

Acts 14:1-28 // The Reality of Gospel Witness

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[0 : 0 0] comes from Acts 14 and we're reading the whole chapter. You can find that on page 1109 in the Bibles in front of you. At Iconium, Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue.

There they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Greeks believed. But the Jews who refused to believe stirred up the other Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there speaking boldly for the Lord who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to perform signs and wonders. The people of the city were divided. Some sided with the Jews, others with the apostles. There was a plot afoot among both the Gentiles and the Jews together with their leaders to ill-treat them and stone them. But they found out about it and fled to the Laotian cities of Lystra and Derby and to the surrounding country where they continued to preach the gospel. In Lystra there sat a man who was lame. He had been that way from birth and had never walked. He listened to Paul as he was speaking. Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed and called out, stand up on your feet. At that the man jumped up and began to walk. When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycian language, the gods have come down to us in human form. Barnabas they called Zeus and Paul they called Hermes because he was the chief speaker. The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought bulls and wreaths to the city gates because he and the crowd wanted to offer sacrifices to them.

But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd shouting, friends, why are you doing this? We too are only human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them. In the past he let all nations go their own way, yet he has not left himself without testimony. He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons. He provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.

Even with these words they had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them. Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city thinking he was dead. But after the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city. The next day he and Barnabas left for Derby. They preached the gospel in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith.

[2 : 4 8] We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God, they said. Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and with prayer and fasting committed them to the Lord in whom they had put their trust. After going through Psyda, they came to Pamphylia and when they had preached the word in Perga, they went down to Atalia. From Atalia they sailed back to Antioch where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed. On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. And they stayed there for a long time with the disciples. Amen.

Thank you to Nicola for reading and let me add my welcome to Simon's. I'm so glad that you've come to join us this evening as we continue to look in our series of acts at the rapid expansion of the gospel from Jerusalem and outwards. Let's pray as we start together. Heavenly Father, we thank you for this evening to come before your words humbly together. We ask that you would give us soft hearts and minds so that together we may grow in our love and knowledge of you. May my words be clear, faithful to your word, and honoring to you alone. Amen. Perhaps some of the ugliest scenes that we've seen in history have come from people trying to prevent others from accessing

what they already have, be that access to natural resources, money, influence, powers, or freedoms. When people feel threatened that the privileges that they enjoy are going to get out to everybody else and possibly away from them, they feel threatened and we see some of the grossest abuses of power.

Take the atrocities committed in the U.S. civil rights era as a part of that and many other horrible scenes of the past. People love to have special privileges, to have special callings, and rights that aren't afforded to others. And when these people organize to oppose the expansion of that, the results can turn very nasty very quickly. And a similar thing is going on at this point in Acts. Last week with Paul quoting Isaiah 49 to the Jews in chapter 13 verse 47, taking this passage and applying it to the church. It says, I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth. He took words that were initially for the nation of Israel, and he said, these are now the special calling for the church instead. And the Jewish leaders hated this. We saw scenes that forced Paul and Barnabas out of Pisidian Antioch, but onwards towards Iconium. Hopefully a map will come up on the screen that we'll use tonight, and that should just be helpful in locating where all these different cities are as we go on a little bit of a road trip with Paul. And so the question is now, for us as readers, is, well, what now? Is such a sharp rejection and persecution how it's meant to be?

And is this Paul guy really the real deal? Is this missions trip to the ends of the earth really how God ordained the gospel to go out? Well, tonight we're going to see how Paul and Barnabas continued their resisted yet unstoppable gospel witness through bold proclamation to a great cost to them.

[6 : 14] We'll touch on Iconium and at the end of the trip, but we'll spend most of our time tonight in the city of Lystra. So firstly, gospel witness is resisted yet unstoppable, verses one to seven.

