

Homiletics Analysis: Acts 14

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Acts 14 narrates the second half of Paul and Barnabas's first missionary journey, moving through Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe before retracing their steps to Antioch of Syria. The chapter is structured by a repeated pattern: proclamation, division, opposition, and continuation. At Iconium, the apostles preach with such effect that the city is split, but a plot to stone them forces their withdrawal to Lystra (vv. 1–7). At Lystra, the healing of a lame man triggers a pagan misidentification — the crowds attempt to worship Paul and Barnabas as Hermes and Zeus — which Paul immediately redirects into a natural theology proclamation of the living God (vv. 8–18). Jewish opponents then arrive from Antioch and Iconium, stir the crowd to stone Paul, and leave him for dead (vv. 19–20). Paul rises, re-enters the city, and the next day departs with Barnabas for Derbe. After making disciples in Derbe, they deliberately retrace their route through every hostile city — strengthening churches, appointing elders, and committing believers to the Lord (vv. 21–23). The chapter closes with their return to Syrian Antioch, where they report everything God had done and note the opening of a door of faith to the Gentiles (vv. 26–28).

This Text — Intent

God intends this chapter to form the church's theology of mission under suffering. The pattern is too sustained to be incidental: every city brings opposition, yet the gospel advances; Paul is stoned and left for dead, yet he rises and returns; the apostles strengthen the churches not by shielding them from tribulation but by telling them *through* many tribulations they must enter the kingdom. The chapter's intent is not merely to document early church history but to anchor the church's expectation of suffering in the missionary enterprise as theologically normal, and to show that God's sovereign grace — opening doors of faith for Gentiles — is the explanation for every advance. The Antioch commission frames the whole chapter (vv. 26–28 closing back to 13:1–3), signaling that this is a pattern meant to be reproduced, not a one-time event.

Subject Sentence: The gospel advances through suffering because God sovereignly opens doors no opposition can close.

Primary Claim: God is calling His church to embrace suffering as the normal and expected path of gospel mission, grounded in the confidence that He — not circumstances, crowds, or opposition — is the one opening doors of faith.

Interpretive Evaluation

The “door of faith” language (v. 27): There is broad agreement across traditions that “door of faith” refers to Gentile inclusion in the covenant community. The debate concerns *agency*. Arminian and Wesleyan readings emphasize that the Gentiles “believed,” stressing human response as the operative factor in the door’s opening. The Reformed reading insists the grammar requires divine initiative: God *opened* the door — the Gentiles’ faith was the result, not the cause, of the opening. This is consistent with Luke’s usage throughout Acts (cf. 13:48: “as many as were appointed to eternal life believed”) and is to be preferred. Arminian readings helpfully emphasize genuine human response but cannot adequately account for Luke’s consistent pattern of attributing mission advance to divine action.

Paul’s stoning and “resurrection” (vv. 19–20): Some commentators (particularly in Pentecostal/charismatic traditions) read Paul’s rising as a genuine miraculous resurrection, paralleling the raising of Tabitha or Lazarus. This reading is possible but not demanded by the text — Luke uses no resurrection vocabulary here and the disciples’ gathering around Paul may simply be prayer for a beaten man who survives. The Reformed reading holds the ambiguity without resolution: the text does not tell us whether Paul was dead or merely near death, and the point Luke is making is not a miracle claim but a mission-continuity claim. Paul rises and *re-enters the city* — the theological accent is on his return, not the nature of his condition. Preaching this as a resurrection narrative misplaces the emphasis the text itself maintains.

The natural theology speech (vv. 15–17): Dispensational readings sometimes treat Paul’s speech to pagan Gentiles as a unique apologetic concession to an audience without Scripture — a “pre-evangelism” that would not apply to audiences with biblical background. This partially holds but overstates the discontinuity. Paul’s appeal to creation witness (rain, fruitful seasons, gladness) as evidence for the living God is not a strategic concession but a theological claim: general revelation is real, universal, and has always rendered all people without excuse (cf. Romans 1:18–20). The speech at Lystra is the positive side of the Romans 1 argument — God has not left Himself without witness. Reformed readings rightly see this speech as grounded in common grace and general revelation doctrine, not as a dispensational anomaly. The speech also establishes what makes idolatry so egregious: it is not merely ignorance but turning from a God who has been continually, visibly demonstrating His goodness.

