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Acts 14:1-28

Twenty-second Message

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A TALE OF THREE CITIES

SERIES: THE SPREADING FLAME

In chapter 14 of the book of Acts, Luke describes the continuation and completion of the first missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas. They minister in three more cities, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe. We will briefly examine their ministry in each city, making a few observations as we proceed. Later, we will reflect on the entirety of this missionary journey, highlighting a number of principles for our own lives and ministries.

When we last left Paul and Barnabas they had been driven out of Pisidian Antioch. Certain Jewish leaders convinced the wives of prominent Roman officials to persuade their husbands to persecute the two missionaries and drive them out of their district. Both men were probably beaten with rods before they were thrown out of the city.

They headed southeast about 80 miles on Via Sebaste, the famous road constructed by Augustus in 6 BC. Traveling through rolling countryside, past the snow-capped peaks of the Sultan Dag Mountains, they came to a beautiful plateau surrounded by fertile plains and green forests. They had reached Iconium, a very old city which today is called Konya, Turkey's fourth largest town. A centre of agriculture and commerce, Iconium was still a Greek city when Paul and Barnabas visited it.

We pick up the story in Acts 14:1.

In Iconium they entered the synagogue of the Jews together, and spoke in such a manner that a large number of people believed, both of Jews and of Greeks. But the Jews who disbelieved stirred up the minds of the Gentiles, and embittered them against the brethren. Therefore they spent a long time there speaking boldly with reliance upon the Lord, who was testifying to the word of His grace, granting that signs and wonders be done by their hands. But the people of the city were divided; and some sided with the Jews, and some with the apostles. And when an attempt was made by both the Gentiles and the Jews with their rulers, to mistreat and to stone them, they became aware of it and fled to the cities of Lycaonia, Lystra and Derbe, and the surrounding region; and there they continued to preach the gospel. (Acts 14:1-7 NASB)

As was his custom, Paul began his ministry in the synagogue. Dressed in his ceremonial robes, as a visiting rabbi he would be asked for a word of exhortation for the people. Luke records that Paul's gospel of grace had an immediate impact that day. It shook people and made them sit up and take notice, with the result that a great number believed. Paul

and Barnabas declared the grace of God in Jesus. In Christ there is a way to receive from God all that people are looking for—cleansing, forgiveness, freedom from guilt, adequacy, and much, much more.

But trouble soon followed, led by the Jews who refused to believe. Notice Luke doesn't say they were unable to believe, but that they refused to believe. They were unpersuadable. The word literally means, disobedient. Theirs wasn't an intellectual but a moral problem. They begin to stir up hatred toward Paul and Barnabas through a campaign of slander. We are not told what lies these people spread about, but the missionaries were undeterred by the propaganda. Instead of fleeing they remained, probably for a number of months. Despite the distortions and deceptions, a sweeping proclamation of truth went forward, and many were turning to Christ. Luke adds that God confirmed the spoken word with signs and wonders.

A comment on the title "apostle" given to Barnabas here, and more directly in verse 14. The word has more than one meaning in the New Testament. There were apostles of Christ, which included the Twelve, Paul, and probably James. There is no evidence that Barnabas belonged to that group. There were also apostles of the churches, sent out by a church or churches on a particular mission. Epaphroditus was an apostle or a messenger of the Philippian church. That is the sense in which Paul is using the word here. Both he and Barnabas were apostles of the church in Syrian Antioch, while Paul was also an apostle of Christ.

Luke says, that "the people of the city were divided." The gospel always has a two-fold effect: it both unites and divides. It demands a response. People are either for it or against it. Eventually, the animosity intensifies dangerously. These enemies finally divide the town council, and a decision is made to stone Paul and Barnabas. Discovering the plot, the two men decide to leave town. They are not afraid; they will continue to preach the message of the cross that offends many people. They are being prudent. They were born again, but they were not born yesterday!

