

The Acts of the Holy Spirit

Gloria Dei Lutheran Church

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Paul's First Missionary Journey, Part II

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Success and Opposition ([14:1-10](#))

They went together to the synagogue of the Jews: When they came to Iconium, they again began their evangelistic efforts by preaching in the synagogue. This pattern is one we see repeated over and over; proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus to the Jews was still a good way to start, even if the leaders of the synagogues sometimes opposed and even expelled the evangelists.

Again Paul and Barnabas have success among both Jews and Gentiles, presenting the same gospel to both. The success in Iconium must have been refreshing, because they had just been kicked out of Pisidian Antioch after their success there (Acts 13:50).

Sometimes Paul stayed in a region for an extended period of time, strengthening the churches and working where evangelistic efforts had already borne fruit. So the persecution Paul experienced in Pisidian Antioch may well have been God's way of moving him on to Iconium and other places.

Unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brethren: Luke makes it clear that it was not all the Jews of Iconium who did this, because many believed (Acts 14:1). But some not only rejected the message, but stirred up others to reject the message *and* the messengers.

They stayed as long as they could, despite the opposition, leaving only when it was absolutely necessary. They did this because they knew that these Christians in Iconium needed all the grounding they could get to stand strong in a city where there was significant opposition.

Speaking boldly in the Lord...: Despite the opposition, Paul and Barnabas continued to preach boldly, bearing witness to the word of His grace and touching others with the power of Jesus.

“The gospel is here called the message of his grace because divine grace is its subject matter.” (F. F. Bruce)

A violent attempt was made... and (they) fled: When forced to, Paul and Barnabas left Iconium for Lystra (about twenty miles away) and Derbe. Their perseverance under the difficulty in Iconium didn't mean that it was time for them to become martyrs.

Acts 14:4 is the first time Paul and Barnabas are called apostles in the Book of Acts. The only other time the title is used for them in Acts is in 14:14. But Paul often used the title of himself in his epistles.

William Ramsay demonstrated that Lystra and Derbe were indeed together in the Roman province of Lycaonia, but only between a.d. 37 and 72, the exact period these events in Acts took place. This kind of accuracy persuaded Ramsay that the Biblical account was true, especially in an age when they were all thought to be fables and made-up stories.

This man heard Paul speaking: The crippled man heard Paul preach about Jesus. This certain man without strength in his feet made the important transition from hearing about the work of Jesus to believing that it was for him.

Paul, observing him intently and seeing that he had faith to be healed: There was something about this man's faith that was evident, and it is likely that God gave Paul the gift of discernment, so much so that Paul knew God intended to heal the man at that moment. That this lame man had faith is made plain by his ready response to Paul's direction to stand up.

Paul and Barnabas did not go into these cities to do miracles, and then to preach. Rather, it was the other way around. They went to preach; then sometimes, depending on the Spirit's leading, they would perform healings. We've often seen miracles precede belief, but we also see miracles as a confirmation following faith. The timing of miraculous acts is entirely up to God; we must never think we can predict them, not matter what some televangelists claim. The truest, purest healing miracle is always that of the unbelieving heart coming to faith in Jesus

Christ. All other miraculous activity serves God's primary purpose, to seek and to save that which is lost!

Paul and Barnabas Called Gods ([14:11-13](#))

The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!: These people saw a stupendous miracle happen before their eyes, yet their idea of who God is had not changed yet. So it seemed logical to them to consider Paul and Barnabas gods. So here we see the miracle merely attracting attention, and in this case, it was unwanted attention! *The miracle itself saved no one.*

Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker: In Greek mythology, it was common for the gods to come to earth in human form, though they did not always do in the best interests of mankind!

The people of Lystra had a legend that once Zeus and Hermes visited their land disguised as mortals, and no one gave them any hospitality except for one elderly couple. In their anger at the people, Zeus and Hermes wiped out the whole town, except for the old couple. This may explain why the Lystrians were so quick to honor Paul and Barnabas.

And Paul, Hermes: Hermes was known as the messenger of the gods, so it made sense to the Lystrians that Paul (i.e., the more talkative one!) was Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. Barnabas apparently had an air of authority about him, so they regarded him as Zeus.

This adoration of Paul and Barnabas would have been in the Lycaonian language, which explains why Paul and Barnabas did not grasp what was afoot immediately

They tore their clothes: They did this to show that they were completely human, just as the Lystrians. They also did it out of an instinctively Jewish reaction to blasphemy. For Paul and Barnabas, it wasn't just inconvenient that they were called gods; it was blasphemy!

That you should turn from these useless things: These are strong words from Paul to people who took their pagan worship seriously. Paul clearly wasn't afraid to confront this mob with the truth, and the truth was that idolatry is wrong, and they had to turn from it.

As Paul told them more about Jesus and what He has done, he especially wanted them to turn from these useless things to the living God. Jesus could not merely be added to their pagan comfort zone.

