

Saved by Grace

Week Commencing 1 May 2023

Notes for next week's sermon on Acts 14: Worthless Idols vs. the Living God

DAY 1: Read Acts 14:1-7

When the Resurrected Jesus appeared to his followers, everything changed in their lives – and in the world. When His Holy Spirit descended on that early group of believers (known as the early Church) and He sent them out into the world, they began a missionary movement that quite literally challenged the thinking and belief systems of everyone with whom they came in contact.

Acts 14 is a great example of this. It easily parallels the various beliefs we see competing with one another across today's contemporary western culture: everything from fundamentalist legalism and relativism to new age worship and Christian faith. Though each might be sincerely devout, Paul and Barnabas show the difference between unbelief, gullible belief and true Gospel belief.

The leaders of the synagogue in Antioch had just expelled Paul and Barnabas from that city. Yet when they came to Iconium, they again began their evangelistic efforts by preaching in the synagogue, which was still the centre of the culture. Their Gospel message attracted a great multitude both of Jews and of Greeks. The fact that Jews and Greeks alike believed, shows that Paul preached the same thing to both groups: That salvation is in Jesus, and we appropriate it by our belief (trust in, reliance on) in Him. Some *unbelieving* leaders, though, "poisoned" the minds of the gullible people, stirring them up to reject the Truth of Christ's Good News. That meant Paul and Barnabas had to "stay a long time" to ensure the new believers understood the true Gospel message. It also meant making more enemies in the process until they were finally forced to leave. What do you think would cause such antagonism to the Gospel then – and now?

DAY 2: Read Acts 14:8-18

Smitten by the love of their Resurrected Lord Jesus, Paul and Barnabas could not help but see the world through new eyes and deeply wanted others to see Jesus too! Regardless of what it might have cost them or how much danger they encountered, they were compelled to speak and act as Christ's reconciling ambassadors. They became his hands and his voice as God led them.

Consequently, as they arrived in Lystra (after fleeing dangerous threats on their lives), they encountered a man unable to walk. Because of his own encounter with Jesus on the Damascus Road, Paul's heart was now soft toward those who were hurting, marginalized or alienated. Instead of wanting to kill Christians as he did before his conversion, Paul now wanted others to know Christ's new life. So when he saw this crippled man, he immediately discerned the man's faith to receive God's gift of healing. And the man did! He sincerely believed in Christ the Great Physician and God changed his life and his body as a result.

Such a miracle, though, did not necessarily change the people's idea of who God was, so they began to worship Paul and Barnabas as if they were gods like Zeus and Hermes. Like Peter in Acts 10, the two Apostles reminded the people that they were mere men, serving the same God who had created them all and provided their daily bread. Their appeal to the God of "common grace" – that is, the blessings of God that fall on believer and unbeliever alike – was a powerful approach to those not schooled in Jewish history. Even so, it seemed to make little impact on this gullible and shallow group. And because all human beings are made to worship, if they do not have their hearts changed by the Almighty Living God, they will find someone or something else to worship. Consider the difference in response to the Gospel Message between the crippled man and the crowd. What does Paul's reaction and message reveal about God's character?

DAY 3: Read Acts 14:19-23

The crowd's shallow belief created a perfect storm for the hard-hearted unbelieving Jews; they convinced the mob that it was *Paul* who was dangerous, not them! "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. However, when the disciples gathered around him, he rose up and went into the city.”

This fickle crowd who’d previously wanted to worship Paul now mindlessly tried to beat him to death. True, Paul’s faithful preaching of the Gospel brought persecution, opposition and believers alike, as it will for us. Though it’s doubtful many of us will be beaten by a mad mob for our beliefs, it does raise the question of devotion. How was it that Paul was able to survive such a violent attempt on his life?

When the disciples gathered around, it is likely they prayed for him. And instead of wandering off somewhere to lick his wounds, Paul went back into the city. So compelled was he to introduce others to Jesus that he was undeterred at what it might cost him. He wanted to make sure others knew the same saving grace he himself had experienced from the Risen Jesus – even if it meant his life.

But make no mistake. It was not Paul’s determination that took him back to the city, any more than it was the disciples’ powerful support that paved the way. God certainly used both, but let’s be clear: the Holy Spirit is the real hero of this story. As John Stott wrote, “Without the Holy Spirit, Christian discipleship would be inconceivable, even impossible. There can be no life without the life-giver, no understanding without the Spirit of truth, no fellowship without the unity of the Spirit, no Christlikeness of character apart from His fruit, and no effective witness without His power. As a body without breath is a corpse, so the church without the Spirit is dead.” Pray for God’s Holy Spirit to empower us – and churches everywhere – to love all those He puts in our path, that they may believe and have their roots go down deep into the soil of God’s marvellous love!

DAY 4: Read Acts 14:24-28

This last section of Chapter 14 follows Paul and Barnabas on their travels to evangelise and establish churches throughout the region. It’s a great study in the disciplines and attributes of a missional church; that is, a group of Christians who wisely pray, fast, serve, worship and seek God’s leading in reaching others so that they, too, may believe. They know it will not be easy – “We must experience many hardships to enter the Kingdom of God”, says Paul. But he knows that Christ’s work on the cross has achieved for them the eternal crown of glory, even as this side of Heaven, we are called to boldly proclaim Christ crucified and Risen!

Still, such conversations, ministry and discipleship always starts in our own hearts. We cannot be missionaries like Paul and Barnabas until we are first smitten with the love of Christ for us, when we experience first-hand the saving grace of God. When we do, we can be sure our vision and calling will be far more than we can imagine, taking us places we might never have thought possible for his sake and for his Kingdom. As Stott said, “Mission arises from the heart of God Himself and is communicated from His heart to ours. Mission is the global outreach of the global people of a global God.” May we pray together, that God might empower us and send us out as active and faithful believers of the Gospel message: Christ is Risen!

Resources: The Message of Acts by John Stott and <https://enduringword.com/commentary/acts-14/>.