

# 3 Kinds of Opposition

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Date: 07 September 2025

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[ 0 : 00 ] Good morning, everybody. Can you hear okay? Good.

That's fine. Sounds a bit loud. Sorry, guys. I just wanted to ask that if the owner of a Blue Suzuki registration W16 ODC could possibly move their car as it's blocking the entrance into Maltings Close, you are not in a parking space.

If you're unable to do that, I'm happy to move it for you. Thank you. That's fine. Okay. So, can we have our first slide, please?

That's great. Let's just pray. Father, as we come to your word this morning, we ask that you would speak to each one of us, that you would speak to us heart to heart, that we would know your presence, that we would understand what your desires are, and that we would be ready to receive them.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. So, as you can see on the slide this morning, we're looking at kinds of opposition, particularly three kinds of opposition that arose in the book of Acts, mostly in chapter 14, but a little bit of chapter 13 before that.

[ 1 : 25 ] So, Paul undertook some very long, difficult journeys with Barnabas. And they were determined to tell Jews and Gentiles the truth about Jesus, to see converts, to establish churches, and to appoint elders in those churches.

And Paul and Barnabas are forced to leave Pisidian Antioch. And then they arrive at Iconium. And then they had to flee to towns called Lystra and Derbe.

And eventually they returned once more to Antioch. An amazing journey, if you think about it, when they hadn't got any transport. Apart from the ships.

They had ships that took them from one place via Cyprus and back up north again. But once they were on land, it was all about walking. So, let's read from Acts chapter 13, verse 50.

We're going on to Acts 14, verse 28. So, the word of the Lord spread through the whole region. But the Jewish leaders incited the God-fearing women of high standing and the leading men of the city.

[ 2 : 41 ] They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas and they expelled them from their region. So, Paul and Barnabas shook the dust off their feet as a warning to them and went to Iconium.

And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit. At Iconium, Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue. There they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Greeks believed.

But the Jews who refused to believe stirred up the other Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. 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.

The people of the city were divided. Some sided with the Jews. Others sided with the apostles. There was a plot afoot among both Gentiles and Jews together with their leaders to mistreat them and to stone them.

But they found out about it and fled to the Lyconian cities of Lystra and Derby and to the surrounding country where they continued to preach the gospel. In Lystra and Derby there sat a man who was lame.

[ 3 : 59 ] He had been that way from birth. He had never walked. He listened to Paul as Paul was speaking. And Paul looked directly at him. Saw that he had faith to be healed and called out, Stand up on your feet.

At that the man jumped up and began to walk. And when the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lyconian language, The gods have come down to us in human form. Barnabas, they called Zeus.

And Paul, they called Hermes because he was the chief speaker. The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside their city, brought bulls and wreaths to the city gates because he and the crowd wanted to offer sacrifices to them.

But when the apostles, Barnabas and Paul, heard of this, they tore their clothes and they rushed out into the crowd shouting, 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.

In the past, he 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.

[ 5 : 15 ] Even with these words, they had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them. 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. 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 they returned to Antioch in Syria. They preached the gospel in that city and won a large number of disciples.

Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, strengthening the disciples, 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. Then they continued their journey. Wow.

[ 6 : 26 ] What a journey. What a way of actually visiting countries which had never been to before to actually bring the gospel. And whatever the dangerous opposition, Paul continues to share Jesus with everyone he meets.

And as they preached the gospel and experienced success in converting both Jews and Gentiles, we see how Paul and Barnabas encounter significant opposition.

People were not happy. If they didn't know the Lord, they just felt that Paul and Barnabas were destroying their idea of religion. Firstly, religious opposition, particularly from unbelieving Jews at Pisidian Antioch.

Then secondly, serious division and conflict within the community of Iconium. And thirdly, serious physical violence and an attempt to kill them at Lystra.

So let's look in a bit more detail. What is happening to Paul and Barnabas and how they deal with this opposition. Religious opposition.

[ 7 : 46 ] In Pisidian Antioch, verse 2 says that the Jews stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas and expelled them from their region. And it says, Paul and Barnabas shook the dust off their feet as a warning to them and went to Iconium.