The “tribulation” teaching (v. 22): Some traditions soften “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom” into a general pastoral encouragement — life is hard, keep going. The Reformed reading insists on the theological weight of *dei* (“must” — the language of divine necessity). This is not pastoral realism but eschatological structure: tribulation is the appointed path to the kingdom, not an unfortunate detour around it. The Clowneyan

anti-moralism discipline applies here: the application is not “be brave like Paul” but “understand the shape of the kingdom road and walk it knowing Christ walked it first.”

Key Canonical Support

- **Romans 1:18–20** — Paul’s letter articulates theologically what his Lystra speech demonstrates practically: God’s eternal power and divine nature have been clearly perceived in creation, leaving all people without excuse; the living God has never been without witness.
 - **John 10:9; Colossians 4:3; Revelation 3:8** — The “open door” metaphor in Acts 14:27 is part of a sustained canonical pattern: it is always Christ or God who opens doors of gospel access; the apostles pass through doors they did not open.
 - **Philippians 1:29** — “It has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake” — the theological grounding for Acts 14:22’s *dei*; suffering for the gospel is a gift, not an accident.
 - **2 Corinthians 4:7–12** — Paul’s own theological reflection on the Acts 14 pattern: treasure in jars of clay, always being given over to death so that the life of Jesus may be manifested; the apostolic pattern is intentionally cruciform.
 - **Acts 13:48** — Immediately prior context: “as many as were appointed to eternal life believed” — Luke’s interpretive key for the entire first missionary journey; divine appointment explains both the advance and the opposition.
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Aim: To establish in the reader a theologically grounded, unromantic, and unshaken expectation that the path of faithful gospel mission runs through suffering — and that this path is governed at every step by the God who opens doors.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–2	Paul and Barnabas preach at the Iconium synagogue; a great number of Jews and Gentiles believe; unbelieving Jews stir up the Gentiles against the brothers	Pattern established immediately: proclamation → division → opposition
3	They remain “a long time,” speaking boldly, relying on	Theological note: the Lord is the one bearing witness to

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	the Lord who bears witness to the word of grace by granting signs and wonders	<i>His word</i>
4–5	The city is divided; a plot forms among Gentiles, Jews, and rulers to mistreat and stone them	Opposition is now coordinated and cross-ethnic
6–7	Learning of the plot, they flee to Lystra and Derbe and the surrounding region and continue preaching the gospel	Flight is not failure; mission continues in the new location
8–10	At Lystra: a man crippled from birth hears Paul preach; Paul perceives he has faith to be made well; commands him to stand; he springs up and walks	Healing is a sign vindicating the proclaimed word; faith is divinely granted
11–13	The crowds, speaking Lycaonian, identify Barnabas as Zeus and Paul as Hermes; the priest of Zeus brings oxen and garlands to offer sacrifice	Pagan misidentification — natural religion run amok; the very opposite of the intended effect
14–15	Paul and Barnabas tear their garments, rush into the crowd, insist they are men of like nature, and call the crowd to turn from vain things to the living God	The gospel reframes the miracle: not divine men appearing, but mortal men pointing to the Creator
16–17	God in past generations allowed all nations to walk in their own ways, yet did not leave Himself without witness: rain, fruitful seasons, food, and gladness	Common grace as general revelation argument; every good gift is a witness to the Giver
18	With difficulty they restrain the crowd from offering sacrifice	The crowd's religious impulse is strong; the apostles must labor to redirect it

