

Introduction: ¹⁹ Some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and when they won over the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, thinking he was dead. ²⁰ After the disciples gathered around him, he got up and went into the town. The next day he left with Barnabas for Derbe.

God has sovereignly sustained Paul's life—he will live another day to contend for the Gospel.

Transition: We catch a glimpse of Paul's Church planting and church growth strategy.

Over the years I have read quite literally scores (honestly, I don't even think I could guess how many) **books, articles** and **podcasts** on church health and church growth. **And I will have to say that there has been a woefully inadequate emphasis placed on the role of preaching to a gathered body on Sunday morning.**

I read a blog post by a self-described "expert" in church growth and his advice on why churches don't grow. He said in no uncertain terms, **"Sermons do a lot of things, but sermons don't make disciples."** He goes on in the article to enlighten us as to what preaching can do "They can inspire, inform, motivate us" but they *can't make disciples*. "The key to making disciples" he wrote, **"is not proclamation."** According to this individual we have far overestimated the power of Sunday morning preaching.

That is exactly the kind of wrongheaded advice that permeates the Mega Church obsession that our culture has had for the last half century or so. I mean to show you that Paul had a very different view of how to make disciples and build the body of Christ.

Let me say plainly, preaching to the gathered assembly is the primary way in which God makes disciples, and it's the primary way in which the church is built. We gather to exalt Christ together, and as we do we are encouraged for the difficulties of life, our bonds of unity are strengthened, and we are moved to fulfill the Great Commission as individual disciple-makers. It is through the proclamation of God's word that we are converted from being unrighteousness to righteousness, and we are taught to obey all that Christ has commanded.

Now, we've talked a lot about parents discipling kids, or individuals discipling friends and the rest. But today we're going to focus on Paul's approach to discipling through preaching.

I. They made disciples by preaching and proclaiming the Good News of Jesus.

Acts 14:21 After they had preached the gospel in that town and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, to Iconium, and to Antioch.

Now, this word for *preach* is the same word Matthew uses when he describes Jesus's ministry in Matthew 4:23 (see also 9:35) "Now Jesus began to go all over Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom." When Jesus taught in the synagogue—an assembly of gathered Jewish believers, he was preaching the good news of the Kingdom of God.

In Acts this word is used repeatedly to describe the Apostles, evangelists, preachers, prophets and teachers making disciples through the work of public proclamation.

Col 1:28 "We **proclaim** him, warning and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ."

Not every act of proclamation is a Sunday Sermon. But the public proclamation can and should inspire ongoing proclamation through conversation.

Preaching is biblical, it is a command, and is the primary way in which disciples are made.

But what exactly does preaching do?

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- 1. Preaching is instrumental in our conversion.** God has ordained it so that faith is awakened through the instrumentality of the proclaimed Word. Paul says in Rom 10:9, 10, “This is the message of faith that we proclaim: ⁹If you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved...¹⁴ How, then, can they call on him they have not believed in? And how can they believe without hearing about him? And how can they hear without a preacher? ¹⁵ And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: **How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news.** ¹⁶ But not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, **Lord, who has believed our message?** ¹⁷ So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the message about Christ.”

Now, this conversion applies to both the unbeliever and the believer.

When an unbeliever hears God’s Word and the Spirit is present to release their minds from unbelief and deception—they experience a conversion from their previous beliefs. Faith awakens in their soul and their eyes see Christ clearly portrayed.

Believers, likewise experience an ongoing conversion/reformation of our thoughts and actions. Just because we’re saved does not mean all the beliefs we hold are now automatically true, nor does it mean that we are predisposed to just believing rightly about everything.

God’s Word is inspired (2 Tim 3:15-16) and is profitable for teaching, rebuking, correction, and training in righteousness. Why would it be necessary for a disciple of Jesus to hear the inspired word to be taught, rebuked, corrected, and trained? Just because we’re saved doesn’t mean always wise. **We all need the discipling conversion that the Word of God brings.**

Illus. After coming to faith in Jesus as a teenager—my best friends and I would regularly study Scripture during the week.

I think it’s safe to say that I spent more time with them than I did any of my pastors. But our time in the word together was drastically different. I began to notice they prioritized “new revelation” and my priority in study was “authorial intent.” As I look back on it, the difference was in our weekend church gatherings. They attended wildly charismatic environments where the preacher could be heard to say regularly “God revealed to me what this passage is saying for us today.” Where is in my church, the pastor would regularly say, “This is what this means in context—it means what it meant to its original audience.” I didn’t know it at the time, but my thinking—the way I thought about the biblical text was being molded and shaped by the way in which my pastor proclaimed God’s word on Sunday. **Never underestimate the power and influence of teaching. God designed teaching and preaching to convert our thinking to his.**

2. Preaching is instrumental for our strength and encouragement. 2 Tim 3:16 is not, **NOT** an exhaustive list of all that the proclaimed word of God will do. God's Word is also presented to encourage us in the faith. Because life is hard. And we need to the mutual encouragement of the Gospel.

Notice what Paul and Barnabas do after making disciples...

