

**Ripples. Part Four**  
**The Believers Grow**  
**Acts 14.21-24, 15.41, 18.23**

**February 16, 2025**

**David Henderson**

Rudy Klaas and his wife Laurie have served as missionaries in Africa for the past 33 years, helping to bring the gospel to men and women and children in refugee camps in places like Darfur, South Sudan, Uganda, and Chad. God has used them in remarkable ways over the past third of a century to share the good news and to reach people for Christ.

But for me personally, the greatest gift I received from Rudy was when I was a brand new Christian at Miami University with just a few more months on campus before I headed off to work with Procter and Gamble, and Rudy took me under his wing and showed me how to spend meaningful time with the Lord each day. Those times we prayed and worshipped and read the scriptures together, often on our knees, were awkward and uncomfortable and necessary and life-changing and life-giving for me.

How interesting, that I learned from a *missionary* that God is as concerned about ministry as he is about missions, and it is as much his heart to strengthen and grow those who are his followers as it is to reach them in the first place.

Three weeks ago we started a new series on the Book of Acts, which is a book in the New Testament about the growth of the early church. We're starting the series by unfolding five overall themes that shape and drive the whole book.

The Lord Acts  
The Word Spreads  
The Church Thrives  
The Believers Grow  
The Kingdom Advances

This morning we focus on the fourth of those themes: the believers grow.

You may remember that the second theme was the idea of the word spreading. The Book of Acts is like a picture of ripples, of concentric circles, expanding ever outwards, as we'll touch on next week.

As God flings his people out into the world, wherever they go, they are called to speak up. They witness to their experience of Jesus and they tell the Good News that Jesus is the King and he has come to bring us safely home to God.

But what's fascinating to see when you read the Book of Acts is that there is another set of waves coming back the opposite direction.

Have any of you discovered the wonderful writing of Tristan Gooley? He's a naturalist who wrote the book *The Natural Navigator*. One of the other books he wrote is called *How to Read Water*. In it he describes a fascinating wave pattern called *clapotis*, which is a French word for rippling waves that bounce off a rock or a wall and begin to travel back the other direction, right through the middle of the waves going outward.

This morning's message is about the *clapotis* waves in the Book of Acts.

Throughout the Book of Acts, and throughout the ages, the church *goes out* in *mission*, sharing the message about Jesus and inviting people to follow him.

And then the church turns around and comes back the opposite direction, *returning* and doing *ministry*, stopping at each step along the way to build up, to strengthen, those who have responded to the invitation and become followers of Jesus.

Out to do mission, back to do ministry.

#### **Acts 14.22**

Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith.

You see this pattern on the first missionary journey in Acts chapter 14, where we're told that Paul and Barnabas, having preached the good news all through Asia Minor, now turn around and make their way back home, stopping at the cities where they have led people to Christ in order to strengthen them and encourage them in their faith.

#### **Acts 15.41**

He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

You see it on the second missionary journey, in chapter 15, where it says that Paul, together with Silas, again stopped and strengthened the churches as they were homeward bound.

#### **Acts 18.23**

Paul set out from there and traveled from place to place throughout the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples.

And you see it on the third missionary journey too, in chapter 18, where we're told that after spending some time in Antioch, Paul returned to visit some of the churches he helped establish on earlier trips, visiting them in order to strengthen the new believers.

Let's go back and look just a bit closer at that first example, the one from chapter 14.

When you look at the whole context, you discover that there are four words Luke uses to describe how Paul ministers to these new believers. The passage says:

### **Acts 14.21-23**

Then 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 let's take a quick look at each of these four words and consider what they tell us about this fourth overarching theme from the Book of Acts.

First, Paul helps the believers grow by *strengthening* them. When you look through the whole Book of Acts, this is the word that's used most often to describe the church's ministry.

The word comes from the world of construction. It describes the steps you take to ensure the stability of a structure. It means to support, prop up, shore up. Think of the flying buttresses on Notre Dame.

