

Text: Acts 14:8-20

Title: Deadly missionary work at Lystra

Truth: The gospel progressed despite extreme danger.

Date/Location: Wednesday 5/29/2013 and 6/5/2024

Introduction

The narrative divides nicely into four segments.

I. Miraculous Healing, v. 8-10

- A. Here is a real “sign and wonder.” A man who was crippled from birth, and had never walked. That is a pathetic condition, and one that would be very obvious. It was not a fake healing like so much of what passes for “healing” today. The man was healed instantaneously. This is like what happened in Acts 3:1-10 with Peter and John and the man who was unable to walk from birth.
- B. Paul was preaching the gospel there (v. 7), but we do not know if he started in a synagogue, or whether there was a synagogue in that city. Because of the prominent theme of idolatry that popped up very quickly after the miracle, it seems that Paul was out amongst a crowd in the city. It is doubtful that the idolatry idea would have gained much traction inside the synagogue!
- C. Paul observed a particular man and discerned that he had faith to be healed. As “normal” Christians, we might catch a little glimpse of such discernment, but Paul had a real gift of discernment in this area—otherwise how could he know without speaking to the man, what that man’s thoughts were (1 Cor. 2:11)? Jesus saw the faith of some by their actions (Matthew 9:2, see parallels Mark 2:5, Luke 5:20). Acts 3:1-8 has a similar situation, but the text does not record whether that healed man had similar faith as this man.

II. Pagan Response of Local Residents, v. 11-13

- A. Notice that the residents had no skepticism that something miraculous had just happened. Today, of course, skepticism reigns in every area of life, whether it is a religious context or political context, or the conduct of our fellow people in business ethics or whatever.
- B. The Lycaonians attributed the miracle to divine power of the Greek gods Zeus (Barnabas) and Hermes (Paul).
 - 1. The Greek gods are myth you may have learned in middle school. But they were “real” to the pagans of the first century AD. They had a

priest and sacrificial system. This was polytheism and idolatry at work. Such is still at work today as people continue to reject the true God and follow idols made to look like God's created things—birds, four-footed beasts, creeping things, and most commonly, humans (Rom. 1:23).

2. Those are not real gods. They are imaginary and made-up. There is only one true God (1 Cor. 8:4). It is sad how in school more time is spent on the imaginary gods of the Greeks and Romans than on the one true and living God described in Scripture and revealed in Jesus Christ.

C. Consequent upon their belief that Paul and Barnabas were “gods,” the residents wanted to offer animal sacrifices to them. Their zeal was entirely misdirected, not to mention that the man who had been healed was forgotten.

D. We learn from the Hermes label that Paul was the primary speaker. Ministry teams will likely have a natural division of labor like that where one speaks more than others, in accord with the giftedness of the group.

III. Apostles Reject Worship and Instead Preach the True God, v. 14-18

A. The priest of Zeus was self-deceived. He thought that the gods had come down among mankind and in the likeness of man. Oh, that he would have believed that THE GOD had come down once, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, and had worshipped HIM. Instead, he brought oxen and garlands (wreaths of flowers and leaves) to worship Barnabas and Paul.

B. Sacrifice is unacceptable to God in general in this era, and particularly so when offered to mere humans. Worship of other humans is forbidden in the Bible (Acts 10:25-26, Revelation 22:8-9). We also need to be careful not to offer anything that is *like* worship to humans (putting someone on a pedestal, focusing on a hero, attempting to make a difference between veneration and worship, etc.).

C. Paul and Barnabas were horrified. This is why they tore their clothes. Sometimes that act was a sign of grief or mourning or even anger (Genesis 37:29, 37:34, 44:12; Numbers 14:6; Joshua 7:6; Judges 11:35; 2 Samuel 1:11-12, 13:31; Esther 4:1; Isaiah 37:1; Mark 14:63).

D. They asked why the people would do such a thing. It is wrong:

1. Because Paul was a man just like them, having the same constitution.

2. Because God has called the people to turn from useless idols to the living God. This is what salvation is about—turning away from other

gods, other objects of trust and worship, and trusting and worshipping God through Christ alone.

E. Paul defines the true God for the crowd.

1. God is the living God. The idols are useless because they are fake, dead, inanimate, etc. The only “power” that may be deceptively working in association with them is demonic.
2. God is the one who made heaven, earth, sea, and everything in them. See Exodus 20:11.
3. God is the one who allowed all nations to walk in their own ways. This shows God’s longsuffering with the nations doing their own thing, doing what they thought was right in their own minds. God still is that same way today. He permits people to live a long time in rebellion against Him, sinning left and right, having a bad attitude toward Him and His people, etc. That longsuffering does not extend forever.
4. God also He sent rain and fruit, food and gladness. These good things are a form of witness or testimony to the existence of God and are part of what theologians call God’s common grace. It is common because it is shed abroad generally on all mankind.

F. Convincing the crowd to stop the sacrificial service was a hard task, and it worked, but barely.

IV. Near Death by Stoning, v. 19-20

- A. How fickle the crowd was—going from the extreme of sacrifice and worship to attempted murder in the space of a few days. The Christian faith is much more measured and stable than this bouncing from one extreme to another.
- B. They were influenced by Jewish unbelievers from the previous two cities where Paul and Barnabas had preached. These troublemakers induced the Lystran people to hate Paul and to (try to) kill him. Evidently, they brought some of the same contradiction and slander that they had practiced in 13:45.
- C. There is a question here about Paul’s physical condition. Did he die? Some have suggested that he saw the third heaven at this time (2 Cor. 12:1-4). But the timeline does not work out properly for that to have occurred because he wrote 2 Corinthians around late 55 or 56 AD. The vision occurred 14 years before that, so 41 to 42 AD. But the first missionary tour starting in Acts 13 did not begin until around 47 AD.

Regarding whether he died, I do not believe so. The text says that the crowds “supposed” him to be dead. But he did revive from probably being knocked unconscious for a while by a blow from a rock to the head. I do not rule out divine intervention, because Paul was an apostle, a select individual chosen by Christ to be His representative, and if the time was not yet for his ministry to be done, then God ensured it was not done. Whether that intervention was special or simply providential to me makes little difference.

Paul probably had a few concussions and other serious injuries throughout the course of his life, with the many beatings and this stoning, besides shipwrecks and probably other things.

- D. It is hard to even picture the scene with the violence and madness of the crowd. But this sort of thing still happens to Christians to this day in countries like North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Iran, etc.
- E. It took a lot of boldness to press on in the missionary work after such mistreatment.

Conclusion

A main idea from the book of Acts is the work of the Spirit in the early Christians to propagate the gospel and start new churches. In Acts 13 and 14 record the first forays into the Gentile world with the gospel.

We are to continue teaching the same kinds of things they did, starting churches like they did, ministering to people like they did, refusing idolatrous worship like they did, dealing with persecution like they did, etc.

God will ensure that His word makes the progress He wants it to make. People will be saved and transformed.

MAP