

ACTS 14 WRAPPING UP THE FIRST MISSIONARY TRIP

We are going to wrap up Paul's first missionary trip this morning. Paul's travels have taken him and Barnabas from their home base in Antioch of Syria to Cyprus, to Perga and to Pisidian Antioch. In last week's lesson Paul preached his first recorded sermon in the book of Acts in that city. When we left off last time our mission team had just been run out of town. "But the Jews incited the devout women of high standing and the leading men of the city, stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district. But they shook off the dust from their feet against them and went to Iconium" (Acts 13:50-51). That whole idea of shaking the dust off of your feet is a symbolic gesture. Jesus had taught His disciples back in Luke Chapter 10. He had said, "Whenever you enter a town and you are rejected there, you are to say, 'Even the dust of your town we wipe off against you...'" (Luke 10:10-11). That is symbolic of what they are doing here following that teaching of Jesus.

Despite the way things ended, which was not good, a church was established there. Paul and Barnabas, undeterred, made their way down the road to the next town, which is Iconium.

So, Paul had preached his first sermon in Pisidian Antioch and then they went down the road about 85 miles to Iconium. Then from there they will go a very short distance to Lystra and then to Derbe. Then they will retrace their steps back home. The road they travel from Antioch to Iconium is a well-constructed Roman highway. The Romans had pretty good roads. This road is relatively level over the flat tableland of Southern Galatia. You all are familiar with the book of Galatians. It was written to the churches that are in that region and many of them Paul established on his first missionary journey.

They arrive at Iconium. It is a beautiful city set among fertile farms and fruit orchards. In fact, it looks a lot like upstate New York. It is quite scenic. When Paul and Barnabas arrive there, God blesses their ministry. Let's pick up the action in Acts Chapter 14 in Iconium...

READ Acts 14:1-2

Just as they had done in Pisidian Antioch, Paul's first stop is the synagogue. That is where he goes to preach. The result is good. Many Jews and Gentiles believe. But once again a small group of unbelieving Jews stirs up the mostly Gentile population against Paul and Barnabas. They say some negative things about them. They slander them. At this point God intervenes.

READ Acts 14:3

God gives Paul and Barnabas divine power to perform miracles. We saw earlier in Acts Chapter 5 where Peter and many of the early disciples and the apostles had been given this power to heal by God in Jerusalem. But what you notice about these healings and miracles as you go through scripture is that, generally speaking, people who do not believe are not persuaded to believe just by the miracles. You saw that with Jesus's ministry. He performed incredible miracles on a daily basis throughout His ministry. And while some believed, most did not. It is not like they are persuaded to believe just because of the miracles. Some are persuaded, but most are not. The same thing applies here.

READ Acts 14:4-7

So again, our two heroes flee for their lives. This time they travel 25 miles to the city of Lystra. These verses end with testimony to the persistence and the resilience of Paul and Barnabas. It says, "there they continued to preach the gospel."

Now they are in Lystra, which is totally different from Iconium. Here there are very few Jews and, apparently there is no synagogue. For the first time on one of his stops, Paul does not visit a local synagogue. There isn't one. Lystra has a primarily pagan Gentile population with a temple of Zeus, the chief god of the Romans. Only a portion of this city speaks Greek. Most of Lystra's citizens speak a strange mountain dialect known as the Lycaonian language. So then, there is a bit of a language barrier here for our missionaries.

At first glance it appears as though Paul and Barnabas fail to make much of an impression on the people of Lystra. But then something happens that gets the undivided attention of Lystra's citizens.

READ Acts 14:8-10

God, using Paul, heals a man who has been crippled his whole life. Paul is standing there preaching and he notices this lame man gazing at him. Paul perceives by the Holy Spirit that this man has the faith to be healed. And so, Paul commands the man to stand up. The man believes and obeys. In fact, we are told that he "sprang up." He LEAPS to his feet! That must have been quite a spectacle to see! Here is a guy who has been lame from birth and he springs to his feet. Well, that grabs the attention of everybody as you might guess.

