



Sunday April 21, 2024

Speaker: Pastor John VanderWindt

Scripture: Acts 14:1-28

Sermon Title: God's Providence Through the Storms

Transcribed by: Liza Perry

Good morning! It is good to be here in the house of Lord. It is good to be with people who are watching online. We are together going through the book of Acts. So at this time, I invite you to turn to Acts 14. Acts 14 is the second portion of what's written about the first missionary journey of Paul as he has been sent from Antioch. Last week, we saw him go to Antioch in Pisidia. Now we will see him go beyond there. So Acts 14 is where we will be reading. He has just been pushed out of Antioch. And now in **Acts 14:1**, we read in Iconium (which is where Paul went from Antioch.)

In Iconium

1 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. **2** But the Jews who refused to believe stirred up the other Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. **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. **4** The people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews, others with the apostles. **5** There was a plot afoot among both Gentiles and Jews, together with their leaders, to mistreat them and stone them. **6** But they found out about it and fled to the Lycaonian cities of Lystra and Derbe and to the surrounding country, **7** where they continued to preach the gospel.

In Lystra and Derbe

8 In Lystra there sat a man who was lame. He had been that way from birth and had never walked. **9** He listened to Paul as he was speaking. Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed **10** and called out, "Stand up on your feet!" At that, the man jumped up and began to walk.

11 When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have come down to us in human form!" **12** Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes because he was the chief speaker. **13** The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought bulls and wreaths to the city gates because he and the crowd wanted to offer sacrifices to them.

14 But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting: **15** “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. **16** In the past, he let all nations go their own way. **17** 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.” **18** Even with these words, they had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them.

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** 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.

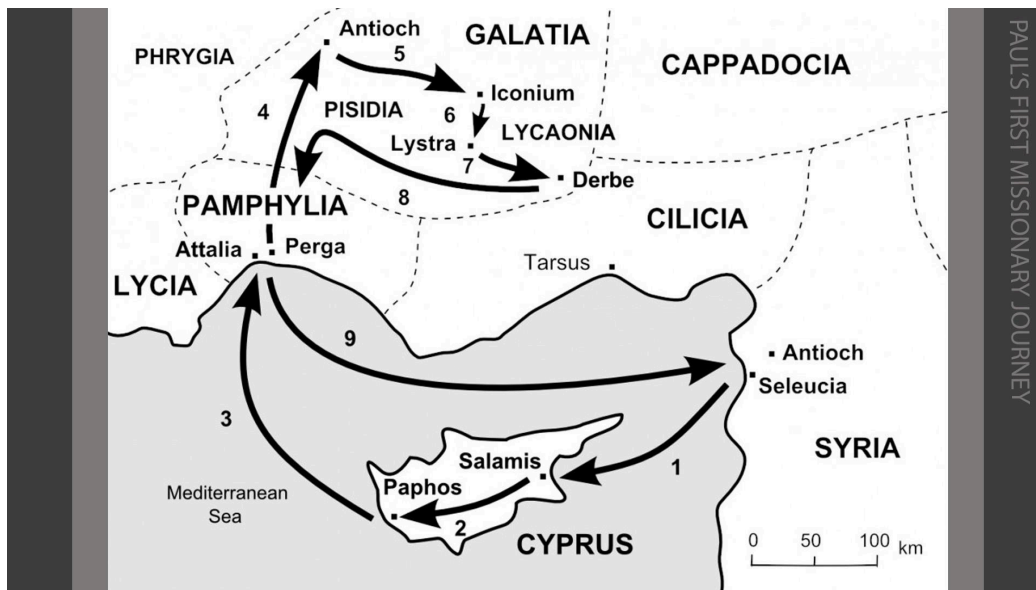
The Return to Antioch in Syria

21 They preached the gospel in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, **22** 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. **23** Paul and Barnabas appointed elders^[a] for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust. **24** After going through Pisidia, they came into Pamphylia, **25** and when they had preached the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia.

26 From Attalia they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed. **27** On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. **28** And they stayed there a long time with the disciples.

This is the Word of the Lord. Let's pray. Dear Lord, we thank You for Your Word. We thank You, Lord, that Your Word is real. That Your word does not back away from the hardships of life. We thank You, Lord, that Your Word also provides guidance and reminds us of how You are with us, and you care for us, and you provide for us. And Lord, today as we look at your Word, we pray that the words spoken may be Your words, and that nothing of me may come out, Lord, but that You may speak to each of our hearts, that you will open our ears, that we may hear You. That we may hear Your great love for us and that we may hear, Lord, of how You have given Yourself for us, that we may live with You. In Jesus' name. Amen.