They flee to two small towns in Lycaonia, Lystra and Derbe. Some wonder why Paul chose these places. Neither location had a large population, and neither lay on an important trade route. The Lycaonians were largely uneducated and illiterate. They had their own language. Noted historian Sir William Ramsay described Lystra as a "quiet backwater."¹

But this backwater place was about to spring to life.

At Lystra a man was sitting who had no strength in his feet, lame from his mother's womb, who had never walked. This man was listening to Paul as he spoke, who, when he had fixed his gaze on him and had seen that he had faith to be made well, said with a loud voice, "Stand upright on your feet." And he leaped up and began to walk. When the crowds saw what Paul had done, they raised their voice, saying in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have become like men and have come down to us." And they began calling Barnabas, Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates, and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds. But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their robes and rushed out into the crowd, crying out and saying, "Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of the same nature as you, and preach the gospel to you in order 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. In the generations gone by He permitted all the nations to go their own ways; and yet He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness." Even saying these things, they with difficulty restrained the crowds from offering sacrifice to them. But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having won over the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead. But while the disciples stood around him, he got up and entered the city. The next day he went away with Barnabas to Derbe. (14:8-20)

We find something new here. Paul ministers in a marketplace rather than a synagogue. There was not much Jewish influence in Lystra, perhaps not even a synagogue. So these two begin preaching in the marketplace, trusting that the Lord had already prepared people's hearts.

As they proclaim the good news, God works in an astonishing way. Sitting there in the marketplace was a man who had been lame from birth. Evidently he was well known, having lived in that place all his life. Hearing Paul speak, he listened intently. Observing him, Paul could see that he "had faith to be made well." There was a work of grace already going on inside him. In response to the Holy Spirit, Paul says to the man, "Stand up on your feet!" Though he has never walked and has never put any weight on those feet, he obeys the apostle. He jumps up and starts walking. Like the crippled man in Acts 3, he probably began walking and jumping, praising God.

The crowd's response and fanatical behavior seems a little over the top and puzzling at first. But some local background is helpful here. The locals believed a legend, based on a poem written 50 years earlier by the Latin poet Ovid. One day, according to the legend, the supreme god Zeus and his son Hermes came to the hill country disguised as mortals, seeking lodging. Though they asked at a thousand homes, no one

would take them in. Finally, at a humble cottage of straw and reeds, a poor elderly couple, Philemon and Baucus, welcomed them in and gave to them out of their poverty. Later the gods rewarded them, but destroyed by flood the homes which would not take them in. These poor, superstitious Lycaonians were determined not to make the same mistake again. Observing the miracle, they shouted in their language that the gods had re-visited them. They name Barnabas Zeus, since he looked dignified, and Paul, Hermes, because he was smaller and talked a lot.

Paul and Barnabas didn't know what was happening at first, because they didn't understand the language. But when the priest comes with bulls and a wreath to sacrifice to them, they get the picture, and they are horrified. They tear their clothes, the traditional Hebrew way of responding to sacrilege, and shout that they are mere mortals, just like the Lycaonians.

Paul uses the situation to launch into a sermon, of which Luke gives but a brief abstract. This is the only recorded address we have of the apostle speaking to uneducated, perhaps even illiterate pagans. It's very different from the sermon he delivered in the synagogue to educated Jews. He begins by commenting on something they knew about, creation, rather than something they don't know, the Scriptures. He says that behind creation there is one living God, not a whole host of powerless pagan deities or idols, and he invites them to turn from the vanity of their idolatrous worship to the living and true God. This God is not only the creator but also the sustainer of the universe, and they have all benefited from his kindness. He has shown his love by giving them rain for their crops, providing them with plenty of food, and at various times filling their hearts with joy.

Once again, the response is very favorable, and a good number believe. But again, the Jews oppose this good news of the grace of God. This time they have traveled from Antioch, 110 miles away, and Iconium, 20 miles away, indicating the urgency they feel to stamp out this work. The crowd, probably disgruntled by the rejection of their worship, is incited to riot. The stoning that was plotted in Iconium now takes place in Lystra. John Stott comments, "It wasn't a judicial execution, but a lynching."² Those probably were the marks to which the apostle is referring in Galatians 6:17, "I bear on my body the brand-marks of Jesus."

