

A Door of Faith Opened to the Gentiles

Read Acts 14.1-28

INTRODUCTION / CONNECTIONS / CONTEXT

1/ This Lesson 14 is a continuation of [Lesson 13, 'To the End of the Earth.'](#) In that lesson, we began following the first missionary journey of Barnabas and Saul as they embark to carry the Gospel to the nations of the world. Though Barnabas seems to have been the team leader of the two, by the time we get to **ch 13.9**, Saul begins to adopt and be called Paul, and also seems to assume the leadership of their missionary team, or **'companions'** as Luke calls them **[13.13]**. Luke seems to do this intentionally, though we can't be certain or dogmatic about the personal and relational dynamics that may have influenced these nuances in the narrative. What we do know is that Saul/Paul is fulfilling the purposed ministry to which Christ had called and commissioned him **[see ch 9.15-16]**.

2/ By the way, this is totally irrelevant to the theme of the lesson, but as I was studying these two chapters that narrate their first missionary journey, my curiosity was piqued to know how many combined miles all these ministries among the various cities would have covered. So I did a simple Google search for 'Paul and Barnabas first missionary journey miles covered' and came up with this brief summary: *"The first missionary journey covered a total of some 1,208 miles wherein Paul and Barnabas established more than a dozen congregations. In all, they had been gone a little over two years."* If you consult the map I have given you, those two years would have been from 46-48 AD.

3/ When we ended our chapter 13 lesson, Paul and Barnabas were in Pisidian Antioch where he preached the stirring Gospel message in **ch 13.13-41**. This Lord blessed His Word, and many believed the Gospel of Christ—both Jews and Gentiles. It also stirred up a firestorm of opposition among the unbelieving Jews who incited a violent riot against them and **'drove them out of their district.'** But God will sovereignly fulfill His redemptive purposes! During all of this opposition, **"when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the Word of the Lord ... as many as were appointed to eternal life believed ... the Word of the Lord was spreading throughout the whole region ... And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit"** [vv 48-52]. And the missionary team traveled on to the next major city, Iconium [v 51]. So we'll pick up the continuing Gospel missionary travelogue there...

I / vv 1-7 | Paul and Barnabas at Iconium

v 1 / Iconium was about 95 miles SE from Pisidian Antioch. Although Paul and Barnabas had declared back in Antioch **"behold, we are turning to the Gentiles,"** that was not a blanket rejection of their ministry to Jews—just an adjustment of their emphasis. Paul would continue to pray for, preach to, and long for the salvation of his Jewish brethren according to the flesh for the rest of his life **[Romans 9.1-5; 10.1]**. So when they come to Iconium, they do exactly what they did in Antioch: **"Now at Iconium they entered together into the Jewish synagogue and spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Gentiles believed."**

v 2 / And, wouldn't you know, they got the same reaction from the unbelieving Jews again—just like they had at Pisidian Antioch [this is going to be a pattern that will repeat itself over and over]. **"But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers."** No doubt they mounted a disinformation campaign against them accusing Paul and Barnabas of 'heresy,' preaching a 'false God,' and in general just being trouble-stirring rabble-rousers.

v 3 / Paul and Barnabas just kept on persevering ... being faithful missionaries of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And God's hand of power and blessing was on them. **God bore witness** to the Truth of what they were preaching **"granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands."** These were the same kinds of miracles the apostles have been performing from the beginning of Acts to demonstrate, authenticate, and publicly verify that they were, in truth, servants of God and apostles of Jesus Christ.

vv 4-7 / Paul and Barnabas stayed as long as they thought they could safely and effectively witness to the Gospel. When they learned of life-threatening plots orchestrated between the enemies of the Gospel and the ruling civil authorities—plots even to stone and kill them—they **“fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia.”** And what did they do there? Did they go underground or hide in fear? Did they call it quits? NO! **“...and there they continued to preach the Gospel.”**

II / vv 8-18 | Paul and Barnabas at Lystra

1/ **vv 8-10** / Lystra was about 20 miles S of Iconium—about a day’s walking distance. The first thing we notice about Lystra is that they didn’t go into the Jewish synagogue. Maybe because there wasn’t one. What we do know about Lystra is that it is the most thoroughly Gentile—even pagan as we shall see—city that Paul and Barnabas have encountered so far. But God has a message for them! Immediately they began preaching Christ. There was a lame man in particular who was enthralled by their Gospel. Paul looked intently back at this lame man, **‘seeing that he had faith to be made well’** by this God and Redeemer they were proclaiming. We assume the Holy Spirit who reads all hearts and knows what is in us revealed this insight and perception to them. Paul **“said in a loud voice, ‘Stand upright on your feet!’ And he sprang up and began walking.”** That sounds familiar, doesn’t it [3.1-10]?