To the living God, who made heaven, earth...: Paul urges the crowd to consider the One true God, the One who stands behind all creation, not one of the lesser (and imaginary) Greek gods.

Paul mentions the good things God does for all men because these are just the kind of things these people would think that Zeus gave them. Paul told them these blessings come from the true God who lives in heaven, not from Zeus. God's kindness to all men (e.g., in giving rain and fruitful crops) should be seen as a witness of His love and power, something theologians call "common grace."

So we see that Paul did not preach to pagan worshippers the same way he preached to Jews or those Gentiles who believed or were acquainted with Judaism. He did not quote the Old Testament to them, but instead appeals "natural revelation", to the things that anyone can understand by looking at the world around them.

They could scarcely restrain the multitudes from sacrificing to them: Even with all this, Paul and Barnabas had a hard time challenging the wrong conceptions of God held by the Lystrians!

Persecution, Success, and the Trip Home ([14:19-28](#))

Then Jews from Antioch and Iconium came: These opponents were not content to kick Paul out of their own region (14:5-6); they followed him and brought their persecution with them. For some these were long trips - they were *dedicated* adversaries of Paul, just as he had once been a dedicated persecutor of the Church.

Having persuaded the multitudes: Well, we already knew the folks here were on the unreliable side. They incited the people of Lystra against Paul and Barnabas, and instigated the stoning of Paul. This was obviously an attempt to execute Paul and Barnabas – with the rocks being thrown by the same people who wanted to worship them shortly before. Quite a dramatic demonstration of how fickle a crowd can be! Whatever admiration they'd had for the miracle, and desire to honor Paul and Barnabas as gods, sure didn't last long.

This reminds us how incredibly dangerous it is for any spiritual leader to cultivate or allow any kind of personality- or hero-worship. The same people who give this honor will feel terribly betrayed when the leader is shown to be human. Martin Luther truly grasped the importance of this:

The first thing I ask is that people should not make use of my name, and should not call themselves Lutherans but Christians. What is Luther? The teaching is not mine. Nor was I crucified for anyone.... How did I, poor stinking sack of maggots that I am, come to the point where people call the children of Christ by my evil name?

They stoned Paul ... he rose up and went into the city: Paul was miraculously preserved here. Some think that he was even actually killed and raised to life again, because stoning was usually a pretty reliable form of execution!

Perhaps Paul had this episode in mind when he wrote, “I bear in my body the marks of Jesus...” (Galatians 6:17). He also refers to this stoning in 2 Corinthians 11:25.

It has been suggested that the heavenly vision described by Paul in 2 Corinthians 12 took place at this attack. It’s possible, but only a matter of pious speculation. It’s entirely reasonable, though, to think that Paul remembered Stephen when he was being stoned, and how he had been a part of Stephen’s execution.

He rose up and went into the city: When Paul was revived, he did not flee the city that stoned him. Instead he immediately went back into it. He had been driven out of Antioch and Iconium by this traveling mob, and he was determined to leave Lystra on his own terms.

In Acts 16, we’ll learn of a young Christian man and his mother in Lystra, Timothy. Could Timothy have witnessed these things? We don’t know, but it’s not unreasonable to think he at least knew of it.

When they had preached the gospel to that city and made many disciples: Despite the persecution in Lystra, the work of God continued – now in Derbe. Paul and Barnabas keep on preaching the gospel and making disciples.

We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God: This is the voice of experience! This message also helped strengthen and exhort disciples of Jesus. This is a fairly simple message, but fully proved in Paul’s personal experience. Paul could *preach* that message because he had *lived* that message.

So when they had appointed elders in every church: Paul and Barnabas were committed to not just making new Christians, but in establishing new churches, places where these new Christians could grow and be established in the Lord.

Paul and Barnabas knew that these churches must have proper administration, so they appointed elders in every city where there were Christians.

After they had passed through Pisidia...: They returned pretty much the same way they came. They did not stop on the island of Cyprus, but sailed to Antioch, returning to their home congregation.

They reported all that God had done with them, and that He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles: The success of the Gospel among the Gentiles, and the blessing of God that it demonstrated, showed that what God did in Antioch was not unique. God wanted to replicate this work all over the world.

Interestingly, the word “reported” here is in a tense (imperfect) that indicates more than one episode of reporting. They were spreading the word of what God was doing, probably to anyone who would listen!

This first missionary trip was a great success that came with great headaches and obstacles: The difficulty of travel itself, the confrontation with Elymas on Cyprus, the quitting of John Mark, being driven out of the cities of Antioch and Iconium, the temptation to receive adoration as gods, and – for crying out loud! -- being stoned in Lystra. Paul and Barnabas would not be deterred from the work God had them to do. It’s not because they were particularly great men, but rather they were men loved, called, and used by a Great God.

Paul later expressed this drive in his letter to the Philippians:

Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:12-14)

Back at their home church in Syrian Antioch, we can assume that Paul and Barnabas took a long break and found plenty of ministry to do back there!