And then they were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit. At first sight, that might seem a strange thing. That Paul and Barnabas shook the dust off their feet as a warning to those who prevented from sharing God's word.

But Paul and Barnabas were simply following the teaching of Jesus. When Jesus sent out the twelve disciples in Matthew 10, Jesus said, If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, leave that home or town and shake the dust off your feet.

So Paul and Barnabas were actually being obedient to what Jesus had taught. They'd been obedient to the Lord in sharing his word to them. As they were not made welcome, they moved on to Iconium.

But again, the Jews did not accept Paul's preaching. And they actively stirred up the Gentiles, poisoning their minds against Paul, the apostles and the new believers.

[ 9 : 06 ] The Jews completely rejected the message of Jesus as the Messiah. But for Paul and Barnabas, it didn't matter, in that sense, what people believed or how they reacted.

They were courageous. Paul and Barnabas were courageous and absolutely determined to speak out God's truth. Whatever the consequences might be. Some people listened.

Some accepted the message of Jesus. Others did not. So the people of the city were divided. Some sided with the Jews. Others with the apostles.

Instead of running away or hiding until things might have calmed down, verse 3 shows us that Paul and Barnabas were determined to declare the truth. And so they spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord.

And the Lord confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to perform these signs and wonders. And then they saw people were saved. Tremendous courage.

[10:15] And a tremendous sense of wanting always to do what God was asking of them. Not sitting there waiting for things to happen, but actually saying, we need to do this because we need to be obedient to what God is saying.

So when we read about the early disciples and how they confronted and challenged people with God's truth, I think God also challenges us to be ready to respond to those that are seeking truth. So they can know God's truth and respond to his call. I don't know about you, but sometimes we find it quite difficult to share the gospel.

Sometimes we find it a little bit easier. Sometimes we find it difficult to talk to people about Jesus. But we have an obligation to respond to those who don't yet know God's truth.

When I was a very new Christian, that was a long time ago, at university, 18 years old, I was much more likely to be seen declaring God's truth about Jesus if I was with a team of people.

[11:24] I'd only become a Christian a few weeks before and then was out on the streets of Sheffield with flip charts, a message about who Jesus really was. And when people challenged me, I was determined to talk to people who were seeking God.

And it really helped being with a team of people who encouraged and supported each other in sharing the gospel. Doing that when you're alone is difficult.

And we often find it more difficult to speak to people about Jesus if they're just on their own. That's true for me too.

And a few weeks ago, God showed me something which surprised me. I met the church warden in our village. He knows the Lord. He knows Jesus. And I shared with him how it is so good to see how Harvest Church is growing as God moved amongst us.

We chatted for a while. And he was really pleased to hear about so many people coming to the church. As a village church has a very small number. You're probably fortunate if you have a dozen of people there on a Sunday morning.

[12:35] I forgot about that conversation until a few weeks later. I was with about eight men in our pub. Yes, in a pub. Who meet each other for a drink every week. And they were saying how small the church numbers are now.

And then Andrew said, Rob's church is really growing though. I thought, oh, now how am I going to respond to this? How many people go there, Rob? So although I was surprised at the question, it was an opportunity to share about how God is moving in our church.

But also across the land. I don't know what they made of it really. They went very quiet. Didn't say very much. And I didn't press it because I don't think that would have helped. You just sow seed sometimes, don't you?

To see what God is doing. But we need to be ready to respond to questions about God. If you're actually thinking about it, we quite often hear people wondering about God or asking about God. And we need to support each other in prayer so we can work together to reach out to those who don't believe. Let's ask God for boldness. For his power to enable us to be strong and determined to share with those who don't yet know Jesus.

[13:48] So they too can hear God's word and know his truth. So the second thing that we find in terms of opposition was a division and conflict within the community, within the town where they were.

So, at Iconium, the people of the city were divided. Some of them sided with the Jews, others with the apostles. Verse 5 says, There was a plot afoot among both Gentiles and Jews, together with their leaders, to mistreat Paul and Barnabas and to stone them.

So there was a violent response from both Jews and even from some Gentiles as they heard the message given by Paul. Sometimes the things we say about Jesus, the things we say about God, can actually wind people up.

