

CALVARY PANDAN BIBLE- PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

[Adapted from Bethel Bible-Presbyterian
Church, 10 Downing St. Oakleigh, Vic., 3166]

DHW BIBLE CLASS LESSON 15 THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES CHAPTER 14

INTRODUCTION

Luke's account in this chapter continues with the first missionary trip of Paul and Barnabas from chapter 13. We have learned that the apostles' missionary trip was initiated by God the Holy Spirit who instructed the church at Antioch-Syria to separate Saul (now Paul) and Barnabas for mission work beyond their city. We witnessed the success they experienced in the island of Cyprus where they were empowered by the Holy Spirit in dealing with the enemy who is always bent on hindering the gospel of Jesus Christ. Then in Antioch-Pisidia, Paul gave a powerful exposition of the Word to both Jews and Gentiles in the synagogue. Many Jews and Gentiles were converted. But there were Jews who were filled with envy and who persecuted the apostles. They managed to influence some important people of the city and expelled Paul and Barnabas, who were not sad but were full of joy.

They continued their missionary trip inland visiting Iconium, Lystra and Derbe before returning to Antioch-Syria where they first started. They were badly treated in two of the three cities that they went to. We will learn how the apostles responded to these persecutions and opposition. Paul's

sermon to a Gentile audience in Lystra is instructional in that we can learn how to approach people who are without any knowledge of Scriptures, with the gospel of Christ. Every one who aspires to do the work of Christ in obedience to His command is not exempted from opposition, persecution and even death. There are times when the enemy used a softer method of flattery to subvert the gospel work. These things happened throughout the history of the Church. The important lesson is what we should do and how we should react to all these. Paul and Barnabas set the example.

Chapter 14 falls naturally into the following sections: (1) Success and Opposition in Iconium (vv.1-7); (2) Miracle in Lystra (vv.8-19); (3) Confirming & Strengthening the Churches (vv.20-23); (4) Homecoming to Antioch-Syria (vv.24-28).

COMMENTARY

Success & Opposition in Iconium

Paul and Barnabas arrived at Iconium, which is about 60 miles south-east from Antioch-Pisidia. It was a flourishing commercial city as it was situated on one of the main trade routes from east to west. In addition to the local Phrygian population, there were Greeks, Romans and quite a large group of Jews. Paul and Barnabas went together to a synagogue. They spoke to a large number of Jews and Greeks and as a result, many of them believed. These Jews and Greeks, who believed, submitted themselves to the Divine call. But some Jews expressed their unbelief in open rebellion. They poisoned the minds of the Gentiles against the brethren but not against Paul and Barnabas in particular. This

manipulation of the minds of people to turn them against others would usually take the form of subtlety, whispering and deceitful propaganda.

There being no real reason for Paul and Barnabas to flee the city, they stayed a “long time” there, probably several months. The apostles continued to speak boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ by preaching a full and free gospel in spite of the prejudices. God answered the prayers of the Twelve Apostles (4:29) and more by giving power to do “signs and wonders” by the hands of Paul and Barnabas. Note that the signs and wonders followed after faith, not the reverse.

But the multitude in the city was divided. Some supported the Jews but some followed the apostles. The gospel often acts like a sword dividing families and friends. It brings peace to the individual heart, but it also brings division to society.¹ This division among the people developed into a threatening outbreak by both the Gentiles and the Jews together with their rulers against Paul and Barnabas who had been courageously preaching and teaching the believers. The phrase “to use them despitefully and to stone them” means to insult and arouse intense anger against the apostles.²

God in His providence allowed Paul and Barnabas to be aware of their plot to stone them. They fled to the cities of Lystra and Derbe in the

neighbouring province, Lycaonia. Here we learn that the apostles fled not because they were afraid to die. Their loyalty to the Lord Jesus Christ was unquestionable. They were prepared to endure opposition, arrest, mistreatment and even death, if need be, for the sake of Jesus’ Name. But they would not be conned into trying to achieve admiration through martyrdom. Moreover, avoiding death at this time furthered their mission to other provinces and cities. It was, simply stated, not God’s will for them to die yet. A believer’s arrest and death must be in accordance to God’s time.

Miracle in Lystra

Paul and Barnabas went to Lystra, which was 18 miles south of Iconium. It was a small and rustic town. Its population was small and the people were less educated than those in Iconium. It was an insignificant village but the Romans made it a colony in 6 B.C. as part of a scheme for defence against local warlords.

