

SCRIPTURE STUDIES

SERIES: A SURVEY OF THE BOOK OF ACTS**ACTS CHAPTER 14****“TRIUMPHS AND TRIALS ON THE TRAIL”**

“There was a plot afoot among the Gentiles and Jews, together with their leaders, to mistreat them and stone them. But they found out about it and fled to the Lycaonian cities of Lystra and Derbe and to the surrounding country, where they continued to preach the good news.”
(Acts 14:5-7)

Did you ever hear the term, "Circuit Riding Preacher?" In early America, before there were as many ministers of the gospel as there are today, one minister had to cover much territory. Therefore, the term "Circuit Riding Preacher" became well known. The preacher would regularly travel to the same small settlements preaching, performing weddings, etc. Early in my ministry I preached for a pastor in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia who ministered to many mountain churches. He made the "circuit" each month. This was the common practice for many ministers in early America and continued in rural areas for many years thereafter.

It could be said that Paul and Barnabas were the first "Circuit Riding Preacher's." Here is the record of their first missionary journey and we see them moving from city to city and then returning. Everywhere they went they left a trail of blessings. It was not always easy going. Not only were the roads bad and modes of travel very difficult, but there was opposition as we shall see in this chapter.

In each new town they visited, there was triumph and trial; praise and persecution; blessing and blaspheming; reception and rejection. This was the story in the cities that they visited as recorded here in Acts Chapter 14: Iconium, Lystra, Derbe, Perga, Attalia and Antioch. Let us visit these towns with Paul and Barnabas.

I. PAUL AND BARNABAS REACHING OUT. Their converting ministry. 14:1-7**A. They Heralded The Word.** *Their converting ministry.* 14:1-7

Many of these people had heard about God. There were many Jews in their audiences. What was so new about what they had to preach on these occasions? They preached the gospel:

Verse seven -- *"and there they preached the gospel."*

Verse 21 -- *"and when they had preach the gospel..."*

Verse 25 -- *"and when they had preach the word..."*

These pioneer preachers went to old settlements with a new story! A story that the citizens had never heard before. What was that story? It's the same one that we sing about when we sing: "Tell me the story of Jesus, write on my heart every word; tell me the story of Jesus, sweetest that ever was heard."

They preached Christ crucified, buried and risen from the dead! This is what they heralded in the streets, in the synagogues and to all souls! The message that we must proclaim today is the same. Today there are new cities in new countries but the same old story. We have a first century message for 21st-century man!

B. They Helped The Weak. *Their comforting ministry.* 14:8-10

Those who preach the Gospel are to be aware of every type of human suffering and need. When Paul and Barnabas came to Lystra preaching the gospel, they found a man that had been crippled from birth.

These compassionate communicators of the Good News of Christ also possessed the compassion of Christ and reached out to an infirm man performing a miracle of healing. The reaction of the populace to this miracle was unexpected and unacceptable.

The pagan populace of Lystra said, "See what Paul and Barnabas have done! These are not men, they are god's come down in the form of men." These people were steeped in Greek mythology and in their ignorance they called Barnabas "Jupiter" and Paul "Mercurius." Jupiter is the Latin for the Greek word "Zeus" who was the national god of the Greeks and Mercurius or "Hermes" as the Greeks called him, was the messenger of Zeus. Mercurius was more commonly called Mercury.

According to the Latin poet Ovid, it was believed that Jupiter and Mercury had once before visited them in human form and the Temple of Jupiter had been erected to commemorate this visit. Now, they thought that these pagan deities had revisited them in the persons of Paul and Barnabas. Verse 13 tells us that the priests of Jupiter brought garlands to decorate Paul and Barnabas, much like the Hawaiians put flowers around the necks of visitors, and they brought oxen to sacrifice to them. In other words, they were in the process of worshiping Paul and Barnabas, who, when they perceived what was happening, demanded that such actions immediately cease.

This treatment of Paul and Barnabas was probably the greatest problem they ever faced. You see, if the devil could not defeat them by criticism in the previous town of Iconium, perhaps he could defeat them here and Lystra by heaping praise upon them. Lesser men might have been tempted to give in to these pagan people and turn it to their own advantage. There have always been men in every age, who have used religion to feather their own nests. We are aware of such shenanigans in our own day. Thousands of people have followed cult leaders who have preyed upon the ignorant.

Paul and Barnabas were in great danger when men suggested that they should be worshiped. This is a peril to any Christian worker. We have seen in our day that Christian workers can be and have been elevated far above anything that they deserve. Prosperity of any sort is dangerous, but praise is the most subtle and deceitful. There is that in human nature that responds to flattery which must be avoided. Not that praise should never be given, if by that is meant sincere and kind expressions of appreciation, but when praise and adoration is heaped upon mere human servants of the Lord, it is hazardous both to the giver as well as the receiver.

Here in these verses we have seen Paul and Barnabas reaching out -- reaching out to herald the Word and to help the weak. The world of mankind needs converting and comforting. That is also our commission for Christ.