Fresh from that fierce rejection in Pisidian Antioch, Paul and Barnabas arrived in Iconium, undeterred from their previous experience. They start off in the local synagogue like we've seen them do in every other city so far. They spoke so effectively that a great number believed, we're told, and that number was both Jew and Greek, just another name for Gentile. Straight off the bat, a great number believed, and it's incredible, isn't it? We can easily skim over this, but Luke right here is telling us that their work in Iconium was really, really effective gospel witness. Through their tireless efforts in the third city of their mission trip, having traveled 90 miles to get there, the Lord uses the words to save a great number into his kingdom. Such amazing results, however, we read, did not go unnoticed by the Jews, who didn't just refuse to listen and believe, but they actively resisted. Aggravated by Paul and Barnabas' teaching about Jesus, they looked to make an alliance of opposition against the gospel that was taking hold of the city. Turning to unbelieving Gentiles, they raised support for that opposition, poisoning their minds against the Christians in the city. It's a very strong term. And amidst such a hostile atmosphere that seemed to have developed against the young church in Iconium, verse 3 tells us that Paul and Barnabas felt the need to stay, possibly for longer than they were planning to. They continued to boldly proclaim the abundance of grace that can only be found in the Lord Jesus. And as they preached, we read that Jesus gave them the power they needed to demonstrate that grace through signs and wonders. Yet again, Jesus provided everything that that church needed to deal with the circumstances that were in front of them. And despite the resistance, the gospel witness goes forth. In the face of persecution and hardship, the Lord was truly unstoppable in his work of spreading the gospel. And so we too can take great confidence that the gospel will continue to go out despite any opposition that we face today.

Such was the impact of that gospel in Iconium that verse 4, the people of the city were completely divided, some with the Jews and others with the apostles. But with the continued gospel growth, the resistance only grew with it. There was no agreeing to disagree or living side by side like often we hear people talking about today. No, there was an active, there was a dangerous opposition seeking to snuff the gospel straight out of Iconium. And the Gentiles provoked by the Jews turned ugly as they plotted to stone Paul and Barnabas. But catching wind of it, the apostles sneaked out of the city and headed to Lystra where their gospel continued to spread. And the advance of the gospel in Iconium, like we've seen in many other places, was redrawing the city's fault lines, where previously the major dividing line in the world had been between the Jewish people and everyone else as Gentiles, that division was completely replaced. And we see in a city that's completely divided, the Christian and those who refuse to believe as the new fault line in the city.

And no matter what the resistance tried, the Lord Jesus provided with signs, the confirmation, and gospel witness continued. And so we too can be greatly confident that he will continue to spread that gospel, no matter what is thrown at us, whatever cultural, social, political, or economic factors we face, the obstacles that we think maybe that means that we just can't do that.

[10:12] We know that the Lord will continue to advance the gospel, no matter what happens. And so as the apostles arrive in Lystra, we see our second point. Gospel witness is bold proclamation.

Well, we've already seen some of that in Iconium, but we continue to see Paul and Barnabas proclaiming the good news despite ongoing resistance. And while witness looks different in Lystra than it did in Iconium, it's the same message communicated in the same way. Simply, gospel witness is always talking about the gospel. Lystra is the first time that the gospel reaches a city that doesn't have a synagogue.

So this is the first time Paul and Barnabas have got to a city that doesn't really have a material Jewish presence in it. Every other time, they've started at the synagogue and worked out from there with people who are very similar to themselves and would have known a lot about the Jewish scriptures.

And so far in Acts, we've been treated to two excellent sermons in the book, one from Peter at Pentecost and then one from Paul last week that we looked at with Jonathan. But the gospel presented in such a manner here would likely fall on deaf ears. So what will gospel witness look like as we go into this city? I think that's a fair question to ask. We get a sense of what the culture might be like from verse 13, which tells us that there was a temple to Zeus just outside. And beyond that, there would have been a whole host of other idols and false gods which were seen to have responsibility for different parts of the world. That would have been the culture in Lystra. I bet you weren't expecting to read about Zeus and Hermes when you came to church tonight. And we get, we see what Paul is speaking here. And as he was speaking, we're told that verse 8, there sat a man who was lame. He had been that way since birth and had never walked. He listened to Paul as he was speaking. Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith and called out, stand up on your feet. At that, the man jumped up and began to walk. It's an exceptionally matter-of-fact telling of the story. Lots of short sentences that just state exactly how it happened with no comment on it. It's almost just a list of details that Luke wants us to know. And after seeing the man healed, the crowd goes into somewhat of a frenzy. As word goes around that the Greek gods of Zeus and Hermes have come to pay them a visit. It's a bizarre scene.