I remember driving down Roosevelt Avenue in Wheaton one time on a visit up to see the guys. On several previous visits I had seen a huge wall being built that was going to be the side of an office building. It was propped up with row of angled 2x4s. But this time there had been a bad storm the night before, and the entire wall had fallen over. It was flat on the ground. Obviously it didn't have enough support.

What does it tell us about ourselves as followers of Christ that the number one word used to describe ministry to believers is the word "strengthen"?

Doesn't it tell us that we are vulnerable and in need of support? Maybe not as strong as we think we are? A lone believer, a solo believer, is a vulnerable believer.



Who is giving strength to your faith? Who is supporting you, stabilizing you, shoring you up, as you grow toward maturity as a follower of Christ? Who have you give permission to speak into your life of faith?

And whose ladder are you holding? Who is God inviting you to come alongside of, to bring stability and strength to someone else's growing faith? A friend? Maybe someone younger? Maybe some of our teens or children?

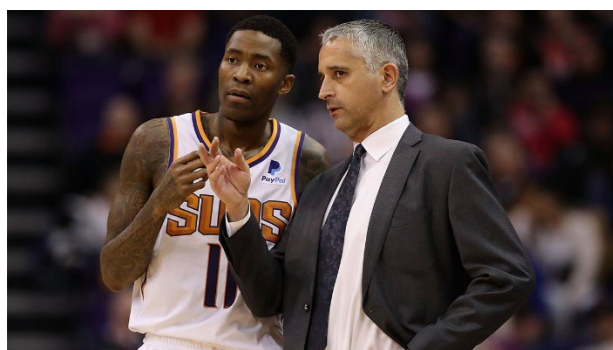
Second, Paul helps the believers grow by encouraging them to remain true to the faith

I love this word. It literally means "to call someone to your side." The idea is that there is someone who knows you really well who can speak into the particulars of your life. So they call you over to their side and speak a word that's just for you, that's just the thing you need to hear in that moment.

This word has an incredibly wide range of meanings. It can mean everything from admonish or exhort; to instruct or teach; to entreat or plead; to comfort or console; to encourage or build up.

In this case, in chapter 14 in Acts, Paul waves them over to his side to remind them that, in a faith in which our own King suffered to the point of death, the Christian life will necessarily include suffering. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," he says. By helping them be clear about what to expect, he is helping them keep their eyes fixed on Jesus when things get tough.

I think of a time when Danny Sharpe, my closest friend, did this for me. Someone in the church was calling everything about my ministry into question and saying I had no business leading the church. It crushed me. When I told Danny, there was a long silence, and then he said, "I wonder how this person might be God's gift to you." It was the last thing I *wanted* to hear, and I told him that, but it was just the thing I *needed* to hear. That one comment completely pivoted around my perspective.



Have you put yourself in a place where people can get to know you? Are you in a small group? Are you intentional to grab lunch or coffee with a brother or sister? And who

have you let far enough into your life that they know you well enough, and love you deeply enough, to know just the thing that God would want to say to you – and have enough courage to say it?

And whose friendship are you pursuing in that same sort of way? Who are you coming to know well enough that God could use you in their life to speak His word of comfort or peace or hope or perspective or truth to them?

Third, Paul helps the believers grow by appointing leaders for them.

The word used in this passage is the Greek word *presbyteros*, which means older people. It's where we get the word Presbyterian. But the point isn't how old they are, it's how spiritually mature they are.

In his ministry Paul establishes a pattern for helping to foster spiritual growth and maturity in the church, in which those who are more spiritually mature are invited to take responsibility for the spiritual growth of those who are less far along.

Those who have followed Jesus for forty years can speak with authority into the lives of those who have followed him for twenty, just as those who have followed Jesus for four years can speak into the lives of those for whom it has been just two. Self-pastoring will only take us so far.



How have you opened your life to those in your church family who may be a bit farther along in their faith than you are? How are you submitting yourself to their spiritual authority and letting them speak into your life?

And how are you being a steward of your own spiritual growth by coming alongside someone who is newer in the faith and mentoring them and cheering them along and building them up?

And last, Paul commits them to the Lord, in whom they have put their trust.