As I said before, this is a continuation of Paul's first journey. And last week, we looked at a map in which we saw how he traveled and he began in Antioch.



PAUL'S FIRST MISSIONARY JOURNEY

You see it there on the right. And he went first to the island of Cyprus and then up to Perga. Last week, we went up to Antioch and today we're going to travel to Iconium, which is about 150 kilometers from Antioch, and then we'll travel down to Lystra which is about another 35 kilometers, and then from Lystra to Derbe (about another 100 kilometers.) So if you take the whole trip from Antioch around and then back again, we travel about 1,300 kilometers by boat and foot. So this is the journey which Paul took. So this is a reference as to where we are today.

So let's go back to Iconium. In Iconium, Paul goes once again to the Jewish synagogue. If you look at Paul's preaching, as he goes through these, you can see a pattern that's happening. Just like in Antioch, he goes to the synagogue. He preaches to the Jews. The Jews don't respect him or some don't. He preaches to the Gentiles. In Iconium, he goes to the synagogue, and in this synagogue there are both Jews and Greeks. And he preaches to them. Many of them hear and believe, and many of them don't. And so there's division in the synagogue, and again, Paul gets persecuted, and then he gets on to the next place. And this seems to be a pattern in Paul's life.

We've been looking at the book of Acts as a guideline for, "How do we do church?" This isn't what we would think is like, "Yeah, let's start this. Hear the Word of God, let's divide the church, create persecution, and then move on to the next one. That's not exactly what we're looking for when we're thinking, "Hold on, let's do church." But it is part of the reality. The Word of God is active and is sharper than any two edged sword. And it divides the heart as in like bone and marrow. And so when you hear the word of God, you are either going to say, "Yes, this is what I'm going to put my faith in." Or you're going to say, "No, this is not what I'm going to put my faith in."

And hopefully you don't have it within one body, as we'll see later on, as the body of the churches is encouraged. So you are going to have this in the world. Where the Word of God is preached, there are people who are going to say, "Yes, this is what I want to follow." And there are going to be, "No, that doesn't fit with what I want. And because it doesn't fit with what I want, I'm going to create difficulty because I want to do what I want to do. These are the rules that I want to live by. And those don't fit in the rules that God is saying. And so we're going to create a problem." And that pattern of Paul's preaching has been going on for the last 2,000 years. We've seen throughout church history, as the word of God comes, it challenges people to say, "Yes, I'm going to fully believe," or, "No, this is not what I want."

So Paul is in Iconium and he preaches and he stays there a long time. It says in **Acts 14:3, "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 we have to believe that it is likely that Paul and Barnabas, while they were in Iconium, although it's not written down, there were probably healings or miracles that happened. There was evidence of God working within the people and God was performing a transformation in people's lives. So they got to know who God really is. And they got to be filled with the joy of God living within that.

But there came a point where the Jews were stirred up so greatly that they went to attack Paul. And we see this in other places in Paul's ministry as well. We see how Jesus was treated when he was on earth. So there is this plan to stone him and Paul learns of the plan. And he says, "The Word of God has been planted. I am not responsible for growing. That's the job of the Holy Spirit. I'm going to plant the Word of God someplace else."

And Paul goes from Iconium to Lystra. When he gets to Lystra, Luke decides, as he's writing the story of Paul, to tell of one of the miracles in Lystra. He talks about a lame man who was healed. Now, for those of you who've been thinking, we've got Paul healing a lame man. And back in Acts 3, we have Peter healing a lame man.

So let's look at those two comparisons here for a minute. Peter, an apostle of Christ comes in and he sees the man and the man is begging for money. And Peter says in **Acts 3:6, "6** "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk."

Now, Paul is preaching. And the lame man says nothing to Paul. Paul notices as he's preaching, that the lame man, in **Acts 14:9, "9** ... listened to Paul as he was speaking. 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." Notice how we are now going from Jews to Gentiles. The Jew asked Peter for money. The Gentile listened to the Word of God that was spoken by Paul. And he had faith that the Word of God was able to heal him. So Paul, through the work of the Holy Spirit, healed this man.

Now we have to say a couple things here about the man's faith and our faith. It says there that the man had faith to be healed. There are many people in today's society who have faith to be healed and are not healed, but it is not a measure of their faith. This was an incident in which God says, "I have done this for my glory and to show that Paul is speaking on my behalf as my Apostle. So God heals this man. Yes, you need faith to be healed. But if you are not healed, that does not mean that you do not have faith. We need to remember that. The amount of faith is never a determining factor as to whether a person is healed or not. That's God's business and we leave that with the Lord.