READ Acts 14:11-13

Upon witnessing this miracle, the crowd becomes very excited. They conclude – remember they have a pagan mindset (they are idol worshippers) – they conclude that Paul and Barnabas must be gods in human flesh. What else could the explanation be? They have it all figured out, in fact. Barnabas must be Zeus, because he is the tall and dignified. He looks like he is the leader. He just looks the part. Then you have Paul. He is the talker. He must be Hermes, the messenger of the gods, because he is an eloquent spokesman. So, they have all this figured out. Of course, Paul and Barnabas have no idea what the people are saying. They do not speak the language. They do not understand what is happening. At first, they are unaware that they have become the objects of the people's worship! But finally, they figure out what is going on.

READ Acts 14:14-15a

When Paul and Barnabas realize the misunderstanding that has taken place, they try to correct the situation. They attempt to communicate that they are simply men like they are. They attempt to deflect the glory and honor that the people want to bestow on them to where it rightfully belongs, which is to the one true living God.

Now, I have to say that Paul shows great tact in dealing with the pagan people of Lystra. Look at his background. He is a well-educated Jew. He deals well with this unusual environment that he has been thrown into. He attempts to communicate with them and he is very polite. Here in the ESV Paul addresses the crowd saying, "Men ("Sirs" in the King James Version). Paul is trying to be very nice. He is sensitive to their ignorance. I do not mean that in a negative way. He is sensitive to their lack of knowledge. They are pagans. They just do not understand. They have a certain way of thinking that they have been brought up with. So, he is very sensitive of this as he begins to speak. This is a completely different audience than most of the audiences that Paul has dealt with before. It is certainly different than he had in Pisidian Antioch in the synagogue or in Iconium. Totally different. So, Paul does not quote scripture because these people are not Jews. Instead, he appeals to their conscience, which is something that God has given to every person, whether you are a believer or not. Everybody has a conscience.

Let me show you a great passage that Paul will later write to the church at Rome that deals with what is going on here in Lystra. This is what he says in Romans 2 beginning in verse 14: "For when Gentiles, who do not have the law [that describes these people here in this pagan town], by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. [He is talking about the conscience that God has put in each one of us]. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them" (Romans 2:14-15). In other words, every person knows instinctively the difference between what is right and what is wrong through their conscience, "the law written on their hearts."

We had a long conversation about this a few years ago when we talked about the conscience. We talked about how the conscience can be dulled and so forth. So, it is not something you need to rely on. But it something that God has placed in every person. And so, Paul is appealing

to that when he talks to them here. These verses apply to the situation that is happening in Lystra.

As Paul preaches to the pagan audience he will make three main points. So, back to Acts Chapter 14. The first two points appear in the last part of verse 15...

READ Acts 14:15b

Paul begins where missionaries begin today whenever they are witnessing to people groups who know nothing about God or Jesus or the Bible. He starts out with that foundational basis to all revelation, which is, first of all, that God is the Creator of all things. Just look around you at your world. Nothing you can see happened merely by chance. The sun, the moon, the stars, the trees, the rivers, plants, flowers, animals, etc. – they have been created by Someone. They did not just happen by chance. So, that is Paul's appeal here. That is his first point.

The second point is found right in the middle of v 15 in that phrase, "you should turn from these vain things." The gods that these people worship are **no gods at all**. They are just idols. They are inanimate objects. They are vain, worthless, empty idols that have no power. There is only one true living God. And Paul says, "You should turn from these vain things **to a living God**." So, there you have his first two points.

The third point is found in verses 16 and 17...

READ Acts 14:16-17

Paul says that God has revealed Himself and His goodness by "giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons." Not only do you have the witness of creation itself, but you see clear evidence of how God cares for His creation. What Paul describes here is what we refer to as "common grace." Jesus talks about this in Matthew 5:45. He says that "[God] makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and He sends rain on the just and on the unjust." God has made Himself clearly known to all people through His bountiful provisions that most of us take for granted.