2/ **vv 11-13** / Keep in mind, these citizens of Lystra are thoroughly Gentile and Roman, and therefore devotees of the Roman gods. When they saw these extraordinary, supernatural works being performed, they immediately credited them to the gods they were familiar with. They have a quick explanation: **“The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!”** *“Specifically, they think that Zeus (as Barnabas), the king of the gods, and Hermes (as Paul), his son and the messenger of the gods, have come to Lystra. There is a logic to their conclusion, as local legend holds that the two gods had visited as human once before”* [Brian J. Vickers, *ESV Expository Commentary* | referencing John Polhill]. Their enthusiasm quickly spiraled out of control. **“And the priest of Zeus, whose temple was at the entrance to the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds,”** obviously an attempt to worship Paul and Barnabas whom they perceived to be their gods incarnated as humans.

3/ **vv 14-17** / We remember how King Herod accepted and gloried in accolades like these [ch 12.20-23] and how God, being jealous for the glory that belongs only to Him, struck him dead. Paul and Barnabas have no desire nor intentions to receive such glory for themselves. To the contrary, they were on a mission to preach the True God who really had come to earth in human form in the Person of Jesus Christ! They immediately began an adamant counter-message to tell them about Him! **“Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you Good News, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God...”** NOTE how Paul and Barnabas begin preaching the Gospel with these pagan Gentiles, meeting them at the point of God-awareness that they had. They didn’t begin with the Old Testament Scriptures because these Gentiles had no awareness of the Scriptures. They began preaching the Gospel by pointing to God as the Creator of all things. [They employ the same tack they will use in ch 17 with the pagan philosophers in Athens—but we’ll deal with that in more time when we get there.] Let’s break down the approach and appeal Paul and Barnabas took with these ‘secularist’ unbelievers who have no ‘Christian religion’ background or knowledge: how did they lead to the Gospel?

- **“we bring you Good News, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them...”** Paul begins with them where they are and what they know—there is a creation. The physical creation they are living in was created by the God they are proclaiming to them. This would have been in stark contrast and correction of their belief that the gods they worshiped brought the creation into being. And with the language of **‘that you should turn from...to’** Paul is preaching repentance from their sin and unbelief and faith in the God He was witnessing to. As Paul wrote to the Thessalonians: **“...how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for His Son from Heaven, whom He raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come”** [1 Thessalonians 1.9-10].

- **“in past generations He allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways”** This does not mean that God condoned the idolatries of the past generations and cultures—but rather in His mercy He did not immediately destroy them. He allowed them to practice their godless ways and perpetrate their perversions in His longsuffering and patience while He was preparing the world for bringing His Savior who would be **‘the Light for the Gentiles’** and **‘bring salvation’** to them [13.47].
 - **“Yet He did not leave Himself without witness, for He did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness”** No doubt pointing to the livestock and fruits that they had attempted to offer Paul and Barnabas as offerings of worship. *“No! Do not offer these things to us! Offer them to the God who made them grow and gave them to you!”* We call this *‘common grace.’* As in **Matthew 5.45: For He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.** God is good to all in that He indiscriminately gives His good, common graces to all mankind [Psalm 145.9]. Looking ahead again to Paul’s message to the pagan, idolatrous Athenians, **“...He Himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything ... In Him we live and move and have our being”** [Acts 17.25, 28]. Again, Paul is pointing these people of Lystra to the goodness and common mercies of the True and Living God.
- 4/ v 18 / We don’t have to assume Paul told them nothing more [see the **1 Thessalonians 1.9-10 reference above along with Acts 17.30-31**]. Surely he took the opportunity to tell them more about how God sent His Son, Jesus, to earth, God truly incarnated in human flesh...and then how Jesus died and rose again to give us forgiveness of sins and eternal life. But Luke wants to emphasize the contextual Gospel approach Paul took to lead them in their knowledge of God from where they were to where they needed to be in their faith. It may very well be that the way Luke describes it, he is relating to us the joy with which they received the Good News about Jesus these missionaries had delivered to them when he says **“Even with these words they scarcely restrained the people from offering sacrifice to them.”** Even after receiving the Truth of the Gospel of Grace in Jesus Christ, they still wanted to give ‘love offerings’ to show their gratitude to the messengers who had brought it to them.