But Luke tells a story and an interesting thing happens. This man stands up. Now, that in itself is quite phenomenal because not only is he healed, but he actually knows how to stand and walk. He has never stood or walked before in his life. And he just does it. And the people witnessed this, and right away, they acclaim Barnabas and Paul as two gods.

Now, we look at that and we go like, "Wow, that was a quick leap. Like, where did that come from?" And actually, there is a story behind this that will be helpful to understand. One of the ancient writers, Ovid, writes about a time in which there was a legend in that area in which two of the gods, Hermes and Zeus (Zeus being the ultimate god and Hermes being his messenger) had visited this area before. They had come in human form. And as they had come to the area, they sought accommodations. So they knocked on people's doors to see if they could stay for the night and they were refused by everybody in the town. Until they got to an elderly couple at the edge of town who invited them in and they stayed for the night. The next day, the gods who came in human form, invited the elderly couple to come with them. And they traveled beyond. Then they sent a flood and everyone in the village drowned.

So this legend has been going through this village over and over and over again and then suddenly, these two men walk into the village and they heal this lame man. And they're thinking, "We're not making the same mistake twice. These must be the gods." So they call Barnabas, Zeus. It's likely because Barnabas was a little bit older. He might have been a little stockier than Paul, maybe. And walked around with a little bit of authority. And Paul obviously did all the talking. So that would make sense that he would be Hermes, who's the messenger.

But it doesn't matter. They saw these two and they claimed right away, they were gods. And so they had a temple for Zeus just outside their city. So they're thinking, "We have got to bring a sacrifice to these people because we need to make them happy because we know what happened last time." So the priest runs out, gets a bull, gets garland, and the garland was put on top of the bull. Kind of like a crown. And around its neck. Then they would come out and they were going to sacrifice this bull to Paul and Barnabas who right away, of course, threw up their arms. They actually tore their clothes to make it very dramatic in the sense of, "No, this ain't happening."

I want you to think about that scene for just a moment. You've got these two men, Paul and Barnabas who are pleading with these people, "No, we are human, just like you are." And they need to now convince them that they are not gods in human form, but that they are just human. So they go back to their strategy of, "How do we convince them that there is a God?" With the Jews, it was pretty easy. Start with the Old Testament. Tell them all about what God has done. Tell them how the Old Testament is a direction toward Christ. And then tell them about Christ. But now, we're in this place where they don't know the Old Testament. And they don't know the God of the Old Testament. So they're going, "Hold on. We need to go back to something that you do know. And here's what it is. Its creation."

And notice how they go back and they say in **Acts 14:15**, "15 "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 (this worthless worship of gods, this worthless worship of man made stuff, of created items) to the living God, who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them." And then in **Acts 14:17**, it says, "17 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."

He is saying, "People, you might not know the God of the Old Testament, but you know creation. You know when it rains, you know when your crops grow and when they've been grown so that you get food. And you know this is not anything that you do. It comes from the heavens. Let me tell you about the God of the heavens."

When we look at creation, creation sings the glory of God. In fact, David, in **Psalms 19** writes this, "1 The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. 2 Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. 3 They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. 4 Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world. In the heavens God has pitched a tent for the sun. 5 It is like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, like a champion rejoicing to run his course. 6 It rises at one end of the heavens and makes its circuit to the other; nothing is deprived of its warmth."

Creation talks about the glory of God in **Romans 1**. Paul, when he writes to the Romans, says, "19 since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. 20 For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse." God has made himself known in creation and it says at the end of this, that God fills you with food, and your hearts with joy. God provides. We have a God who provides whether you believe in him or not, because all of us are created in the image of God, and God provides for his people.

In one of our catechisms, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Lord's Day 10, we read that God is the God of Providence. And so it asks, "What do you understand by the providence of God?" Answer: "God's providence is his almighty and ever present power, whereby, as with his hand, he still upholds heaven and earth and all creatures, and so governs them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, indeed, all things, come to us not by chance 4 but by his fatherly hand. There we see God's goodness."

And Paul and Barnabas are saying to the people in Lystra, "God is good and God provides. So don't worship us. Worship God." And they're like, "This is great!" And lots of people follow. But as we see this pattern that arrives, a couple of days later, or we don't know how long later, there are people from Antioch and Iconium. You have to realize that's quite a trip for them, right? They have made a strong effort to go and go against Paul again. So they come to Lystra. And it says in **Acts 14:19**, "**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."