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
19–20a	Jews arrive from Antioch and Iconium; persuade the crowds; Paul is stoned and dragged outside the city as dead; disciples gather around him; he rises and re-enters the city	The same city that wanted to worship him now stones him; Paul’s return is the key act
20b	The next day Paul and Barnabas depart for Derbe	The mission continues the morning after a near-death experience
21a	They preach the gospel at Derbe and make many disciples	Derbe is the “easy” city in the journey — a brief note, not embellished
21b–22	They return through Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch (Pisidia) — the hostile cities — strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith: “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God”	The return route is deliberate and theologically significant; <i>dei</i> — divine necessity — governs kingdom-entry through suffering
23	They appoint elders in every church, pray with fasting, and commit them to the Lord in whom they believed	Church planting is completed by appointing leaders and entrusting the community to God
24–25	Pass through Pisidia, come to Pamphylia, speak the word at Perga, go down to Attalia	Brief geographical summary of the return
26–27	Sail back to Antioch, the sending church; report all that God had done with them and how He had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles	The commission framing (13:1–3) is now closed; the report is theological: God opened the door
28	They remain a long time with the disciples	The missionary rhythm includes seasons of rest, consolidation, and fellowship

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–7	Iconium: The Word Divides the City
2	8–18	Lystra: From Misguided Worship to the Living God
3	19–20	Stoning and Rising: The Apostle Undeterred
4	21–23	The Return Route: Strengthening What Suffering Cannot Destroy
5	24–28	Report to Antioch: God Opened the Door

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The gospel advances through suffering because God sovereignly opens doors no opposition can close.

Primary Claim: God is calling His church to embrace suffering as the normal and expected path of gospel mission, grounded in the confidence that He — not circumstances, crowds, or opposition — is the one opening doors of faith.

Applications (Five)

1. (Mind/Belief) Reframe what “success” in gospel ministry looks like. Acts 14 never once describes the mission as failing — not at Iconium where they flee a stoning plot, not at Lystra where Paul is left for dead, not anywhere. Success in God’s economy is faithful proclamation and the continuation of the mission; it is not measured by crowd response, numerical results, or absence of opposition. The church that measures gospel success by comfort and reception is using a ruler Acts 14 never employs. You may be in the most fruitful season of your ministry right now and not know it, because fruitfulness in Acts looks nothing like fruitfulness on a church growth chart.

2. (Affections/Worship) Let the living God claim your worship precisely where your natural religion runs strongest. The Lystrans’ mistake was not that they wanted to worship — it was that they aimed their worship at the wrong object, divinizing what was merely instrumental. This error recurs in every generation: we worship the preacher, the movement, the spiritual experience, the ministry itself. Paul and Barnabas tore their garments. Wherever your religious energy is most intense, ask whether it is aimed at the living God who gives rain and fruitful seasons and gladness — or at something He has merely given.

3. (Will/Behavior) Return to the hostile city. Paul and Barnabas did not take the easy road back to Antioch — they went back through Lystra, where Paul had just been stoned. They did this not to prove something but to strengthen the disciples who remained there. Identify the relationship, the community, the ministry context you have avoided because of the cost it has already extracted. The mission logic of Acts 14 is not “cut your losses” — it is “the people left behind in the hard places need strengthening, and you are the one appointed to give it.”

4. (Mind/Belief) Receive the doctrine of verse 22 as a gift, not a burden. “Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” is not a threat — it is a map. The word *must* (*dei*) signals divine ordering: this is not chaos, this is not divine abandonment, this is the appointed and sovereign road to the kingdom. Jesus walked it first (cf. Luke 24:26: “Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?”). The tribulations are not evidence that God has lost control of your situation. They are evidence that you are on the road He has marked.

5. (Affections/Worship) Let the final report shape your emotional posture toward the mission of God. Paul and Barnabas return to Antioch and report “all that God had done *with them*.” Not “all that they had accomplished.” Not “all they had suffered.” The suffering is the context; God’s faithfulness is the content of the report. The affective posture this requires is neither triumphalism (denying the cost) nor self-pity (being defined by the cost) but something harder and rarer: the joy of a participant in something larger than yourself, telling others what the living God has done. Cultivate that report. What has God done *with you*?

