

**Acts 14:1-28 ~ Teacher's Lesson
Zeus & Hermes Visit Lystra
(Paul's 1st Mission Journey, Part B)**

Introduction: Acts 13-14 deals with Paul's first missionary journey. It lasted two years, around A.D. 47-48. Today we will learn about the conclusion of Paul's first missionary journey, which lasted about 2 years. They evangelized all over the island of Cyprus and in southwest Turkey. Back then, that area of Turkey was called Galatia. The things that happened on this journey confirmed that God was calling Gentiles to respond to the gospel. The success of the mission among Gentiles set the stage for the next chapter and the Jerusalem Council, which settled the question of a Gentile believers' relationship to the Law of Moses (whether or not Gentiles have to pass through the gates of Judaism to come to Jesus).

Review: Last week in Acts 13, we saw how the Holy Spirit led the church in Syrian Antioch (Antakya in modern Turkey, not modern Syria) to set apart Paul and Barnabas for the missionary work He had called them to do. The church laid hands on them and sent them off on their first missionary journey. They first sailed southeast to the island of Cyprus, then sailed northwest to the Turkish mainland and trekked 100 miles inland to another city called Antioch, near an area called Pisidia, also in modern Turkey. Leaving Pisidian Antioch, they traveled 90 miles east to a city called Iconium (13:51, today called Konya) in the region of Galatia (also in modern Turkey).¹ In general, they went to cities located along major Roman highways.²

******How did the apostles foil an Iconium plot to stone them to death (14:1-7)?** When they learned of the plot in Iconium, they foiled it by fleeing 18 miles southwest to the city of Lystra.³

Insight: The biblical way to handle persecution: run! Flee if you can. He who shares and runs away, lives to share another day! For example:

ESV **Matthew 2:13** . . . an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt . . . for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him."

ESV **John 7:1** Jesus . . . would not go about in Judea, because the Jews were seeking to kill him.

ESV **Acts 8:1** . . . there arose . . . a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria . . .

¹ Marshall, 247.

² Kistemaker, 503.

³ Lystra and Derbe are cities in a region called Lycaonia. In Paul's day, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe were all three in a larger district called Galatia.

ESV **Acts 9:23-25** . . . the Jews [in Damascus] plotted to kill him [Saul], but . . . his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket.

ESV **Acts 9:29-30** . . . the Hellenists [in Jerusalem] . . . were seeking to kill him [Saul]. And when the brothers learned this, they . . . sent him off to Tarsus.

How did the people in the Iconium synagogue at first respond to the Gospel (14:1)? A “great number” of both Jews and Gentiles⁴ believed!

1. According to 14:1, humanly speaking, what caused these people to believe? It was because Paul and Barnabas “spoke in such a way”. God uses human agency in the process of bringing the elect to salvation. In this case, God enabled the apostles to speak in “such as way” as to cause people to believe.

Application: On the one hand, we can’t argue people into heaven. Anything we can talk people into, the devil can talk them out of. On the other hand, God has chosen to use the church in the process of bringing the elect to salvation, and the Holy Spirit will sometimes give us the words to speak and so empower our words as to supernaturally work in an elect person’s life.

In 14:2, what mischief did the unbelieving Jews commit? The unbelieving Jews poisoned the minds of the unbelieving and ignorant Gentiles against “the brothers”. They launched a smear campaign.

2. To whom does the word “brothers” (14:2) refer? “The brothers” may refer to the new believers rather than to the apostles. If so, this means the unbelievers were persecuting the new church.⁵

3. What is the significance of the word “so” at the start of 14:3? The word “so” indicates that the response of the apostles to the opposition was to remain a long time in Iconium, speaking out boldly for the Lord. Precisely because of the opposition, the missionaries felt they should remain as long as possible. They did not leave until absolutely forced to do so.⁶

Grace: Luke describes the apostles’ message as “the word of His grace” (14:3). The gospel is a message of grace, of undeserved favor from God. Grace is what motivated God to give us the gift of eternal life. Grace has been explained as God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense.

4. Based on 14:3, how did the Lord Himself bear witness to the word of His grace? The Lord granted that signs and wonders be done by the apostles.

5. What was the purpose of these signs and wonders (14:3)? They were signs of authentication of the message.

⁴ Luke is here using “Greek” as a synonym for Gentile.

⁵ Kistemaker, 504.

⁶ How did Paul know it was God’s will for him to leave town? He got stoned out.