Well, there's a change of heart. One day, "You are God." And a couple days later, "We're stoning you." Sound familiar? Think about Palm Sunday. Hosanna to the King of kings. Think about Good Friday. "Crucify him. Crucify." How easily people are swayed by other people. How easily the mob can change the tone when emotions come into play. And rather than going back to what is true, we sit with "Oh, did you hear? Did you hear this? Did you hear that? Oh, maybe that's really not the case. Maybe we should do this." Or, "What about this? Actually, they're really not that good." And so it begins and pretty soon the change from the culture around us begins to change, even people within us who begin to say, "Hold on. We don't like this. We need to get rid of you."

So they stone Paul. Now, the Lord obviously wasn't finished with Paul because Paul didn't die at that point. They dragged him out of the city. And as the disciples were standing around him, it says in **Acts 14:20**, "**20** ... after the disciples had gathered around him, he got up..." And where did he go? He went back into the city. Paul was not one to back down, because he knew that it wasn't him. He knew it was God who was doing this. So he goes back into the city, spends the night and the next day he goes to Derbe. He spent some time there and then it says, "He goes back." And notice what Paul does. He goes back from Derbe back to Lystra (they're the ones who stoned him) back to Iconium (they're the ones who plan to stone him) back to Antioch (they're the ones who kicked them out.) He goes back there to do what? To encourage the people who are following God. Paul knows that God is at work.

And Paul goes back to these places and he realizes that people in these places do not have it easy. They need encouragement. So Paul goes back to encourage them. In fact, when he goes back to Lystra, it is most likely that he's encouraging a young boy by the name of Timothy because it is likely that Timothy and his mother first heard Paul when he came to preach in Lystra.

So Paul goes back to these places, and he encourages them, and then he sets up churches. You'll see as he goes through that it says that in **Acts 14:23**, "**23** 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." Paul understood that for the gospel to grow within people, they need to be in a community. They need to be in a community which has teachers, which has people who are in authority over them in the sense of guiding them, to continue to encourage them to grow in their faith. And not only guiding them to grow in their faith, but also to help them discern truth as it is in the Word of God. Because we've already seen in this story how fickle people are and how, one day they're all on board and the next day, it's like, "Well, maybe that's not quite right. I think I'm gonna go someplace else again."

And Paul understood we need people who are going to help each of us continue to grow in the Lord. Because it was, as it says in **Acts 14:22**, "**22** strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," Paul understood very well that becoming a believer, especially in that culture - and I would dare say more and more so to in today's culture - that becoming a believer and standing for your faith is going to take encouragement. And you are going to face challenges. That is part of the walk of a Christian. We'll talk about that just a little bit more but I want to take Paul back to Antioch before we go there. Because Paul goes back to Lystra, goes back to Iconium, goes back to Antioch. And then it says he goes back to Perga. And in Perga it says that he preaches the Word.

Now it's interesting that it says, "At this time that he preached the Word." The first time, as we were going up to Antioch, it just said that he got to Pergo and then he went to Antioch. And this time it says, "He preached the Word in Perga." So we don't know whether he did the first time and whether this was an encouragement again, or whether this was a new thing. And then from Perga, he sails back to Antioch in Syria. And there he meets with the church. And notice what happens when he meets with the church in **Acts 14:27**, "**27** On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles."

When Paul gets back to Antioch and gives his missionary report he doesn't say, "Well, let me tell you about the hard things that I had to go through." He doesn't say, "I should tell you about this cool thing that happened in Lystra where this guy that I was with, I told him to stand up and he did." He doesn't use the word "I". All he does is he says, "Here is what God did." But can you imagine coming back to a group and saying, "Thank you for sending me. You just need to know how much God loves me. Because I was stoned. Because I was planned to be stoned. Because I was beaten and kicked out. And there's all kinds of people who are now threatening my life. God is good. God is good because he has opened the door to the Gentiles and he has allowed me to share the gospel with him."

Do you remember what he said to the churches as he went back to encourage them? He says, "You will have hardships. That will be part of it. We need to understand that that's part of our life." In fact, when he writes Timothy, who he met in Lystra, he says to Timothy this in **2 Timothy 3:12-13**, "**12** In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, **13** while evildoers and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived." And you might think, "Well, this isn't really great to tell people who are going to become Christian. Right? Don't we want to welcome them into, 'You've got to know God and the joy that comes with God, and the freedom that comes with God, and all the great things that come with God.' You don't start off a conversion message by saying, 'Hey, let me tell you about this great way to be persecuted.'"

