjoy God's good gifts without worshipping them more than him.

So whether it's first century Lystra or 21st century Glasgow, the message of Jesus, when it's truly heard, does cause great disturbance in our hearts and in our lives because it shows up the vain things that we live for, the worthless things we invest our lives in and it helps us to see them for what they are so that we will turn to the living God.

And that's always a disturbing message, isn't it? To say that you're an idol worshipper and you're wrong in how you're living your life. And that's what happened here in Lystra.

So that's our second point. First, mission creates division. Second, mission causes disturbance. And third, mission contains danger. What's the danger? Well, it's summed up in verse 22 where Paul and Barnabas say we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.

Now that was Paul's experience as a missionary, wasn't it? So verse 19, then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city thinking he was dead.

[20 : 36] That must have been some stoning if they left him for dead. But after the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city. The next day, he and Barnabas left for Derbe.

So it's like this group of Jews are on some kind of jihad because they actually came from over 100 miles away just to stone Paul.

And the stoning was so brutal that they left him for dead. And so being part of the mission of Jesus is always going to be difficult.

It is always going to be dangerous. And opposition will come from all sorts of people who will go to all sorts of lengths to stop the message of Jesus spreading.

And you notice here that it doesn't stop Paul. So while true gospel mission does contain danger, true gospel workers keep going.

[21 : 36] They keep going as Paul does here. Jesus said it would never be easy. And Paul's experience tells us that it wasn't. Because although Paul left Lystra, you notice that he goes back the next day.

Back to the very place where they tried to kill him. And yet there's more. Because Paul and Barnabas here retraced their steps and they revisit all the churches that they had planted.

Why? Well, in verse 21, halfway through, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, 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.

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. So can you see here that mission doesn't just involve winning new converts to the faith, it also involves strengthening them and encouraging them to continue in the faith.

So Paul and Barnabas here follow up with all the disciples that they had made on this missionary journey. They go back to all the churches they had planted. And in a sentence, that's quite short, but do you know what this involved?

[23 : 00] If you look at one of those maps at the back of the Bibles that explains Paul's missionary journeys, here's what they did. Rather than take the short route back to Antioch, which was 200 miles with no cars like we have today, 200 miles is a long way, but rather than take that shorter route back, what they do is they go a longer route back, retracing their steps and going to all of these churches they had planted, which is about 600 miles, much longer journey.

Why? Why go back to these churches? Well, they visited these churches to tell the believers that life with Christ is going to be tough.

We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God. So the mission's not just about planting churches, although it's always good to plant churches.

It's about growing healthy churches that are full of strong believers. And so part of this was appointing elders in these churches, because if churches are going to be strong and healthy, they need strong and healthy leadership.

And that's why the elders' role is to teach and to help people keep following Jesus. We've just recently appointed elders in our own church, and they're here to help people follow Jesus, because there's always going to be resistance to the message of Jesus, and there's always going to be danger for the messengers of Jesus.

[24 : 38] And yet here, we see this is how God opens doors for his work to expand and to grow. So it's the normal pattern of mission.

It was in Acts, it is throughout the New Testament, and it has been throughout church history, and so it really still is the same today. It is part of the deal if we're going to follow Jesus.

We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God. Paul and Barnabas went round to say to people, it is hard. following Jesus.

But it's worth it. You know, when our children were younger, we would always go on holiday to a cottage in Comrie, well, St. Fullens, which is near Comrie in Perthshire, and it was fantastic being at the cottage.

But the road to the cottage was an absolute nightmare, because it was about eight miles long, and it was single track, and it was a windy road, and at one side there was a massive hillside where if you just weren't careful, you might fall over the edge of the hill.

[25 : 48] I just checked the map the other day, and the road is the B827, so you can check it out. It's one of the windiest roads I've ever driven on. But if you're going to go to the cottage via the shortest route, you've got to go through and along this road.

There's a longer road, but it takes longer, obviously, and nobody with three young children wants to drive longer or further than you need to. But the whole family hated travelling on this road, and it was frustrating for me.

It was so long and so windy, you could hardly accelerate or get moving on it. It was dangerous because you were driving at the edge, and it was often disgusting because dogs have been known to be sick on this road because it's so windy, and Shona has caught dog sick in her hand as we're driving.

So it's not a pleasant journey. Nobody likes it. The smells, the sights, never good. People complain about my driving. It's too fast or it's too slow.

It's too windy. Never a pleasant experience. Always painful, and it seemed like it took about three hours to drive eight miles on this road. But when the children were young, if you'd said to them, hey, let's go to Comrie, they would jump into the car like they were spring-loaded because the scenery was beautiful, the cottage was lovely, there was a nice open fire, the wildlife was amazing, the garden was great, the walks were fantastic, the loch was lovely, and we had so many family traditions that the road there was actually worth it.

[27 : 32] Didn't seem so at the time, but when you got to the destination, it was all worth a while. Well, why do I say this? Because we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.

That is the reality of following Jesus Christ, and we know it. I know it, and you know it. Some of you are going through really tough and painful times right now.

You know about the hardships, the difficulties, the trials, and the tribulations. For various reasons, you just know how tough it is. And so God's word to us is saying to us, don't be shocked when these trials and tribulations come.

Don't be surprised when it is hard. Because this is the road that is set before us. It always has been.

And yet, when we follow this road and we keep going, we know it will be worth it in the end. The destination will be beautiful because we will enter the kingdom of God.

[28 : 40] And so let's not be surprised. And let's never just give up in despair, even though the hardships may involve hurt and pain. And many of us might even bear scars.

Apostle Paul certainly did. And our scars may not be physical scars, or they may be, but we may have them because of our involvement in the mission of Jesus.

Whether you're young or whether you're old, it is hard. But we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God. So as a follower of Jesus, there's a sense in which we will limp all our way to glory.

Because it's tough. We will tread a road of suffering. suffering. We've got to. And so how can we keep going as we close? Well, it's impossible to keep going in our own strength.

We can't do it. But we do have one who has gone before us and who has gone for us. Jesus Christ stuck to his mission, even though it meant suffering and death.

[29 : 56] Jesus went through the tribulation of the cross before the triumph of the resurrection. Jesus willingly, willingly went to glory through suffering.

The cross before the crown. Why? Well, for you and me. Jesus kept going in order to save us.

He was crucified for our sin so we could be set free from his punishment. Jesus did it for us so we could enter the kingdom of God.

And so if this was the road the Savior went, then should not his servants tread it still? Because there can be no crown without a cross.

God help us. If we are a follower of Jesus to see beyond the tribulations of this life to the sure and certain triumph that is to come.