It's a funny scene. Paul has clearly just been proclaiming the gospel there. The healed man had been listening and he had had faith. But as soon as the miracle is done, all sense of that is lost as the people around them start, the word starts spreading. Well, Hermes and Zeus are here. You can picture the scene for the apostles. They're in a new city with a very different culture than what they'd previously been operating in. And things were going well. A man had faith. There was healing.

[13:17] But all of a sudden, people start speaking in a local language, one that they had no idea what it was about. And you could certainly think that they're going, wow, this is going really well. We've had a really successful ministry in Iconium. And again, the city is bustling with all that news. And maybe you don't really need any Jewish influence as we step out into Lystra for the gospel to catch like wildfire.

But then a priest of Zeus, his temple, shows up ready to sacrifice some bulls and lay some wreaths. What they probably didn't know was that there was a big superstition in Lystra. The story went that many years ago, Hermes and Zeus came seeking refuge in human form in that city. And over a thousand houses turned them away and refused to provide rest until they got to one elderly couple who did.

And the story continues that that elderly couple got their house transformed into this beautiful golden palace. And then the rest of the houses were destroyed. So you can understand why they're all falling over themselves, desperately trying to be the ones to honor Paul and Barnabas. But it must have been utterly bewildering for Barnabas and Paul. And so the big question for us, I think, is what on earth is this scene doing in Luke's orderly account of all that Jesus is continuing to do? Is it just a bit of light relief for the reader? After Paul and Barnabas almost got stoned a few verses ago, maybe we just need to take our heads up for a moment and take a breath. But why is it that the signs and wonders in verse 3 get like one version, one verse in the mention to them? Whereas this one in Lystra, which causes people to worship Paul and Barnabas rather than God, gets six verses devoted to it.

And then we get another five devoted to the response of the apostles. And what Luke is doing here is showing us the continuity of gospel witness across two very different messengers in two very different situations. The healing in Lystra has massive parallels to a healing we saw earlier in Acts. And Peter heals a lame man back in chapter 3, and it's reminiscent as well of many of Jesus' healings. We'll go into that in a moment. But first, let's think about where we are in the book.

[15:34] We've had the first 12 chapters, largely devoted to Peter's ministry to the Jewish people. And then the next few chapters that we've been looking at in this series, we've been looking at Paul's ministry, which has largely been to the Gentiles, sometimes at the expense of the Jews after they rejected him, like we saw last week. And in a time before largely church denominations were a thing, you largely had two different church movements that were seen. You had the church with Peter, and you had the church with Paul. Peter was a core apostle of Jesus, whose ministry to the Jews seemed to keep some continuity from the Jewish faith, and certainly seemed to be a more legit gospel witness. And then you had Paul. Reports were that he was off spreading the gospel to the Gentiles without involving the Jewish faith very much at all at times, pretty much bypassing it to get to Christianity. Paul himself wasn't there with Jesus when he walked on earth. He had spent much of his time killing people like Peter after Jesus ascended. So are these two movements the same? Are they both legit continuations of Jesus? Or is one, Paul, badly wrong? And that's all going to come to a head in our next chapter with the question of circumcision. But throughout the letter, Luke is painting Paul and Peter in the same light. And that's a lot of what this chapter is doing, is setting that up for us.

So let's look at the similarities a little bit more in detail between this and chapter three. And you can see, if you agree with me, that this is what Luke's doing. So you might like to flick back to chapter three, which is on page 1094 of the church Bibles. I'll just give you a moment to get there.

So in chapter three, in verse two, we're told that the man was lame from birth. And verse four, he looked straight at the apostle. In verse 10, he was healed with a command. And then in verse 12, he began to walk.