²¹After they had preached the gospel in that town and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, to Iconium, and to Antioch, ²²**strengthening the disciples by encouraging them to continue in the faith and by telling them, "It is necessary to go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God."**

We're saved through hardships. The Gospel has a preserving effect on the believer—we are saved as we go through many hardships.

These hardships are not the source of our salvation, nor are they the destination.

Let me tell you a secret: **everyone goes through the valley of the shadow of death**—but not everyone goes through it with Jesus, or with the family of God to lean on. Everyone endures that valley, but Christ prepares a table for us, his people.

We've said it before—*Everyone wants to go to heaven but no one wants to die to get there.* Likewise, everyone wants to enter the Kingdom of God (much preferable to its alternative) but who wants to go through the valley of death's shadow? **But Paul says it's necessary. Why?**

Their primary message is: 1) trials are inevitable and instrumental and 2) we ultimately enter God's Kingdom where trials cannot touch us anymore.

So what do trials do?

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A. Trials are the means of our growth.

- **Trials are instrumental in maturing us.** It is one of the primary ways God grows us up. An unexercised muscle atrophies. A blade not hammered nor tempered will break.
- **Trials are vital in proving us. Testing the genuineness of our faith.** “The testing of your faith” results in genuineness.
- **Trials are indispensable to equip us to minister to others.** “We comfort you in your trials with the same comfort we received in our trials.” Trials deepen us and give us sympathy for the plight of our brothers and sisters in the Lord.
- **Trials are the means by which God preserves us. Trials produce endurance, and endurance perseverance—hope.**

But in the midst of these tests and challenges to our faith—we need encouragement. We need the encouragement that comes with the hope of eternity.

B. We’re encouraged as we’re reminded of our heavenly calling in Christ. The headline of this passage is not that trials are necessary to grow us up, test our faith, equip us with compassion, and as the means of our perseverance. The headline is that they actually deliver us to the Kingdom of Heaven. That’s where we’re going.

This is an already but not yet Kingdom. Jesus taught them (Acts 1:3); Philip proclaimed the “Good news of the Kingdom (Acts 8:12); Paul argued persuasively about the Kingdom of God with the Ephesians in the Lecture hall of Tyrannus (Acts 19:8); From morning till night Paul never stopped proclaiming from the Law and Prophets about the Kingdom (28:23, 31).

- 1) **The Kingdom of God is his reign over all power, authority and dominion.** Seated above the clouds, Jesus is proclaimed King and Lord over all.
- 2) **The Kingdom of God begins in the heart of every believer who is born anew into this realm. “And the peace of Christ will reign over your hearts as you are thankful” (Col 3:15).** The Kingdom is intensely personal experience of Christ reigning in me. This kingdom is everywhere and nowhere.
- 3) **The Kingdom of God is visible in and through the Church**—local and universal. The world can see the effects of God’s rule in the lives of his people. This is what it means to live in community with God again. This is the picture of God restoring his presence to humanity.
- 4) **The Kingdom of God is advancing until the time of the Gentiles is up and God turns his attention back to ethnic Israel** so that he may have two witnesses in the last days—the lampstand and the olive branch. The Church consisting of Jew and Gentile who witness boldly, powerfully, and against unremitting headwinds of the hatred of our culture.

- 5) **The Kingdom of God will be consummated when Christ returns.** The author of Hebrews says (2:8) “At present we do not yet see everything subject to him”—but when he returns he will bring all nations, cultures, and systems under his Sovereign, benevolent rule.
- 6) **The Kingdom of God results in a New Heavens and Earth**—when God brings his world-righting salvation to all creation in the new Eden, the new Jerusalem.

Right now it's proclaimed over all; right now it's present in our hearts; right now it's portrayed in Christian community. But it's also not yet. It's consummation awaits fulfillment.

This is the kingdom of God that brings us consolation in the midst of our present struggles.

Preaching reminds us that the cares of this life—all the stuff we wade through and walk through—the testing and trying circumstances of life—it is the means by which we are forged into Christ's likeness; **All of it will be swallowed up in victory. As we pass through many hardships, we are ultimately coming into God's Kingdom—the Heavenly Realm.**

Conclusion: That's how disciples are made—we need to be disciplined in this hope. And we need to hear it frequently! The gospel—the Good News of this Kingdom isn't going to solve every problem you have right now. Ultimately though, it will solve every problem in creation.

Rom 16:25 “Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation about Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery kept silent for long ages²⁶ but now revealed and made known through the prophetic Scriptures, according to the command of the eternal God to advance the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles—²⁷ to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ—to him be the glory forever! Amen”

Prayer:

Father we thank you for leaving us a sure word—for the transformation of our minds in the gospel. We thank you for its converting effect on how we think—as Kingdom ambassadors to a lost world.

We know that our trials are inevitable, and instrumental—the very way you forge in us the character of your Son Jesus. We take comfort and solace in the fact that we have received an eternal Kingdom.

Right now it's proclaimed over all—Father may we fearlessly proclaim that you reign over all; right now it's present in our hearts—Father may the peace of Christ reign in us

Right now it's observed in the Church—your holy saints in holy community. Where your will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

And we look forward to a day when we will enter the Kingdom of Heaven fully—no more sorrow, no more pain, no more grief and heartache. Where every tear will be wiped away from our eyes.