Truth: Miracles only produce faith in the lives of the elect. They harden the reprobate. Sometimes people think, “If son we could do miracles like this, everyone would believe.” No they wouldn’t! Jesus said people would not believe even if someone came back from the dead (Lk 16:31). It is heart problem, not a head problem.

Despite the witness of signs and wonders, what turmoil was the city in (14:4)? It was divided; some were with the unbelieving and some were with the apostles.

ESV Matthew 10:34-36 Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household.

What word did Luke use to describe Paul and Barnabas in 14:4? Luke referred to them as “apostles”. One mark of a true apostle was the ability to perform signs and wonders, and they were able to so.

ESV 2 Corinthians 12:12 The signs of a true apostle were performed among you . . . with signs and wonders and mighty works.

Word Study: “Apostles” (14:4) is from *apostolos*. It remains an untranslated word! “Missionary” would be a good translation. It broadly means messenger or delegate. Sometimes in the New Testament it refers specifically to the twelve disciples selected and trained by Jesus to be His personal representatives.⁷ Luke extended it to refer to both Paul and Barnabas and clearly recognized that there was a second group of apostles, also commissioned by Jesus, wider than the original Twelve.⁸

The modern church’s support for missionaries is based on Matthew 28 and the various missionary journeys recorded by Luke here in Acts.

False Apostles: Beware of anyone claiming to be a modern apostle in the same sense that Paul was an apostle. If false apostles weren’t convincing, no one would follow them! Paul warned of:

ESV 2 Corinthians 11:13-15 . . . false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness.

Examples: Joseph Smith, founder of Mormonism was a false apostle. Also, many false teachers within the charismatic movement claim to be apostles.

Based on 14:5, what plot did the unbelievers hatch to silence the apostles? They attempted to mistreat and stone them. As shall be seen in the next city, they were really intent on stoning Paul.

⁷ Thayer, #652.

⁸ Marshall, 248.

6. What did the apostles do when they got to Lystra 18 miles away (14:6-7)? They continued to preach the gospel.

Application: The apostles did not let opposition—even potentially violent opposition—dampen their enthusiasm for preaching the gospel. So too we should not be discouraged with people reject the gospel and oppose us.

******The apostles left Iconium and fled to the city of Lystra, about 18 miles southwest. Lystra, of course, is famous for its mouthwash (Listerine).⁹ When they got to Lystra, what case of mistaken identity did the run into (14:8-18)?** Paul and Barnabas healed a lame man and were mistaken for the Greek gods Zeus (Jupiter) and Hermes (Mercury), 14:12. The people there had a legend that Zeus and Hermes had already visited Lycaonia in incognito, so the crowds were quick to assume they had returned.¹⁰

No Synagogue? There evidently was no synagogue in Lystra, so the apostles began their ministry there with miracle evangelism directly aimed at purely pagan Gentiles (before they had worked with Gentile converts to Judaism).

7. Based on 14:9, what allowed this lame man to be healed? The man had faith to be made well.

Divine Healing: What should be concluded about divine healing from 14:9? Not much should be concluded! One must be very careful when drawing theology from historical narrative. One thing that can be observed is that God can and does heal people, but within Acts this supernatural healing is for the purpose of testifying to the truth of the gospel.

Also, whereas this man had the faith to be healed, it was not stated that the lame man healed earlier had faith (3:1-10). Later in Acts, the dead man that Paul resurrected certainly had no faith (20:7-12) to be resurrected! These people were healed just because it was God's sovereign purpose to heal them as a testimony to the truthfulness of the gospel.

Other places in Scripture make it clear that it is not always God's will to heal us of our physical problems. For example, God refused to heal Paul of something he called a thorn in his flesh (2Co 12:7-10). Timothy had frequent stomach ailments (1Ti 5:23). Paul left Trophimus ill at Miletus (2Ti 4:20).

However, it is biblical to ask God for good health:

ESV 3 John 1:2 I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, as it goes well with your soul.

⁹ Not really!

¹⁰ *ESV Study Bible*, 2113.

8. In 14:11-12, why did Luke tell us that the crowds speaking Lycaonian when they declared them to be Zeus and Hermes? Mostly likely, neither Paul nor Barnabas spoke Lycaonian, so they had no idea what the crowds were saying at first.