And the crowd responded with belief in Peter rather than belief in God. And we see the same sequence of our events in our passage tonight. What Peter's done in Jerusalem, Paul is doing in Lystra. Two very different cultures, two very different messengers, yet the same unchanging gospel. You might like to flick back to chapter 14 now. We'll spend the rest of our time just there. But it's interesting, isn't it, that both sets of people were drawn to the messenger rather than to God himself? One, a polytheistic pagan culture, the other, a monotheistic Jewish culture. Yet both see the created, not the creator, the actor, not the director. And both Peter and Paul were at great lengths to dissuade the crowd from honoring them. In chapter 14, verse 14, when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd shouting. Once they clocked what was happening, they knew how important it was to divert worship away from themselves and towards God. It's a very striking contrast to what we saw with King Herod back in chapter 12.

When an adoring crowd worshipped him as he spoke, he soaked up the praise for himself and completely ignored God. And as a result, God struck him down and he was eaten by worms.

[19:07] Perhaps we would do well to be as grieved at people pointing to us, to be as grieved as people giving worship to the created things rather than the creator, as urgently as Peter and Barnabas were.

Paul goes on to deliver a very pointed message to his pagan audience. Read from verse 14 with me. Friends, why are you doing this? We too are only human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them. In the past, he let all nations go their own way. Yet he has not left himself without testimony. He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons. He provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.

There is no quoting from the law or prophets. There is nothing on fulfillment or Jewish lineages. But there is lots on nature, creation and the earth. His big point is that everything you think that your Greek gods have been doing for you is actually what the true living God has been doing.

Paul brings the gospel to Lystra and meets them exactly where they are. He knows what they are rooting their faith in and what they value in life. And he boldly proclaims the gospel into that.

It's the same unchanging gospel, a call to repent. But instead of repenting from trusting worthless Jewish traditions and lineages, they're called to repent of worthless false gods and idols.

[20 : 41] Zeus was seen as the one who sent rain upon the land with a whole host of other gods for other things. In their minds, they needed to constantly try and please these gods, appease them to get what they needed. Just think about how exhausting that would be. If there was a particularly dry season, they would constantly be trying to appease a far-off, unknown God with more and more sacrifices, not actually knowing if that far-off God would accept their sacrifices. The more and more they went without water, the more and more futile it was. And then one day, Paul and Barnabas showed up and started speaking about the living God. The implication being that he's the only God. They claim the living God has made the whole earth and everything in it. There's no complex web of idols or false gods to be appeased, but there's just one God and he's the living God. Not only that, but this God, who they have never known, they've never sacrificed to, they've never tried to appease, has, verse 17, shown them kindness by giving them rain from heaven and crops in their season. He provides them with plenty of food and fills their hearts with joy. Here, says Paul, is a God who provides and shows kindness to all nations, whether they worship him or not. It's a bold proclamation to call all of their practices worthless, but it's also true gospel witness for the weary and heavy-laden Lystrians struggling under the mystery of whether or not their gods would ever be appeased. This is profoundly good news. It's so liberating for them, isn't it? It turns out that the living God who made and controls the whole earth is not a far-off unknown entity that they must endlessly try and please.

They just need to turn from those worthless things towards Jesus. So what might it look like for us to present the unchanging gospel to those around us in a way that meets them where they're at? What's making the people we work with or study with, live with, or hang out with weary and heavy-laden? That would be a great question to chat about with one another afterwards. I think for some, it's constantly having to prove that they're worth it. The fear that one day their colleagues or friends will just decide that they're not worth spending time with anymore or investing in. That that's all they're worth, and when they lose it, they're worthless.

Wouldn't it be great if we were quick to speak of God's free love for us and our intrinsic value that no one or thing can ever take away? Maybe you're here tonight because you are weary of being on the treadmill of life, constantly trying to prove yourself, and you want to find out if there's another option. Well, I'm so glad you're here because we have truly good news for you. There is another option. Turn from those worthless burdens that your culture puts on you and turn to the good news. One whom the God, the only living God, has made you with intrinsic value and worth. You do not have to prove that. One who always desires a relationship with you. Turn to the living God who never changes and always welcomes you in. It's interesting that Luke doesn't give us an immediate comment on anyone believing, albeit it's implied in verses 21 and 22, where we read that Paul and Barnabas visited disciples in Lystra on their return leg. And we also know from chapter 16, verse 3, that Timothy, who goes on to play a big part in Paul's future work, was from Lystra.