Paul was bruised, scarred and deeply wounded, and the marks would be with him for the rest of his life. As the rocks began to rain down on him, I wonder if his mind flashed back to Stephen's execution, which he approved of and participated in. Soon Paul's blood-soaked, broken body lay on the rubble of Lystra. Thinking him dead, the people drag him outside the city. As the new believers gathered around him, weeping and lamenting, they too thought he was dead. But Luke says that Paul got up and walked back into the city. What courage! Caked with blood and dirt, he must have looked quite a spectacle. What a witness to those new believers in Lystra!

We know from Acts 16 that Lystra was the home of Timothy, his mother Eunice who was Jewish, and his grandmother Lois. All three possibly became Christians during Paul's ministry there on this first trip. During his second missionary journey, about five years later, Paul will recruit young Timothy to go with him. He would write to his son in the faith at the end of his life, "you followed my teaching, conduct, purpose, faith, patience, love, perseverance, persecutions, and sufferings, such as happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium and at Lystra; what persecutions I endured, and out of them all the Lord rescued me!" (2 Tim 3:10-11). Timothy may have watched on that occasion as Paul was pelted with stones.

The next day Paul walks 30 miles to the town of Derbe. That is amazing. The pain of being wounded and humiliated doesn't dampen his enthusiasm for the mission God had given him. The message preached in Derbe is still the good news, even though it has produced some very bad experiences. The Lord blesses their efforts with a "large number of disciples," and there is no mention of opposition there.

Luke writes:

After they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. They passed through Pisidia and came into Pamphylia. When they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia. From there they sailed to Antioch, from which they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had accomplished. When they had arrived and gathered the church together, they began to report all things that God had done with them and how He had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. And they spent a long time with the disciples. (14:21-28)

Instead of returning straight home they decide to retrace their steps, passing through the three towns in which they had just ministered, Lystra, Iconium and Antioch. They had been beaten and expelled from one and fled from the other two. On the return visit their concern is not evangelism, however, but the care and nurture of the new believers. This encouragement also included the instruction not to be surprised by difficulties; that hardship, suffering and persecution was a necessary requirement in the Christian life. It was Paul's own sufferings in these three cities that led him to say to Timothy in his letter, "everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim 3:12 NIV).

They also appointed elders in each of these Galatian churches, recognizing the spiritual gifts that were present, and the need to provide shepherds so that the flock in each place would have some leadership and care. The gospel would con-

tinue to be preached through the life of the church, through its message and its love. And just as they had been sent forth from Antioch with prayer and fasting, in the same way they commit these leaders to the task for which God had chosen them.

After completing the work that God had called them to do, Paul and Barnabas headed home, crossing the pass over the Taurus Mountains and climbing down to the coastal swamps of Pamphylia. This time they didn't bypass Perga, but preached the word there. From there they went on to Attalia, the port from which they sailed back to Antioch of Syria. There they gathered the whole church and give a report on what God had done. What an exciting service that must have been! They had been gone for about two years. The believers saw the scars on their bodies and heard the marvelous stories of changed lives, and particularly the amazing story of how God had opened his kingdom to gentiles.

Reflecting on this chapter and on the entire missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas, I will make a few observations.

First of all, I am struck by the power of the message of the gospel. Wherever they traveled, these men preached this simple message of the grace of God, and people responded. The lives of thousands were changed: rich and poor, young and old, educated and illiterate, governors and slaves.

The means of communication that we employ today are almost unbelievably powerful. I was in an electronics store yesterday with my son, and we stopped for a moment and watched a boy playing an Internet video game. My son said, "Right now he is playing with kids from all over the world." But in spite of the rapid advancement in technology and communication, the messages that are communicated through the media are hollow and empty. The world still cries out for a message that is worth believing.