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Acts 14 teaches that God governs missionary advance by sovereign grace — He opens the door of faith (v. 27), He bears witness to His own word (v. 3), He appointed those who believed (13:48) — and that this sovereignty does not eliminate opposition but runs *through* it. The chapter also establishes the doctrine of general revelation in its most positive form: God has not left Himself without witness among the nations; His goodness in creation has always been a testimony to His character and a warrant for turning from idols to the living God. Finally, the chapter teaches that the kingdom of God has a divinely ordered entrance path: not comfort, not vindication, not removal of enemies, but “many tribulations.” This is not pessimism — it is the eschatological shape of the age between Christ’s first and second comings, grounded in the pattern of Christ’s own suffering and glory.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Acts 14 is one of the clearest narrative demonstrations of the Reformed doctrine of effectual calling operating through means. The apostles preach; God opens the door; those whom He has appointed believe. The human instrumentality is real and the divine sovereignty is total — not in tension but in concert. The chapter also displays what Reformed theology calls the *via crucis* (the way of the cross) as the normative shape of kingdom advance: God does not work around suffering in mission but through it, just as He did not work around the cross but through it. The elders appointed in every church (v. 23) and the commitment of believers “to the Lord in whom they believed” anchor church planting in divine trust rather than organizational structure. The chapter thus models Reformed ecclesiology in miniature: Word proclaimed, faith granted, community gathered, leadership appointed, and the whole enterprise committed to the God who opened the door in the first place.

Main Takeaway

The road to the kingdom runs through many tribulations — and that is not a malfunction, it is the map. God opened the door of faith for the Gentiles; God bore witness to His own word; God’s purposes advanced through floggings, stoning, and a man left for dead outside the city. If you are in the suffering part of faithful obedience right now, you are not outside God’s plan — you are inside it. Stop waiting for the opposition to clear before you believe He is at work. He has not left Himself without witness, and He has not left you without purpose.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating Acts 14 as biography rather than theology.** The most common failure is to preach this chapter as inspiring stories about courageous missionaries — Paul gets stoned and gets back up, isn’t that amazing! — without asking why Luke includes this pattern and what claim it is making about the nature of gospel mission and the kingdom of God. Acts 14 is theology in narrative form. The pattern is the point. Paul’s resilience is downstream of the theological claim that God governs the mission; preaching the resilience without the theology produces admiration for Paul and no change in the listener’s actual theology of suffering.
- **Moralizing v. 22 into mere pastoral encouragement.** “Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom” is frequently softened into “life is hard, keep persevering.” This strips the *dei* of its theological force — divine necessity, eschatological structure, the ordered path of kingdom entrance. The verse is not pastoral realism; it is a theological map. Preach the map, not just the encouragement.

- **Preaching the Lystra speech as a missions strategy tip.** Paul’s appeal to general revelation is sometimes presented as a clever contextualization technique — “meet people where they are.” This misses the point entirely. Paul is not being strategic; he is being theological. General revelation is real, and the living God has never been without witness. The application is not “use natural bridges in your apologetics” but “the God you are proclaiming has already been testifying to Himself in every raindrop and harvest these people have ever enjoyed — and they have suppressed it.” That is a very different sermon.
- **Treating the stoning/rising of v. 19–20 as a resurrection narrative.** As noted in the Interpretive Evaluation, the text does not tell us whether Paul was clinically dead. Preaching this as a miraculous resurrection imports a claim the text does not make and shifts the accent from the mission-continuity point Luke is actually making: Paul rises and re-enters the city. The miracle, if it occurred, is in service of the mission, not the story. Preaching the miracle and dropping the re-entry misses the theological center.
- **Disconnecting the Antioch bookends from the chapter’s meaning.** The chapter opens under the Antioch commission (13:1–3) and closes with the report back to Antioch (14:26–28). This is not a literary frame — it is a theological one. The mission is never self-initiated or self-reported; it flows from the church and returns to the church. Preaching Acts 14 as the story of two heroic individuals without the ecclesial frame (sending church, receiving church, corporate report) produces a lone-ranger missionary theology that is precisely what the text resists.
- **Skipping Derbe.** The brevity of the Derbe notice (v. 21a) can lead preachers to treat it as a transitional verse and pass over it. But the contrast is deliberately built into the narrative: after the stoning at Lystra, Derbe is the “easy” city — many disciples, no recorded opposition. This contrast matters. The mission does not always cost equally at every point. The theological discipline is to continue faithfully in the easy seasons as well as the hard ones, and not to mistake ease for divine approval or hardship for divine abandonment.