

Misguided Worship
December 10, 2017
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Acts 14:8-20

Due to the winter weather, we may not be together in person tomorrow morning. In light of that, here are some summary notes about this passage.

Overview of the passage:

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT Acts 14:1-28 *“Last week we left Paul in Antioch of Pisidia where he delivered a powerful message in the synagogue, demonstrating that Jesus was the long-anticipated Messiah who alone could bring forgiveness of sin and a right relationship with God. After the synagogue service was dismissed, many of the Jews and devout proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas, who were persuading them “to continue in the grace of God” (Acts 13:43). When the size of the crowd increased the next Sabbath, the Jews began to oppose Paul by insulting him. Paul and Barnabas declared that it was necessary to preach first to the Jews, but since the Jews had rejected the message, they would now focus on the Gentiles (14:36). The response from the Gentiles was immediate and the message spread through the whole region. This resulted in persecution and expulsion from the region, but the disciples’ response was one of joy prompted by the Holy Spirit (13:52). The pattern of successful preaching in the synagogue followed by great division in the community was repeated in Iconium. When Paul and Barnabas discovered that the Jews and Gentiles and their rulers planned to assault and stone the two of them, Paul and Barnabas fled the countryside around Lystra and Derbe. But rather than hiding out from their persecutors, Luke affirms, “and there they continued to preach the gospel”(14:7). Lystra was a city in south central Asia that was considered to be an important Lycaonian center. According to Acts 16:1 it was the home of Timothy, a young man who, in God’s timing, would become one of Paul’s companions and fellow-laborers.”*

LYSTRA (...an ancient, native city whose inhabitants spoke their own language.ⁱⁱ)

“Paul and Barnabas are now in Lycaonia, where they visit the out-of-the-way towns of Lystra and Derbe. At Lystra they receive a rapturous welcome—thanks to a local legend (14:8–20).”

“The story goes that two Greek gods—Zeus and Hermes—once visited Lystra in disguise. The only people who welcomed them were two poor peasants. The gods were so angry that they destroyed the town with an earthquake; but the two peasants were spared and became guardians of the temple.

The superstitious folk of Lystra are now always looking out for visiting gods! When Paul heals a lame man, they hail him as Hermes, the messenger god. Barnabas, who is older, they take to be Zeus. Let the sacrifices begin!

Urgently, Paul explains that they are merely human. There is a true and living God. His power is seen in creation. His love is seen in the blessings of nature ...

The Lystrans are confused. When Jews arrive from Antioch and Iconium with news that Paul and Barnabas are frauds, Paul is very nearly killed. They have to leave as soon as possible.”ⁱⁱⁱ

So, what do we learn in this passage?

- This was a small town of mostly pagan, Gentile people. We know there were some Jews (Timothy’s family lived here and his mother and grandmother were Jewish, though his father was Greek.) It appears there was no synagogue so Paul and Barnabas taught in the streets.
- God once again used a miracle to open the door for sharing the good news of the gospel. Luke’s account of the healing of the lame man compares closely to his account of another healing in Acts 3:2-8. In this case it was Paul who God used; in that case it was Peter.
- The fact that the man had been lame from birth made it clear this was a miracle and not just a disease or condition that suddenly improved.
- Application: We don’t have the power God gave the apostles to facilitate a miraculous healing. However, we have the opportunity to “connect the dots” for unbelievers that

unexplainable, positive circumstances are proof that God is at work. In the New Testament God used miracles to open the door for sharing the good news of Christ. We can help people recognize God's power leading to a RELATIONSHIP with His Son, Jesus.

- The pagans jumped to their own wrong conclusions when they saw the man healed --- they thought Paul and Barnabas were the Greek gods Hermes and Zeus. Paul was the spokesman, so they assumed he was Hermes who was the messenger of Zeus. Barnabas was likely tagged as Zeus (the chief Greek god) because he was a "strong, quiet" type.
- At first, due to the language barrier, the apostles didn't know they were about to be worshiped as false gods. But when the priest of Zeus brought around the oxen to sacrifice to them, they figured it out quickly and tore their clothes to display their dismay at such blasphemy.
- Paul immediately launched into a mini-sermon (verses 15-17) tailor-made for his pagan audience. In chapter 13, when speaking to a Jewish crowd, Paul referenced their Jewish heritage going back to Abraham, Moses, and David. In this case he instead pointed them to creation as proof of God's power and patience.
- Paul shared a similar truth in Romans 1:20 stating that God's creation "witnesses" to people that He exists and they need to respond to Him.