The simple, unsophisticated message of Jesus and his love is what changes lives. Paul wrote in Romans 1:16, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation." There is no other message with the inherent authority, beauty, and life-changing truth as the gospel of God's grace. The only thing that can change the heart of a man or woman is the good news about Jesus. Without it, people are left to grope after a sense of meaning and significance.

Over the years, a number men have told me stories of their commitment to start-up companies and the excitement of working on cutting edge technology, which they thought was going to change the world. But after a while they realized they were believing a lie. The only thing it really changed was the quality of their family life. I've known people who fall in love again and again, hoping each time that this new someone will meet their needs, only to realize after a while that this relationship would not be any better than the ones they had before.

We have a message that is worth hearing, a message about life with meaning and love that lasts. That is why I have so much respect for those of you who are involved in the lives

of young people. You spend a lot of hours listening to their stories, eating too much junk food, and sleeping in tents on cow pastures in Mexico. You do that because young people are making decisions about how they will spend the rest of their lives. Someone needs to be there to tell them that God loves them, and that there are answers to their questions.

We can learn from Paul's flexibility. We have no freedom to change the message of the gospel. We don't need to. The only thing that changes lives is the good news about Jesus' life, death and resurrection, and the salvation offered on the basis of his work. But we must adapt our approach to the gospel. We need to begin where people are. That is what Paul did in Lystra. Speaking to educated Jews, he began with Scripture; speaking to uneducated gentiles, he began with nature. We need to find our own points of contact with secular men and women.

A few questions might be helpful. What does it mean to be human? Why do people search for personal significance, for a spiritual dimension in life, for a reality that eludes them in their materialism? What about people's hunger for love and community in a world that senses its alienation? What is this longing for freedom anyway? These are all relevant issues in the secular world. Jesus addresses all these questions and offers himself as the answer. We need to begin where people are, and slowly, gently, lead them to Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of every human aspiration.

We have a message worth hearing, a powerful message!

Secondly, not only are we struck by the positive power of the gospel to save and heal, we are struck by its negative influence. Wherever Paul went, the message of the good news of the grace of God always divided people. It still does. The same truth that produces faith also produces opposition. We would like to share Christ in such a way that others would believe. Even if they don't receive Christ, we hope they would respect us at least. But the option of being faithful to Christ and universally approved does not exist. Jesus himself said, "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first...If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also" (John 15:18, 20 NIV).

The rejection we face is rejection of the Lord, really, and it is inevitable. We have to be willing to be opposed for telling the truth.

The good news of the grace of God involves a cross. When you understand the meaning of the cross, you know why its message is so difficult for people. The cross makes a judgment on human life. If you say you believe in the cross, you are admitting that God substituted himself for your wickedness. The sinless One died in your place. The cross condemns our righteousness. It says we are sinners in need of a Savior; that all our abilities and intellect and good works are deeply marred and therefore worthless. That is the message of the gospel. In 1 Corinthians, Paul says that the gospel is an offence to those who are perishing, a crude, absurd attack on their pride. But to those who are being saved, the cross is the key that opens the gate to all of the blessings in life. The cross is the way to experience forgiveness, healing, wholeness, peace and joy.

The third thing that strikes me in this passage is that, in spite of people's response to this powerful message, the messenger remains the same. I am impressed by the steadfastness of Paul's Christian character, despite the reaction he received. He was entirely unmoved by either flattery or opposition, by the attempt to worship him as God or execute him as a criminal. None of these things mattered. He would later tell the Ephesian elders, "But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, in order that I may finish my course, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20:24).

As a servant of God, Paul was responsible to God to fulfill his ministry. Never was he a slave to the opinions of men. He refused to be sidetracked or deterred by the reception his message received. Our calling is to model and share the gospel of the grace of God, whether the response is praise, apathy or abuse. The summary that Paul gives to the church at Antioch about his entire trip does not focus on his experiences, but about what God had done and the privilege he felt to be part of that. May our hearts echo those same sentiments!

1. Sir William M. Ramsay, *The Cities of St. Paul: Their Influence on His Life and Thought* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1907), 408.

2. John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 232.

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