There was no local synagogue and this meant there were hardly any Jews and if there were, they numbered less than ten, the number required to set up a synagogue. Paul and Barnabas preached the gospel. In one instance, there was a certain man who was crippled since birth. Luke’s record of this miracle shows some similarities with Peter’s healing of the lame man. Both men had their disabilities from birth. Both these men looked intently on Paul and Peter. Both the apostles spoke to the men who were lame and both of them were healed. There was no slaying of the Holy Spirit or falling backwards to the ground by the wave of the apostles’ hand. Both of them immediately jumped to their feet after they were healed. And the spectators

¹ Matthew 10:34 Think not that I am come

² Paul when he was a persecutor used the same term: 1 Timothy 1:13 Who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious: but I obtained mercy, because I did *it* ignorantly in unbelief. – “injurious” in Greek, means: heaping insulting language upon others; synonym: Despiteful as used here in Acts.

attributed the healing to the powers of the apostles. In highlighting the parallels of these two miracles, Luke's intent was to show that Paul's ministry to the Gentiles was as much Divinely authorized and blessed as was Peter's ministry to the Jews. Furthermore, the similarities reinforce the unity of the one gospel of Jesus Christ although it is preached to different people.

When the people saw what Paul had done, they lifted their voices saying in Lycaonian: "The gods are come down to us in the likeness of men" (v.11). They called Barnabas Jupiter and called Paul, Mercurius.³ Why Barnabas was called Jupiter (or Zeus) was because he was probably more dignified and had a longer beard; and Paul, Mercurius (or Hermes) because he was smaller in stature and an eloquent speaker. Apparently, Paul and Barnabas did not understand what they were saying in their Lycaonian tongue. It was only when their priest, who was in charge of their temple Zeus, brought oxen to be sacrificed at the gates of the house where Paul and Barnabas stayed that they openly expressed the customary dismay and disapproval. They rushed into the midst of the crowd shouting out their protest.

Paul passionately reasoned with them. They were not Jews and did not know of God's special Scriptures given to the Jews. Paul then appealed to God's creation and general revelation. Paul began his speech to them by strongly denying that they were gods but men of like passions with them. Then Paul preached to them. In his appeal to

³ These are Roman names equivalent to the Greek gods. Jupiter is the Roman name of the Greek head god, Zeus; and Mercurius is the Roman name of the Greek god "Hermes", a messenger of the gods.

them, he mentioned important truths about God. The first truth, which he mentioned, was that the gods they were worshipping were useless and that they should turn to the living God, who is the Creator of heaven and earth, and the seas, and all things that are therein. The next truth was that God allowed men the freedom of choice, and in allowing men free choice, he must also allow evil. Paul continued by showing that God who created heaven and earth was good, in that He gave rain from heaven and many fruits in their seasons for men's nourishment so that they could be glad (v.17). After making his impassioned speech, the people stopped carrying out the sacrifice they intended to do for the apostles. Paul made himself all things to all men. When preaching to the Jews in the synagogue, he quoted from the Old Testament. Here Paul was speaking to simple village folks, and he described God in terms they could witness with their eyes and understand.

Now a sad development occurred. Wherever God's servants preached the true gospel of Jesus Christ, the devil is bound to disrupt and create chaos. Certain Jews from Antioch-Pisidia and Iconium came to Lystra – imagine how malicious and wicked these Jews were! They managed to persuade the people to stone Paul, the main speaker! The locals had just made Paul as one of their gods, and now they joined these visiting angry and evil Jews to stone Paul. Our Lord Jesus Christ suffered the same treatment – one moment "Hosanna" and the next, "Crucify Him." Paul could not forget this day.⁴ The

⁴ Paul forgave his wicked persecutors, but he did not forget their evil deeds. 2

wicked mob after stoning Paul dragged him out of the city, “supposing he had been dead” (v.19b). His persecutors had finished their work and dispersed. Paul was left alone and the Christian disciples stood around his battered body with torn hearts. They must have gone to Paul in order to collect his body to give him a decent and proper burial. But Paul got up. He was not dead but was rendered unconscious. He went into the city and the next morning, he departed with Barnabas to Derbe. Perhaps one of the reasons why Barnabas escaped the beating was probably because he was not as demonstrative as Paul.

Confirming & Strengthening the Churches

Derbe was about 40 miles east of Lystra. Nothing much was written about it. Paul and Barnabas preached the gospel of Jesus Christ there. There were converts and Luke mentioned one of them, Gaius of Derbe (20:4) who accompanied Paul in his journey to Jerusalem. Having taught there, Paul and Barnabas decided to retrace their steps and revisit Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch-Pisidia. Imagine the apostles were returning to the cities where they had been persecuted and maltreated. We can understand why. Luke mentions that Paul and Barnabas were concerned for the newly born-again Christians in the cities they evangelised. Paul had

Corinthians 11:25 Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep;

2 Timothy 3:11 Persecutions, afflictions, which came unto me at Antioch, at Iconium, at Lystra; what persecutions I endured: but out of *them* all the Lord delivered me.

three aims: to strengthen the new converts; to urge them to continue steadfastly in the faith; and to exhort them that they must accept much tribulation to enter into the kingdom of God. In a further move to strengthen the churches, the apostles ordained “elders”. These elders were solemnly set apart for their office by prayer, fasting, and laying on of hands; and then they were commended to the Lord. After visiting Antioch-Pisidia, they retraced their steps till they came to Perga. There they halted and preached the Word. This was the city where John Mark had left them and on their first visit we are not told that they preached there. From Perga, they took a land road to Attalia, the seaport of Pamphylia. From there, they sailed for Syria, coasting along Cilicia and by way of Seleucia, they returned to Antioch-Syria, where they began their missionary trip.