What we are told is that the resistance to bold proclamation of the gospel pursued them from Antioch and from Iconium. The crowd was won over, and they succeeded in having Paul stoned as they had planned back in verse 5. But Paul picks himself up with the help of the disciples and goes back into the city. I mean, it's incredible. One minute they're trying to sacrifice to him, the next minute they're trying to kill him. I'm not sure if I'd visit Lystra on my way back home, but Paul goes straight back into the city. But he then goes on, and the next day he travels 55 miles to boldly proclaim the gospel to the people of Derby. And that leads us on to our third point.

Gospel witness is always costly, verses 21 to 28. Undeterred by being chased around the Galatian countryside by those opposed to the gospel, they continued to preach the word in Derby.

[25 : 29] And yet again, won a large number of them over to discipleship. Despite all that has gone on to try and stop the expansion of the gospel to the ends of the earth, God's kingdom is still growing, and it's claiming new cities as a place where the Lord is spoken of and worshipped. And from Derby, they traveled back through the cities they'd preached in to strengthen and encourage the young churches to remain true to the faith. No doubt already people were being tempted away from Jesus to new or old things which claimed to be better. But Paul and Barnabas were clear that the real deal in this world is remaining true to the faith. That is, sticking with Jesus and his word no matter what comes your way, no matter what the cost is. Luke gives us their tagline for their return journey in verse 22. And it's worth noting that these are the only words that we get by Paul in Acts that are directed to ordinary people who are already believers. He says, we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God. As we've seen, bold proclamation of the gospel is resisted,

yet unstoppable. But with that comes costs for everyone. Paul is extremely clear and realistic with all of the new Christians. In different cities, with different situations and levels of opposition, the main message was the same. Hardship and suffering are a necessary part of the Christian life.

It might not seem like a great tagline for a tour, but it's exactly what we've seen in Acts this far. With the establishment of elders in the churches as well, we see Paul and Barnabas setting up these churches with realistic expectations and strong leadership so that they can endure until the end. And we count the cost of gospel witness as well, don't we? In lots of little ways, but also in some big ones. Whether that's not spending as much time in our hobbies as we might enjoy, not always having the latest stuff, not doing all the exciting things we see our colleagues and friends doing. Or sometimes we lose friends for not being willing to agree with them on certain issues or do certain things with them.

Sometimes speaking up for Jesus, boldly proclaiming the gospel and trying to tell others about him leads to social exclusion, a breakdown in relationships, or damages your potential for the future. While we're not Paul on a missionary trip taking the gospel to the Gentiles for the first time, we're not all that different from the people that he was speaking to. So let's encourage one another to remain true to the faith and not shy away from the fact that there are many hardships to enter the kingdom of God. As we close, following their encouragement of the local churches to keep going, they traveled back to the church in Antioch that had originally sent them out. And they tell them all that the Lord has done through their efforts to encourage them.

[28 : 40] Luke doesn't let his readers move on from this first mission trip without reminding them, verse 27, of all that God had done through them and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.

All that's been going on has only happened because of God. While we've had a lot on Paul and Barnabas through this trip, we must not forget that Acts is a book all about what Jesus is continuing to do.

God ordained that the people of Iconium, Lystra, Derbe would come to faith, just like he ordained that each one of us would come to faith. And that is a wonderful truth to rejoice in together. Let's pray.

Thank you, Father, that your mission is still ongoing today. Thank you that you chose to include us in that work. We ask that you would give us real confidence in your unstoppable gospel, that while there is much resistance to it, your kingdom is advancing. Help us to boldly proclaim the good news of Jesus to the people's lives you have placed us in, and to faithfully endure any hardships that may come our way. In Jesus' name, amen.