Galatia: The area called Lycaonia was part of a greater area called Galatia.¹¹ When Paul later wrote the letter to the Galatians, the believers in Lystra were among those who got the letter. Iconium and Derbe were also in Galatia.

9. What did Paul being the chief speaker have to do with the crowd thinking he was Hermes (14:12)? Zeus was the chief Greek god. Hermes was believed to be Zeus' attendant and spokesman.¹²

Hermeneutics: In theology, hermeneutics concerns the science of interpreting the Bible: what it meant to its original readers and how it applies to us today.¹³ The term "hermeneutics" is derived from the name of the Greek god Hermes, whose job it was to speak on behalf of the other gods, interpreting the will of the gods.¹⁴

10. When did Paul and Barnabas finally realize who the crowds thought they were (14:13-14)? It was not until the priest of Zeus brought out oxen to sacrifice to them.

Why did the apostles tear their garments (14:14)? See *Matthew 26:64-65*. It was a sign of duress, that something was terribly wrong. For example, the high priest torn his robe when he thought Jesus committed blasphemy for declaring Himself to be the Son of Man.

Comparison with Herod: The response of the apostles was totally different from that of Herod when the crowds declared him to be a god (12:20-23). We should always point people to God, not ourselves.

11. Even though the gospel ever changes, was the apostles' introduced the gospel in Lystra was quite different from how they introduced the gospel in the synagogues. There was no appeal to the Hebrew Scriptures. What lessons in basic theology did the apostles apply in 14:15-16?

- a) They taught that they themselves were mere men, not gods or demigods.
- b) They declared the worship of Zeus and Hermes to be "vain".
- c) They taught that there is one true, living God (as opposed to any one of the Greek pantheon) who made everything.
- d) The apostles applied all this theology by urging them to turn from the vain worship of Zeus to worship of a living God, the one who made everything.

¹¹ Kistemaker, 509.

¹² *New Bible Dictionary*, 476. The Roman counterparts were Jupiter and Mercury (Marshall, 251).

¹³ Fee & Stuart, *How To Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 18.

¹⁴ R.C. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1977), 45.

12. According to 14:16-17, what witness had God given all nations in past generations?

Even though in past generations God allowed the nations (outside of Israel) to go their own ways, He witnesses to them by doing good for them, giving them rain, food, and even gladness.

Insight: Even though the Gentile nations were totally pagan, God had done good for them, even granting them gladness. It is not true that only Christians enjoy gladness.

Based on 14:18, how effective was the apostles' speech? They were scarcely able to restrain the people from offering a sacrifice to them.

******Showing the fickle nature of mobs, what fate befell Paul after they realized he was not really Hermes (14:19)?** They went from homage to homicide. One would think that in light of the amazing miracle of the healed lame man, the crowd would appreciate what Paul had to say about Jehovah as the true God. Instead, they turned on him. Evidently, they were upset that it was not really Zeus and Hermes. A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still.

What outside agitators influenced the crowd to stone Paul (14:19)? Unbelieving Jews came from Iconium (18 miles away) and even from Pisidian Antioch (100 miles away!) and manipulated the crowds.¹⁵ They went to a lot of trouble to harass Paul and Barnabas.

13. What motivated these unbelieving Jews to follow the apostles to Lystra (14:19)? See 13:45, John 16:2. Evidently they were motivated by jealousy (13:45) and a misguided sense of serving God by stamping out error (Jn 16:2)

ESV **John 16:2** They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God.

What kept the crowds from actually killing Paul (14:19)? Paul played possum! They intended to kill him, but they supposed he was dead when in fact he was still alive.

No doubt this was the incident Paul wrote about later:

ESV **2 Corinthians 11:25** Once I was stoned.

ESV **2 Timothy 3:11** . . . persecutions and sufferings that happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra . . . yet from them all the Lord rescued me.

14. How did Barnabas avoid being stoned (14:19)? We are not told. Perhaps he found a better hiding place!

¹⁵ *ESV Study Bible*, 2113.

15. What can we learn about the impact of the apostles' evangelism from 14:20? There were disciples in Lystra! We learn from Acts 16:1 that Timothy was one of those who believed there. They were like those described in Thessalonica:

ESV **1 Thessalonians 1:9-10** . . . you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God . . . to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

16. How was Paul able to travel so soon after having been stoned and left for dead (14:20)? Luke did not tell us. Perhaps it was a miracle recovery. Perhaps they were inept at stoning.

