

Paul's First Missionary Journey Concludes

Acts 14

Acts 14:1-7: *“Now it happened in Iconium that they went together to the synagogue of the Jews, and so spoke that a great multitude both of the Jews and of the Greeks believed. ² But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brethren. ³ Therefore they stayed there a long time, speaking boldly in the Lord, who was bearing witness to the word of His grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands. ⁴ But the multitude of the city was divided: part sided with the Jews, and part with the apostles. ⁵ And when a violent attempt was made by both the Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to abuse and stone them, ⁶ they became aware of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding region. ⁷ And they were preaching the gospel there.”*

Background Notes

At the end of Acts 13 Paul and Barnabas left Antioch of Pisidia, and went to the city of Iconium. Iconium was about eighty miles southeast of Antioch. Both cities were located in the Roman Empire's province of Asia. That area is in central Turkey today.

When Paul and Barnabas came to Iconium, once again they went to the Jewish synagogue where they would get a hearing from Jews and from Gentile proselytes to Judaism. A proselyte was a non-Jew who believed in the one true God of Israel, and followed Judaism to one degree or another. Many Jews and Gentiles at Iconium believed (v1), but once again the Jews who did not believe stirred up opposition: *“But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brethren.”*

Paul and Barnabas continued to witness boldly and the Lord confirmed their testimony with miraculous signs and wonders, but when the opposition attempted to physically mistreat them and stone them, they left Iconium and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of the district of Lycaonia (v6).

Here is an example of how the science of archaeology confirms the geographic accuracy of the Bible. The implication of verse 6, *“They... fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia...”* is that the cities of Lystra and Derbe, which were in the district of Lycaonia, were in a different district than Iconium, from which Paul and Barnabas had fled. Critics of the Bible used to say that Luke had made an error here. After all, Lystra was only twenty miles from Iconium, so Iconium was also a city in the Lycaonia district. But in 1910 archaeologists found a boundary marker in the twenty miles between Iconium and Lystra. This proved that Iconium and Lystra were in different Roman districts, even though they were only twenty miles apart. Once again, archaeology supports the accuracy of the Bible!

Doctrinal Points

1. It is not wrong for believers to flee dangerous situations.

Verses 5-6: *“And when a violent attempt was made by both the Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to abuse and stone them, ⁶ they became aware of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding region.”* Wait a minute! What kind of Christian courage was that - running away just because their lives were in danger? Is that acceptable Christian behavior? Yes! It’s called common sense - not a lack of courage. It is not wrong for believers to flee dangerous situations.

There are times when believers can’t flee from dangerous situations, as when Daniel was thrown into the lion’s den, or when the three young men were sentenced to die in the fiery furnace. And sometimes God will purposely lead a believer into a dangerous situation - in fact, Lystra became a dangerous place. And notice that the Lord led Paul and Barnabas back to these dangerous places: *“And when they had preached the gospel to that city (Derbe) and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch” (v21).*

Normally, however, if the Lord gives you an opportunity to get out of a dangerous situation without compromising your faith in any way, take the opportunity to flee. To put it another way, if the Lord doesn’t specifically tell you or lead you to stay in a dangerous situation, take the opportunity to flee. Many foreign missionaries have rightly fled from foreign countries when the situation turned dangerous. Wives and children and the safety and welfare of national believers are important factors in making decisions to stay or to go. But remember - it is not wrong for believers to flee dangerous situations.

2. It is wrong for believers to receive worship.

Acts 14:8-20: *“And in Lystra a certain man without strength in his feet was sitting, a cripple from his mother’s womb, who had never walked. ⁹ This man heard Paul speaking. Paul, observing him intently and seeing that he had faith to be healed, ¹⁰ said with a loud voice, “Stand up straight on your feet!” And he leaped and walked. ¹¹ Now when the people saw what Paul had done, they raised their voices, saying in the Lycaonian language, “The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!” ¹² And Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. ¹³ Then the priest of Zeus, whose temple was in front of their city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates, intending to sacrifice with the multitudes. ¹⁴ But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard this, they tore their clothes and ran in among the multitude, crying out ¹⁵ and saying, “Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men with the same nature as you, and preach to you that you should turn from these useless things to the living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and all things that are in them, ¹⁶ who in bygone generations allowed all nations to walk in their own ways.*