Romans 1:20 (ESV)

²⁰ For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.

- Wiersbe writes: *"Men knew the truth about God, but they did not allow this truth to work in their lives. They suppressed it in order that they might live their own lives and not be convicted by God's truth. The result, of course, was refusing the truth (Rom. 1:21–22), and then turning the truth into a lie (Rom. 1:25). Finally, man so abandoned the truth that he became like a beast in his thinking and in his living."*^{iv}
- John Stott wrote: *"...with the pagans in Lystra he [Paul] focused not on a Scripture they did not know, but on the natural world around them, which they did know and could see. He begged*

them to turn from the vanity of idolatrous worship to the living and true God. He spoke of the living God as the Creator of heaven, earth and sea, and of everything in them (15).^v

- Stott's point: *"We need to learn from Paul's flexibility. We have no liberty to edit the heart of the good news of Jesus Christ. Nor is there ever any need to do so. But we have to begin where people are, to find a point of contact with them. With secularized people today this might be what constitutes authentic humanness, the universal quest for transcendence, the hunger for love and community, the search for freedom, or the longing for personal significance. Wherever we begin, however, we shall end with Jesus Christ, who is himself the good news, and who alone can fulfill all human aspirations."*
- In other words, we have to learn to witness to unsaved people in language they can understand, not "Christianese." We have to adapt our approach while never compromising the basic good news that Christ died for our sin.
- Another point of this text is that all people, pagan or believer, can fall victim to worshipping the messenger rather than God alone.
- You might find that hard to believe because you've been well versed in biblical truth. However, even Christian people can become so focused on gifted pastors and evangelists that we lose sight of the fact that they are just the messenger and God is the only one worthy of worship.
- The point: We need to love, respect, and appreciate God's messengers but always remember, they are *"...merely human beings—just like you! [who] have come to bring you the Good News that you should turn from these worthless things and turn to the living God, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them."^{vi}*
- The passage ends when the unhappy Jews from chapter 13 track down Paul and Barnabas in Lystra and incite a riot among the pagans. Suddenly, the Lycoanians went from wanting to worship the apostles to stoning Paul and leaving him for dead.
- Verse 20 tells us that God not only kept Paul alive, He gave him the strength and determination to go back into the town for the night before moving to the next city to share the gospel.

- The point: People are fickle and will often turn on us just because we share the truth of the gospel. Like, Paul we need to depend on God to strengthen us to press on in delivering the good news even under painful circumstances.

So, What's the Takeaway?

- All worship belongs to God alone. Our job is to use every opportunity to point people to Him as the only source for life and salvation.
- We need to be willing to change our approach in talking to unsaved people without altering the basic truth of the gospel. This takes some practice, preparation, and dependence on the Holy Spirit to guide us.
- We need to be prepared for times of rejection and hostility because we've shared the truth. Even when we share the gospel in a loving manner, those who refuse to believe can mistreat us. Like Paul, we need to press on in the power of the Holy Spirit and continue to carry the good news to those who desperately need it.

ⁱ Explore the Bible Teacher's Guide – LifeWay 2017

ⁱⁱ Richards, L. O. (1991). *The Bible reader's companion* (electronic ed., p. 721). Wheaton: Victor Books.

ⁱⁱⁱ Knowles, A. (2001). *The Bible guide* (1st Augsburg books ed., pp. 549–550). Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg.

^{iv} Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible exposition commentary* (Vol. 1, p. 518). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

^v Stott, John. *The Message of Acts* (The Bible Speaks Today Series) (Kindle Locations 4139-4141). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

^{vi} Tyndale House Publishers. (2013). *Holy Bible: New Living Translation* (Ac 14:15). Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.