III / vv 19-23 | Paul stoned at Lystra – on to Derbe ... then backtracking

1/ vv 19-20 / What happened next was beyond remarkable—it had to be miraculous. **“But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead.”** First, NOTE the virulent hatred of Paul’s fellow Jews against him and the Gospel of Christ he was preaching. Antioch was now 120 miles behind them. They had encountered this same animosity and opposition there. Antioch is where they **‘drove him out of their district’** [13.50]. But they weren’t content for Paul just to move on and get out of their district. They continued to surveil his movements, no doubt sent out spies to see where he went next, and followed him there also. It’s ironic that when we get to **ch 26.11** where Paul appears before Herod Agrippa II, we will hear him tell about his past life of persecuting Christ and his followers: **“And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities.”** Now, here later, the unbelieving Jews whose cause he prosecuted against the followers of Christ are now pursuing him in the same way. They came all the way from back in Antioch, picked up fellow disgruntled compatriots in Iconium, and together they said, *“Let’s go to Lystra where we hear Paul is and see if we can kill him there!”* Remember, they had also concocted plots to **stone them** in Iconium also [v 5]. Luke uses the same word ‘crowd/people’ [ochlos] here four times within eight verses to show that opposite reactions to the Gospel are present among the same peoples to whom they preached, and sometimes even the same ‘crowd’ can be fickle and easily swayed from one opinion to the other. This time they succeeded in their attempts to kill Paul—and thought they had. I repeat, **“they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead.”** We have noted many times before that stoning was not just mischievous pelting with rocks—it was the breaking of bones and crushing of the body with the biggest rocks they could find with the intention to kill. But it was happened next that has to be miraculous. **“But when the disciples** [obviously those who had believed the Gospel

message in Lystra] **gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city, and on the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe.**” Derbe was about 60 miles SE of Lystra—about a three-days walking journey. So the question is: *how could Paul have been stoned to the point of satisfying his persecutors that he was dead—bruised, battered, broken—and then get up, go back into the city, and walk the next three days to another city...without a miracle of healing—or even resurrection[?]?* Luke gives us no more explanation or commentary—just that he did.

2/ vv 21-23 / NOTE now Paul’s commitment to Christ and His Gospel, his perseverance, and his determination to fulfill the calling and commission Christ had given him: **“When they had preached the Gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra [where he had been stoned and left for dead] and to Iconium and to Antioch [where the murderous persecutors had come from]...”**

There are four ministry activities Paul and Barnabas conducted in those cities:

[1] **‘strengthening the souls of the disciples’** They encouraged those who had believed the Gospel.

[2] **‘encouraging them to continue in the faith’** They not only led them to faith in Christ, but they also encouraged them to persevere in their own new-found faith. This also doubtless included teaching them more about the Scriptures and how to conduct their own life and conduct going forward.

[3] **‘and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the Kingdom of God’** Just his returning to them after how he had been mistreated and abused—which they had witnessed with their own eyes—was a remarkable living personal testimony to these new believers of what they, too, must expect and endure. Do we have any doubts that Paul recounted to them how Jesus had sent him to them with this advance expectation: **“For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my Name” [9.16]?** This **‘Kingdom of God’** is not only our present standing with God and mission here in this world, but it is especially the coming eternal Kingdom of the New Creation. **See Revelation 7.9-17.**

[4] **‘And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.’** We must reiterate what we have repeatedly said: the end goal of missions is not just to evangelize and ‘get people saved,’ but to **‘make disciples of all the nations’** and establish/plant New Testament churches. Healthy churches need leadership. And so the apostles preached the Gospel and then established churches they would leave behind to continue to function according to the Scriptures.

IV / vv 24-28 | Return to Antioch church via Perga – they report all that God had done

1/ vv 24-26 / Having now backtracked from Derbe to Lystra to Iconium to Pisidian Antioch, they turn southward again and head for Perga [see 13.13]. Perga is where they had first ministered on this part of southern eastern Europe [modern-day Turkey]. From Perga they walked the few miles to Attalia, the seaport entry city. **“...and from there they sailed to Antioch...”** This time they bypassed the island of Cyprus, sailing directly across the northern Mediterranean back home to their sending church **“where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work they had fulfilled.”** NOTE that both Paul and Barnabas and their sending Antioch Church acted in everything they did in full, absolute, total dependence on the **grace of God**. They did nothing in their own wisdom, strength, or ability.

2/ vv 27-28 / Paul and Barnabas reported just this to their sending church: **“And when they had arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how He had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. And they remained no little time with the disciples.”** True, effective Gospel missions—whether it is being conducted in every local church or in the other local churches established through their missions outreach—is the work that God is doing **with us** through the power of the Holy Spirit! BUT, as we will see in our next lesson, as the Antioch Church is rejoicing in God’s grace being expanded **‘to the end of the earth,’** and also strategizing how they will reach out yet further, resistance is building among their Jewish brethren in Jerusalem to object and seek to curtail it...

“I will make You as a Light for the nations, that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth [Isaiah 49.6 / Acts 13.47]”