Romans Chapter 1 is a great chapter about people who do not know about God and how God has revealed Himself. I think it is appropriate to bring up here. This is Paul's theology: "For what can be known about God is plain to them [to the people who say they do not know God], because God has shown it to them. For His invisible attributes, namely, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So, they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks to Him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened." (Romans 1:19-21). They created their own gods and came up with weird concepts about how it all happened. When you look around at this physical world you see evidence for God and you see His manifest glory everywhere. So, this is Paul's point to the pagan citizens of Lystra in Acts Chapter 14.

READ Acts 14:18

Perhaps it was the language barrier. I don't know. But they just kept doing what they were doing. The Gentile pagans of Lystra have their minds made up. Paul and Barnabas are gods. They are going to worship them. Nothing Paul can say is going to change their minds. But then, right in the middle of them worshipping Paul and Barnabas, something happened that nobody saw coming.

READ Acts 14:19

You talk about a complete flip-flop, a 180-degree turn! The crowd of people in Lystra is worshipping Paul and Barnabas as gods one minute and then in the very next verse they are stoning Paul, trying to kill him. They drag him outside the city and leave him for dead. A god one minute and unfit to live the next minute! So, what happened to drastically change the people of Lystra's attitude toward Paul? Luke does not really say. All he says is that these Jews came from these towns in the area and persuaded the crowds. We do not know what they said. All of a sudden, the crowd turns on Paul. For further insight I went to John Phillips commentary on

the Book of Acts. He really helps out a lot here with his explanation. Phillips says this:

“Eventually the crowd dispersed. The priest of [Zeus] went back to his temple; the garlands were removed from the oxen, which were returned to their stalls. There was an anticlimax. The people felt cheated and deceived, not to say embarrassed. Resentment sprang up. The whole incident was the talk of the town. The pagans felt they had been made to look foolish. As for Paul’s words, as their import sank in it became evident that he had insulted their gods, [remember he called them “worthless” and “vain”] scorned their religion, and made a mockery of their worship.

It was tender ready for a spark. Forgotten already were the miracle and the message. All that remained was a smoldering resentment, only awaiting a wind to fan it into flame. Nor was it long in coming – Satan saw to that. Here was a good chance to get rid of this dangerous fellow Paul.

Jews from Pisidian Antioch, more than a hundred miles away, arrived in town determined to get rid of Paul once and for all. They had evidently been in touch with each other. Paul was a menace to Judaism. Drive him out of one place and he showed up somewhere else. There was only one thing to do. Kill him! And get the Gentiles to do the dirty work.”

It sounds a lot like what they did to Jesus in Jerusalem. The Jews wanted to kill Jesus and they got the Romans to do their dirty work.

So, John Phillips believes that it was the Jews from down the road who instigated the pagan crowd and suggested stoning them. He is probably right because stoning was a uniquely Jewish practice and it would have been their punishment for what they perceived as blasphemy. They focus their efforts against Paul, the high-profile chief spokesman. However, nothing happens to Barnabas apparently. Acts does not talk about Barnabas being harmed at all. They focus all their wrath on Paul because he is the one who talked. So, Paul is laying there all bloodied up and they think he is dead. But then, another miracle.

READ Acts 14:20

We are told here that some disciples gathered around Paul and they are very concerned about his condition. This is significant. The fact that disciples (plural) were standing around Paul indicates that there had been some in that town who believed, that were followers, that were disciples. They are gathered around Paul. It was not just Barnabas. We do not know how many but there are some that are concerned about Paul. This indicates that there is some fruit in Lystra from Paul's preaching the Gospel. These disciples may have thought that Paul was dead and they were standing there stunned. They do not know what to think. Perhaps they had formed a prayer circle and were praying for his recovery. We don't know. They are concerned. Whatever the case, miraculously, Paul stands up! You can imagine their shock. This is an example of God's divine protection and healing power. God is obviously not finished with Paul yet. In fact, we know (because we have been reading the book of Acts) that He is just getting started.