Can make them cross. Can make them turn their backs on us. For Paul, it was obviously that there was a tense atmosphere. And further fuel the conflict and division, which led to a really dangerous time for Paul and Barnabas.

So much so that when they found out about it, they fled to the Lycanian cities of Lystra and Derby, where they continued to preach the gospel. So in spite of how they were treated and how they were threatened when Paul spoke, they were determined to speak to as many towns and cities as they could, sharing the gospel, encouraging people to hear God's call on their lives.

[15:12] They didn't allow these difficulties to put them off. They weren't disillusioned. They knew they were called by God and they wanted to obey God.

They were determined to be faithful to God and to declare the gospel to as many people as possible, whatever their views. When you think about it, Paul was able to work in this way because he never forgot God's initial call on his life and God's absolute truth.

He had been given a task and he was so determined to respond to God's call, to reach out to Jews and non-Jews, to receive God's word. He was determined.

And we can look back and remember God's call on our lives, can't we? And we are obedient to him or were obedient to him in all circumstances when we actually turned to say, yes, I want to follow you, Jesus.

But we can easily be put off by circumstances and difficult situations. Sometimes we probably feel quite weak. Sometimes I would say we use the word useless about how we feel at sharing Jesus.

[16:20] Oh, I don't do that, I'm not good at that. And yet there's people around us who don't know him, who need to know him. You know, we know it isn't easy to share God's word with people if we're on our own.

But we need to remember the Holy Spirit is always with us, to teach us, to direct us, to give us strength, to give us confidence in those situations. God knows the people who, sorry, the Spirit knows the people who need God.

And he can help us to reach out to others. He can give us the right words to share with people. It might not be very many words. It may just be a few words that actually make a difference.

But we also need prayer and support from other Christians around us to enable us to reach out to others who need to hear God's word. And then thirdly, physical violence, verses 19 and 20.

Some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul. They dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead.

[17:26] 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 this opposition escalated to a point where there's a plot to mistreat and then to stone Paul and Barnabas.

And they were stoned. And we know, don't we, that when the Bible talks about people being stoned, it wasn't just a few pebbles. This would have been huge rocks thrown at them which would have knocked them down.

And they would have continued to throw rocks onto Paul on the ground until they thought he was dead. When we read that, we're reminded of Paul in Acts chapter 7.

Before he knew the Lord, Paul had witnessed the stoning, the murder of Stephen. He may not have been involved in terms of throwing rocks, but he stood by and watched.

I'm sure he never forgot what he had witnessed. How he saw Stephen killed for believing in Christ.

I'm sure it must have always stayed with him in the back of his mind.

[18:37] It was always there. So how did Paul react to this opposition? Even though at that time he was probably very close to death, maybe even unconscious, but he wasn't put off.

He went to other cities nearby where he continued to speak, to minister, to pray for others, and to declare the power of the gospel wherever he went. He was determined to fulfill God's calling on his life.

And he still faced all kinds of opposition. He could easily have avoided any further pain and punishment and simply left the areas, left any town or city that was opposed to the gospel.

He could just have gone. But Paul set out to ensure that everyone had the opportunity to hear God's word. And to respond positively, as many people did.

People need to hear God's word. They need to hear the gospel. So that they can respond and know Jesus. But whether we like it or not, when we follow the Lord, there will be times when we too will face opposition.

[19:52] But it's our response which is crucial. As we follow Christ, some people will abuse us for our beliefs. Some will mock us.

Some will discriminate against us simply because they know we are a Christian. And if we proclaim the truth of our Lord, we may well face many difficulties in our lives and strong opposition.

But Jesus is always with us. We're not on our own. Think back to Luke chapter 6. How Jesus taught the disciples how to react to those who were their enemies.

How to react to opposition. How to love their enemies. And it's still true today. Luke chapter 6, verses 26 to 36 say, Do to others as you would have them do to you.

Be merciful, it says in verse 36, just as your Father is merciful. It's vital, isn't it, that we actually take those words really seriously.

[ 21 : 28 ] Because we will have people who are like enemies to us, who speak against us. We might even find people who hate us because we go to church. There are people, I can remember when I was a young Christian, there was another person at university who would see me in the street and would sort of really have a go at me because I'd come to the Lord.