II. PAUL AND BARNABAS ROUGHED UP. 14:5-6

Wherever Paul and Barnabas went they met various forms of opposition. In Iconium we read that, *"the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brethren."* (14:2) and *"a violent attempt was made by both the Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to abuse and stone them, they became aware of it and fled...."* (14:5-6)

Jesus had told his disciples, *"when they persecute you in this city, flee into another."* (Matthew 10:23). It is the wise witness who knows when to fight and when to flee! Paul and Barnabas were forced to flee from some of the cities in which they had ministered. The actions and reactions were different in almost every city. In some places they were received and in others they were roughed up!

A. There Was A Verbal Abuse.

Notice the words, *"the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brethren."* (14:2) how do you suppose the enemies of Paul and Barnabas did this? By speaking against them -- verbally attacking them! James writes of the tongue, *"It is full of deadly poison."* (James 3:8).

Verbal abuse drove two of the godliest men on earth out of the city of Iconium and other cities, thereby depriving sinners of hearing the only message of salvation. I wonder how many children heard their parents verbally abusing the servants of God? Not only would adults be deprived of the soul-saving message but the children would suffer also. It is always the case. Children hear parents in their homes criticizing men and women of God and then those same parents wonder why their children have no respect for the church. Such parents reap what they sow!

B. There Was Physical Abuse.

"A violent attempt was made by both the Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to abuse and stone them, they became aware of it and fled...." (14:5-6)

"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." (14:19)

Unbelieving Jews from the previous cities tracked down the missionaries. They persuaded the mob to stone Paul. Some think that Paul actually died at this time and was raised from the dead miraculously. (Compare II Cor. 12:1-4) At the very least there was a miracle of healing, for we read, *"However, when the disciples gathered around him, he rose up and went into the city."* (14:20) In Chapter 15 Paul and Barnabas are referred to as *"men that hazarded their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."* (15:26)

In II Timothy, Paul refers to these difficult times: *"But you have carefully followed my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering, love, perseverance, persecutions, afflictions, which happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, at Lystra—what persecutions I endured. And*

out of them all the Lord delivered me. Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.” (II Tim.3:10-12).

Illustration: The hymn “Am I A Soldier of The Cross” was written by Isaac Watts in 1709, to follow a sermon on 1 Corinthians 16:13, *“Watch, stand fast in the faith, quit you like men, be strong.”* Here it is:

“Am I a soldier of the cross?
A follower of the Lamb?
And shall I fear to own His cause
Or blush to speak His name?

Must I be carried to the skies
On flowery beds of ease,
While others fought to win the prize
And sailed thru bloody seas?

Are there no foes for me to face?
Must I not stem the flood?
Is this vile world a friend to grace,
To help me on to God?

Sure I must fight, if I would reign
Increase my courage, Lord!
I'll bear the toil, endure the pain,
Supported by Thy word.”

III. PAUL AND BARNABAS RETURN HOME. 14:21-27

After preaching the gospel at a place called Derbe the two men sensed that they had reached their outward destination for the time being. Therefore, they began their journey back to the church in Antioch from which they had been sent.

A. They Retraced Their Steps.

“Now when they had preached the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia. From there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work which they had completed.” (14:25-26)

They retraced their steps in order to edify and encourage the converts they had previously made. Here we sense that true missionary work is more than just evangelizing. There are those who are won to Christ who must be stabilized. A proper missionary program has as its aim the establishment on the mission field of a self-governing, self-sustaining and self-propagating church. This was the purpose and practice of Paul. And we would do well to always follow his example in this respect.

They ordained elders, or pastors, to lead the newly established churches. They knew that their personal work was only going to last so long therefore they established local churches where the converts could fellowship and grow together.

B. They Reported To Their Home Church.

“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. So they stayed there a long time with the disciples.” (14:27)

Notice that the "home church" was given a thorough report of the results of Paul and Barnabas' first missionary journey. This passage of scripture is a good basis for the practice of having periodic missionary furloughs and reports given by the missionary to the sending church. What a thrilling meeting it must have been! Of particular interest must have been the news that God had "opened the door of faith to the Gentiles."(v.27)

God could have used angels, or could have created a special race of beings to carry the good news of redemption throughout the world. Instead, He has given Christians the great and glad privilege of partnering with Him in making Jesus Christ known.

Illustration: Dr. A. B. Simpson, a writer and Minister of years gone by, was fond of saying "Do not pray, 'Lord, use me,' for God is always ready to do that. Pray rather, 'Lord, make me usable.'"

After this 1200 mile journey, I am sure that Paul and Barnabas could have sung,

“Through many dangers, toils and snares
I have already come;
'Tis Grace that brought me safe thus far
And Grace will lead me home.”

Paul's missionary tour had taken a toll on him, but think of the precious souls saved, the churches that were established. Think too, of the saints who down through the years have been encouraged by Paul's example to keep on when the going gets rough.

Let us use Paul as a role model and "endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ" (II Tim. 2:3) and let us keep on reaching out until that day when we make our report in our eternal home!

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