¹⁷ Nevertheless He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good, gave us rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness.” ¹⁸ And with these sayings they could scarcely restrain the multitudes from sacrificing to them. ¹⁹ Then Jews from Antioch and Iconium came there; and having persuaded the multitudes, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead. ²⁰ However, when the disciples gathered around him, he rose up and went into the city. And the next day he departed with Barnabas to Derbe.”

After the amazing miracle of the healing of the lame man, Paul and Barnabas were looked on as Greek gods by the citizens of Lystra. Suppose we had been in their sandals at that point. Would we have taken advantage of the situation? After all, we could at least have asked for a little traveling money from those willing worshipers! But Paul and Barnabas refused to receive their adulation and worship in any way: *“Why are you doing these things? We also are men with the same nature as you, and preach to you that you should turn from these useless things to the living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and all things that are in them”* (v15). Only the one true God is worthy to receive worship, so it is wrong for believers to receive worship.

Notice that Paul used the evidence of God’s creation to begin his witness with this multitude of Gentiles. Remember, these folks did not have the knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures that the Jews had. So Paul and Barnabas started with the common ground of God’s creation and provision for mankind. This is a good example for us as we witness to people who have no knowledge of the content of Scripture – and sadly there are many people in our culture today who have no knowledge of Scripture. We can always start with the witness of Creation.

Verse 7 indicates that they moved on from the evidence of God’s creation to the gospel, and some people believed, because the rest of the chapter indicates that there were new disciples at Lystra. Once again, the self-righteous Jews at Antioch and Iconium dogged the steps of Paul and Barnabas. They persuaded the fickle crowd to change their minds and persecute these men, who really were not gods. This reminds us of the Palm Sunday crowds who welcomed the Lord into Jerusalem. But when their minds were poisoned by the Jewish leaders, how quickly they changed their attitude to Jesus.

The people of Lystra stoned the apostle Paul, dragged him out of the city and left him for dead. But God raised him up! Whether Paul actually died or not is hard to say. Many Christians believe that Paul was referring to this incident in 2 Corinthians 12:2-4 when he wrote about his experiences: *“I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a one was caught up to the third heaven. And I know such a man—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows— how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.”*

Just think. Paul and Barnabas could have avoided all this trouble if they had just accepted the worship that was first offered them. But they didn’t permit it, because it is wrong for believers to receive worship.

Practical Applications

1. Don't forget to follow up.

Acts 14:21-23: *“And when they had preached the gospel to that city and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, ²² strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, “We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.”²³ So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.”*

Paul and Barnabas did not practice “hit and run” evangelism. They retraced their steps in order to strengthen and encourage the new believers. They made sure the churches were established with elders for the continued growth and spiritual well-being of the new believers. And Paul revisited those churches on his second and third missionary journeys. Paul did not forget to follow up new believers.

Do you know any new believers? Are they being followed up? Are they established in good Bible teaching churches? If not, find ways that you can help them to grow in their new faith. Follow-up of new believers is a must. Don't forget to follow up!

2. Don't forget to report back.

Acts 14:24-28: *“And after they had passed through Pisidia, they came to Pamphylia. ²⁵ Now when they had preached the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia. ²⁶ From there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work which they had completed. ²⁷ Now when they had come and gathered the church together, they reported all that God had done with them, and that He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. ²⁸ So they stayed there a long time with the disciples.”*

Paul and Barnabas started their missionary travels when the church in Antioch of Syria sent them out to evangelize. At the end of their first journey, they returned to the home church and reported all that God had done, and shared with them the fruit of the ministry.

The apostle Paul continued this practice. It's a biblical practice that should be followed today. All servants of the Lord should have a home base for purposes of accountability as well as support, advice and fellowship.

If you're involved in any kind of ministry, don't just “do your own thing.” Make sure you have a home base. And don't forget to report back!