But maybe we need to be real for a moment. Maybe we need to say to each other, "You know what? There is true joy, as it says in **Acts 14:17**, where he talks about how God fills their hearts with joy. And there he is speaking to Gentiles who also have some joy. And when you know Christ, that joy just bubbles up even greater. He says, "Well, we need to share that. That there's joy. But we also need to be realistic. We need people to understand that when you say yes to Christ, there will be pushback. If you've been going around with a group of friends who have been doing things that now you realize, "This is not the way I want to live," there will be pushback. And you need to be prepared for that because Jesus says that it will not always be easy. But as we read in **2 Timothy 1:12**, it also says, "**12** ... they have believed in one who is able to keep what I've committed to him until that day." And so when we give our lives to Christ, we are in that space.

We saw earlier from the Lord's Day 10, The Heidelberg Catechism, this aspect of God's providence and how God provides, but let me read a section from Belgic confession article 13, which says this, "We believe that this good God, after creating all things, did not abandon them to chance or fortune but leads and governs them according to his holy will, in such a way that nothing happens in this world without God's orderly arrangement. Yet God is not the author of, and cannot be charged with the sin that occurs. For God's power and goodness are so great and incomprehensible that God arranges and does his works very well and justly even when the devils and the wicked act unjustly. We do not wish to inquire with undue curiosity into what God does that surpasses human understanding and is beyond our ability to comprehend. But in all humility and reverence we adore the just judgments of God, which are hidden from us, being content to be Christ's disciples, so as to learn only what God shows us in the Word, without going beyond those limits.

This doctrine gives us unspeakable comfort since it teaches us that nothing can happen to us by chance but only by the arrangement of our gracious heavenly Father, who watches over us with fatherly care, sustaining all creatures under his lordship, so that not one of the hairs on our heads (for they are all numbered) nor even a little bird can fall to the ground without the will of our Father. In this thought we rest, knowing that God holds in check the devils and all our enemies, who cannot hurt us without divine permission and will."

That's kind of a tough thing to gather, isn't it?

Paul was sent on this journey to spread the gospel. And God, in spreading the gospel, allowed Paul to go through these hardships which, in some ways, shouldn't surprise us. Because Jesus also came to earth to share the gospel of Good News of his saving grace and God allowed Jesus to be crucified.

When God speaks of people - those that He loves and those who are called by His name - His goal is always to make us holy. Not necessarily to make us happy. He will fill us with joy, knowing that He has kept and will keep everything until that day that we meet Him in heaven. But we can be assured that no matter what we go through here, whether it is good times, or whether it is hardship, that God is in control. And we might say, "God, why? Why do I have to go through this?" And maybe that's beyond what we can even ask or imagine or understand. But be assured that God says, "I am with you while you go through it. And I will carry you through it. Whether that's a full recovery and redemption in this world, or in the next, but I am there with you."

As Paul went back to the churches, one of the things he did with them was he set them up for the purpose of encouraging each other. And one of the things which we do as a church still today, is we spend time encouraging each other, especially those who are going through difficult times, whether that is physical illness, or mental illness, or emotional or spiritual aspects of life where we say, "How can we encourage you together?" And one of the ways we do it here at Living Hope is through small groups where we gather together as a small group and say, "How can we do life together? How can I be like Paul and come back and encourage you in your journey? How can I remind you of God's faithfulness and God's providence, that He is there with you?"

And when you see the basis of it all, if you go back to the verses in which he talked about meeting with the churches in **Acts 14:23**, it says, "**23** 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." Where does it begin? It begins with prayer and committing each of us to the Lord's hand. And it is because of prayer and that understanding that it is God who was working within them. When Paul got back to report he didn't say anything about himself. Because it wasn't him. It was God who was working through him. And when we are encouraging each other, it's not because we are so great, but it's because God encourages us and gives us the strength to encourage each other. And where do we get that strength from? We get that strength in prayer.

And so this week, I encourage you to encourage each other and begin with prayer. Join me. Dear Lord, we thank You that You are the God of all. And Lord, that no matter what is going on in our life, You are in control. Lord, help us to place our faith in You, even in those terribly difficult times when we don't know why things would happen. But Lord, we ask that You will give us the faith of Job who just trusted You, knowing that You are in ultimate control. Lord, thank You for each other and the group which we can work with together and encourage each other. Lord, may we be Your ambassadors to each other and to the world. In Jesus' name. Amen.