Paul and Barnabas had fulfilled the work, which the Holy Spirit had set them apart to do. They had been absent for nearly three years, and probably few things had reached the Church at Antioch. A missionary meeting of the church was called. The Christian disciples eagerly gathered to hear news of what God had done in their missionary exploits and of progress in the places they visited. Paul testified how God had “opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles” (v.27). God opens the door of faith and no human mortal can shut! Paul stayed in Antioch a “long time”; exactly how long we are not told. Perhaps he stayed for almost a year.

PRACTICAL VALUE

One clear lesson is that Christians are the targets of persecution and ridicule when they faithfully preach

and teach the Word of God. In almost every city, which Paul and Barnabas visited and preached the gospel, there was opposition. They were persecuted and in Lystra, Paul was so badly beaten that he became unconscious. One reason why Christians are targeted is because the gospel is “a sword of division”. Acceptance of the Lord Jesus Christ means total loyalty and allegiance. Christ has said that if a Christian loves even parents more than He, he is not worthy of Him. The Christian faith is exclusive. We preach Christ is THE ONLY Way, Truth and Life, and therefore all other faiths or religions are not accepted. This evangelistic fervour and exclusivity of the Christian faith arouses opposition and rejection. So, Christians will always face criticism and opposition. Many of us have not been thus tested. We should be prepared and pray that the Lord would grant us the courage and strength to stand up and not give up.

Another benefit is that this first missionary trip by Paul and Barnabas serves as a model for missionary work by a local church. The most notable feature is the sense of direction of the Holy Spirit. The missionary apostles were specially chosen and sent by God, the Holy Spirit. In each place they visited, He gave them power in their preaching and people were converted. Every missionary work must be directed and guided by the Holy Spirit. Today, we have the Word of God authored and inspired by the Holy Spirit and in it, He spells out the directions and guidelines. Our work is to discern what these directions and guidelines are and to do them.

When the apostles left, a local church was planted and the witness of Jesus Christ continued. This is another

purpose of mission work. While the missionaries keep on going, the local church becomes independently self-supporting and carries on the work of God. In this way, missionaries are free to go into untouched places with the gospel. One lesson learnt is that Paul used different approaches when preaching to Jews and Gentiles. In Antioch-Pisidia, he spoke predominantly to Jews and he opened the Scriptures and expounded from it. But in Lystra, he approached the Gentiles through general revelation. They did not have the Holy Scripture. And the first pertinent point Paul stressed is the existence of a living God who is the Creator of everything.

One of the dangers, which every servant of God may experience, is to take credit or glory for what God has done. Paul and Barnabas performed signs and wonders, and in Lystra, Paul healed a man who was a cripple from birth. It was by the power of God that the man was healed. But the locals attributed the power to the apostles. They flattered them with great names and worshipped them with offering of sacrifices. Similarly for pastors and missionaries whom God blesses, their work flourishes and increases and the people readily praise them. But the response of Paul and Barnabas to such flattery and admiration even to the extent of being worshipped was to immediately decline such honour and praise. And Paul explained to the people to turn to God and to give Him the glory and honour, which were due to Him

One last great lesson we learn is that Christians need to be strengthened in their faith, especially young converts. Their newly found faith in Christ needs to be strengthened. They also need to

be encouraged and to continue in their Christian faith. How many young converts started well and were full of enthusiasm. Gradually they become disinterested in their Christian walk because there is no follow-up work. Moreover, they need to be warned that they will face trials and tribulations for being a Christian. It is not all health and wealth by merely praising the Lord and "paying their tithes". That is a false gospel. Every individual Christian who is loyal and true to his Master will suffer for His sake. There is a need therefore to ordain "elders" to oversee the flock. They are those who know the Word and who are long-standing Christians. They have a responsibility and duty to nurture and to build up the Christians. The qualifications of these elders are given in 1Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:4-9. Christians who are duty-bound to ordain and elect these elders must study these qualifications given in Scriptures. The spiritual health and leadership of a church depends on these godly men of faith. AMEN

DAILY READINGS & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Daily Readings

Monday: Acts 14:1-7; Nehemiah 4:6-11; Ephesians 6:11-17.

Tuesday: Acts 14:8-12; Daniel 3:14-30.

Wednesday: Acts 14:13-18; 1 Chronicles 16:24-31.

Thursday: Acts 14:19-23; Deuteronomy 6:1-15.

Friday: Acts 14:24-28; Isaiah 63:7-9.

Discussion Questions

1. What significant events happened in Iconium in relation to the gospel outreach by Paul and Barnabas?

2. How did Paul and Barnabas react when they were perceived as gods in Lystra?

3. What five elementary truths about God, suited to a heathen audience, are set forth by Paul in verses 15-17? Can we use the same truths today?

4. What may we learn from the ways, which Paul and Barnabas did to strengthen the churches they had founded?

5. Why must persecution be part of the Christian's obedient life?