I want you to think about something. If Paul had died that day, we would not have half of our New Testament. Galatians, the first book Paul wrote was not written until after his first missionary journey. We would not have such wonderful chapters as the Love Chapter in First Corinthians 13 that we all quote at weddings. We would not have, "For we know that God works all things together for good to those who love God and are called according to His purpose" (Romans 8:28). We would not have that verse. We would not have those verses in Romans I just read. We would not have Ephesians 2:8 – "For by grace you have been saved through faith..." We would not have Philippians 2:9 – "Therefore God has highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow..." We would not have those verses. We would not have Galatians 2:20, which was my dad's favorite verse – "I have been crucified with Christ: nevertheless, I live; yet not I, but Christ lives in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself for me." We would not have these verses and many, many more if Paul had died that day. So, God is not finished with Paul yet.

I want to point out something about this incident here in Lystra. Some Bible scholars believe that it was this incident, where it appears that Paul had died, that he experienced his vision of heaven which he would describe later in 2 Corinthians Chapter 12 as being "caught up into paradise." Some believe this is the incident where that took place.

From Lystra, Paul and Barnabas resume their journey and head to Derbe, about 30 miles away.

READ Acts 14:21a

I want to stop there and point something out. All we know about what happened in Derbe is what that little verse says. They preach the Gospel and make many disciples. No persecution is talked about. No pushback. No resistance. They have success. One of the most successful stopping places they have on their mission trips is Derbe. And yet this is all that is mentioned about what happened there. So, why wasn't there any resistance? Why didn't the Jews follow him to Derbe? Perhaps Paul's enemies presumed he was dead. Out of sight, out of mind. They probably went back to their homes. They figured they had killed Paul and did not have to worry about him anymore. Now we come to the passage I read last time...

READ Acts 14:21b-23.

They do their follow-up work. They go back to the towns they had been to before and did discipleship.

From Derbe they begin to make their way home. The shorter and faster route home for Paul and Barnabas would have been to continue following the Roman highway through the mountain pass of the Cilician Gates to the east and then head southward back into Syria. That would have been a lot shorter trip. But they do not do that. Instead, they backtrack through all the towns where they had preached previously without any fear of reprisal by those who had opposed their preaching, our team returns to Lystra where Paul had been stoned. They also go back to Iconium and then to Pisidian Antioch where they had been run out of town.

They minister to the new believers in the churches that had been established. This shows the priority Paul places on discipling new believers. He goes back to these places at great risk to his own life!

READ Acts 14:24-26

Paul and Barnabas return to their home church in Antioch of Syria. By the time they arrive back home they have been gone for about 18 months. A year and a half. Long trip!! For us it is just a chapter or two.

READ Acts 14:27-28

This is another way of saying that they spend quite a bit of time with the disciples there in Antioch. They give the church a detailed report of their missionary experience. It would have been interesting to hear them tell their stories. They then get some much-needed rest and recuperation. And that is the end of Paul's first missionary journey.

Application from Acts Chapter 14

- Do not let a little resistance keep you from serving the Lord and finding joy in the work you believe is important. Paul and Barnabas offer us a really good example of Christian perseverance. They pursued a clearly defined goal of taking the good news to the Gentiles. No opposition, not even physical violence, was going to keep them from preaching the Gospel.
- Paul and Barnabas refused to be worshipped as gods by their uninformed pagan audience. They quickly deflected all glory and honor to the rightful Recipient – the one true living God.
- Paul placed a high priority on both **evangelism** (getting people saved) and **discipleship** (getting people to grow in their faith).
- Know your audience and then present your message at their level of understanding.