Leaving Lystra, they went east to the city of Derbe, about 55 miles away.¹⁶ What results did Paul and Barnabas get in Derbe (14:21)? They made "many" disciples. Gaius was from Derbe (Acts 20:4). Derbe marked the easternmost extremity of the first missionary journey.¹⁷

Application: Paul and Barnabas did not let rejection dampen their enthusiasm for sharing the gospel. They didn't give up.

17. How did the apostles strengthen the churches in Derbe, Lystra, Iconium and Pisidian Antioch (14:21-23)?¹⁸ They went back in person to visit the disciples, encouraged them, taught them that it is through many tribulations that we enter the kingdom of God, had elders appointed, prayed and fasted with them, and committed them to the Lord.

Discipleship: Paul was not one to love 'em and leave 'em. Jesus said to make disciples of all nations, not simply to evangelize all nations. Despite the danger, he and Barnabas left Derbe and went back to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch to strengthen the churches there.

No Evangelism: The apostles did not openly evangelize when they went back to these hostile cities, probably because it would have meant certain death. Instead, their ministry now was more private and pastoral.

18. Based on 14:22, what should church meetings be like? Church meetings should be times of strengthening, encouragement, and setting realistic expectations concerning the trials we will face in this life.

19. What did the apostles mean when they taught that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God (14:22)? See 14:5, 19. Look what had just happened to the apostles! Being a follower of Christ often means being hated by the world.

ESV **John 15:18** If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you.

¹⁶ Marshall, 248.

¹⁷ Ibid., 254.

¹⁸ Luke mentioned mission work in Perga for the first time (14:25). Attalia (14:25) was a port adjacent to Perga (Marshall, 256).

ESV **John 15:20** Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.

ESV **John 16:1** I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away.

ESV **2 Timothy 3:12** . . . all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted . . .

20. What can we learn about church government from 14:23? Every church was served by a plurality of elders (not a single pastor).

Word Study: “elders” (14:23) is from *presbuteros* (“Presbyterian”, “presbyopia”), literally “old man”. Within the church it is a title for a man who is mature in the Faith and who presided over the churches.¹⁹ The elders’ job was to teach, judge and rule.²⁰

Word Study: “appointed” (14:23) is from *cheirotoneo*; it clearly means to appoint. It is interesting that the root meaning is to vote by stretching out the hand. There seems to have been congregational involvement.²¹ The idea seems to be that with the approval of the churches, men were appointed to serve as elders. The alternative translation in the NIV reads that the apostles “had elders elected.”

Synonyms: A synonym for elder, used interchangeably, is overseer (bishop in the KJV). There was not hierarchy within the leadership of a NT church. One elder may have been more gifted in teaching than another, but there was no senior or lead pastor as such.

Timing: It is interesting that these churches had been in existence less than a year, yet there were already men in them who qualified as elders. This is probably because some of the elders in the synagogue had come to faith in Christ. These men, already mature in life and sound in Old Testament theology, would quickly be able to come up to speed about Jesus.

******21. What did Paul and Barnabas do when they go back home to Syrian Antioch (14:24-28)?** They gathered the church, declared all that God had done with them, and how many Gentiles came to faith. They did not brag about what they had done, but rather told what God had done through them.

Application: It is good to have missionaries report on what did God through them to the church that sent them out.

On the return journey, the apostles passed back through the region of Pisidia and when they got to the region of Pamphylia they stopped in Perga (13:13, 14:24) and taught God’s word. Then they went to the port city of Attalia to sail back to Antioch in Syria.

¹⁹ Thayer, #4245.

²⁰ *New Bible Dictionary*, 965.

²¹ Kistemaker, 525.

How long did they stay home in Antioch (14:28)? A master of understatement, Luke wrote that they spent no little time there. It is possible that Paul penned his letter to the Galatian churches while back in Antioch.

Sabbatical: The apostles had just returned from a dangerous mission trip that lasted about 2 years. They did not immediately pack their bags for the next deployment. Instead, they remained in Antioch, recharging their spiritual batteries. They were careful not to burn out.

So What?

22. How did God speak to you in this chapter?

Personal application: We can all learn from the example of Paul and Barnabas to be faithful servants to Christ, not matter what the cost.

Why didn't God spare Paul from being stoned? What does this tell us about God's protection when in His will?

**** = ask this question before reading the text aloud. Doing so will cause focus.

- These lessons are designed for a 45 minute session and are based on the text of the ESV.
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