And telling me how stupid I was and how worthless it was. But when we pray, let's invite the power of God into our lives so we can be more like him.

So we can respond in the right way to people who are against us. Sometimes that seems quite impossible. But it is possible for us through Christ.

Jesus gives us the love and the energy to be able to be obedient in all things through the power of the Holy Spirit. And when we face persecution, social pressure, when people put us down and belittle us, we need to stand firm in our faith and trust in God's strength.

Paul knew God is able to do all things. He reminds us in Romans chapter 5. He says, not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings. Because we know that suffering produces perseverance.

[ 22 : 45 ] Perseverance, character, and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame. Because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

Suffering is not to be desired. Don't get me wrong. But when we go through tough times, suffering will produce perseverance if we are being obedient to God. And that perseverance will build a character in us and it will give us hope in our lives.

These verses highlight how we should respond to suffering as it's not a cause for despair, but rather a catalyst through Christ for growth and for Jesus to strengthen our faith, ultimately leading to a hope that is unshakable because of God's love.

And later on in the letter to Romans, Paul says, bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse them. Almost the same words he used in other letters.

So this verse is a direct command from the Apostle Paul to early Christians, encouraging them to respond to those who may harm or oppose them and to respond with kindness and blessings rather than with curses or retaliation.

[ 24 : 04 ] So we need to pray for those who speak out against God and speak out against us. And we need to be careful, to be warned really, as we see a growth in numbers of people turning to Christ across our nation, which is wonderful to see, there will also be those who will be in opposition, who will put us down, who will call us stupid, pathetic, or worse.

And there will be more discrimination against Christians. But we need to learn from Paul. Paul will be ready to speak up.

We need to be speaking up. We need to declare our allegiance to Christ. We need to declare our excitement at what he's doing in many lands. We need to be actively praying for more and more people to come to God as they recognise his truth.

We need to be ready, ready, to share his truth with others. See, Paul had no fear when he turned to Christ. He was determined to follow Jesus, to ensure that his word was quickly spread as far as he could travel.

I haven't counted up the number of miles that Paul travelled, not only by boat, but also on feet. It was enormous. He wasn't put off by any opposition or violence.

[ 25 : 34 ] He wasn't afraid. to speak God's truth. He wasn't afraid to declare God's plan for all people wherever he went. He was absolutely set on sharing God's truth and God's love.

And he ensured that wherever he went, people had the opportunity to turn to the Lord. I ask this question, I ask it of myself as well.

Are we always ready to speak God's truth? Particularly to those who do not yet know him. Some might say, well, we're not like Paul.

We can't be like Paul. But we don't need to compare ourselves with Paul. We have much to learn from Paul and his obedience as we recognise how he lived his life, sharing God's word through many countries, being determined through thick and thin to be obedient to Jesus and not allowing anything to prevent him from serving Jesus.

So we too can be obedient to God by listening to God, by responding to him so that those around us who don't know Christ are able to discover him and enjoy his presence forever.

[ 26 : 47 ] Let's just pray. Father God, we thank you for your word. We thank you for Paul who has so much told us how we should be thinking about you and how much we should be responding to you, how we can be strong, how we can be committed to sharing your word, to sharing your truth.

It's so wonderful that that's all there for us. We don't need to ask how you've already set it in your word. And we can see exactly how we need to be following Jesus, following you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Father, we ask your forgiveness when we've been slow to respond or perhaps haven't responded at all to people, haven't shared anything with them about you unless they don't even know we're Christians.

And we ask your forgiveness. We ask that you would enable us to just know your truth inside out so we can declare your truth gently where it needs to be or even strongly when it needs to be said in a way because people are abusing you, abusing how you have behaved in Scripture.

Lord, we pray that you will guide us and strengthen us and that we can be more able to share you with others. in Jesus' name. Amen. I'd encourage you if you do find you're like me, one of those people who finds it difficult sometimes to share, to know what to say, to know how to actually speak to people about God, please do come there after this meeting and we'll pray for you to really have that confidence to be able to speak about God to others around you.

[ 28 : 26 ] for you. unsere unsere