The word “commit” means entrusting someone you *treasure* into the care of someone you *trust*. Isn’t that a beautiful picture? Entrusting someone you treasure into the care of someone you trust. In the end, inviting God to do *his* work in the life of our brother or sister is the best way for us to nurture their spiritual growth.

Committing one another to the Lord can take two forms. One of those is prayer. In Acts 14.23 we’re told that this act of entrusting the believers to God took place in the context of “prayer and fasting.”

It can also take the form of blessing them – speaking a word of faith directly to them. We’re given an example of that in Acts 19.32, when Paul blesses the Ephesian elders. He says, “Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”

We might say something like, “May you experience God’s presence as you walk through this.” “May God give you his wisdom as you wrestle with this difficult decision.” “The Lord bless you and keep you.” “God’s grace to you.” “I entrust you into God’s perfect care.”



Augustine says the key to life is to love God in such a way that we find our life and fulfillment and rest and peace in him, and then to love those God brings into our lives for *his* sake, with reference to him, seeking his best for them.

Who in your life is always encouraging you to keep God in the picture, and to find your life in him?

And when you interact with others, how much do you see them with reference to God, through the lens of what God is doing in their life, and seek what is best for them from his perspective? What might it look like to walk through life entrusting those you treasure into the care of the One you trust?

What is God saying to us this morning about strengthening, encouraging, and developing each other’s faith, and committing one another to the Lord?

God sends the church to the world in mission. God sends the church to the church in ministry. And he intends to use every one of us to shore up the faith of a brother or sister. May God use us in each other's lives to strengthen our church family and to encourage one another in our life of faith.

### **Covenant Snapshot**

Two years ago the elders created a spiritual self-assessment tool for the church. We called it a *snapshot* because it's meant to give us a quick picture of who we are as a church family and where we are spiritually.

We created it for two reasons. First, it was designed to help individuals in the church family to reflect on their own spiritual condition and to encourage them in their spiritual progress. It was also designed to be a tool for our church leaders, to help us reflect on how God is using the ministries we are carrying out, and to wrestle with how those can be made more faithful and effective.

When we created the snapshot the original intent was to circle back around every couple of years and take it again, so that, just like comparing pictures of family gatherings that are taken a few years apart, we can see the way our family members are changing and growing.

Those of you who were with us two years ago will remember that we tried to make taking the survey as convenient as possible by setting aside the last part of a service and giving everybody the chance to take the survey together.

This morning we're going to do that again.

Here are some quick instructions and then we'll get started.

1. There are both paper and electronic versions of the snapshot. We'll put the QR code for the snapshot up on the screen, and ushers will have the paper version available. When they come through, just raise your hand if you'd like one.
2. Most of the survey is simple Q and A format, but in a few places we give you a question that may require a bit of reflection. If you are filling out the snapshot online and you'd like to take some extra time on some of the questions, feel free to grab a paper survey, put your name on it and fill out the longer answers, and then bring it back or mail it in, and we'll join your responses together.
3. Some of you are new to the church family. We'd still love to have you fill out the survey just as a tool for your own reflection as you think about your own spiritual progress and where you are with the Lord these days.
4. Some of you are guests from other nations. We just want to acknowledge that this is an unsettled time in our world and if you are not comfortable answering the questions about your ethnicity or nationality, please don't feel any pressure to do so. But we do

want to assure you that nothing you share with us will be shared beyond the bounds of this church, and even what we do share will only be in the form of general demographic information for the church family as a whole.

5. We won't have a closing song or an official end to the service. Once you're done with the survey, feel free to slip out into the Hub and enjoy the company of your church family.

6. If you take a paper version of the snapshot, when you finish, please put the survey in one of the green baskets. You'll find those in the Landing, in the Hub near the coffee, and at the Reception Desk in the Hub.

7. If you have kids in our Next Gen Ministry, please pick them up at 10:00/11:30 and then continue to enjoy interacting with your church family.

8. Once we begin to compile the results we'll let you know the most important of our discoveries.

Thanks so much for giving us the gift of your thoughtful answers to these questions. We look forward to learning from you.

And now, as we turn to take the snapshot, a blessing for all of you . . .

## **II Peter 3.18**

Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.