

Ministry's Ups and Downs – Acts 14:1-28

Introduction

Review

I don't know about you, but it feels to me like we've been away from the book of Acts for a very long time

When we left off **5 Sundays** ago we had taken a look at Acts 13 which tells of the beginning of what we know as Paul's first missionary journey

Barnabas and Paul were ministering in Antioch of Syria when they received the call to take the gospel to the Gentiles

We saw how they combined **human wisdom and reasoning** with **the divine call** to determine where they would go

We saw how they sailed to Cyprus which was the homeland of Barnabas and how they travelled the length of the island witnessing to those who lived there

Sergius Paulus

Then we saw how Luke recorded the account of only one convert but it was a significant one

The proconsul Sergius Paulus accepted the Lord in spite of the resistance of the magician Elymas

And we saw how, as a result of this event, Paul began his official ministry as an apostle and that the leadership role switched from Barnabas to Paul

Antioch in Pisidia

Having reached the end of Cyprus, we saw how the group sailed to the mainland of what was then known as Asia Minor – what we know as Turkey today – and how they travelled overland to Antioch in Pisidia

It was during their time in Antioch that we saw **Paul set the pattern** that he would follow for the remainder of his ministry of going first to the synagogue in each city and preaching the gospel to his countrymen before moving on to the Gentiles

And in Paul's first recorded sermon we saw him approach the gospel from **an historical angle** as he spoke to Jews and Gentile proselytes who would have had knowledge of Old Testament prophecy and Jewish history

Paul's approach was wildly successful as some were saved and many others gathered the next week to hear more

So many gathered that Luke records that "almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord"

Which made the Jewish leaders jealous and in their jealousy they conspired with the Gentile women of high standing to prevail upon their husbands to drive Paul and Barnabas out of the district

So they left, shaking the dust off of their feet as they went; signifying that their opponents had determined for themselves that they were unworthy of the gospel of Christ

And leaving a joyous group of disciples behind, they set their course for **Iconium** some 85 miles to the S.S.E.

It was a tough start for the fledgling missionaries with plenty of ups and downs

They had apparently had little success to report on Cyprus

John Mark had abandoned them as soon as they got to Asia Minor returning to Jerusalem for reasons left unstated

And while they had been successful in leading many people to accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior in Antioch they were constantly plagued by resistance and opposition

Still, they persevered and continued on with the work that they knew they had been set apart for

The Ups and Downs of Ministry

Paul's entire ministry was characterized by ups and downs

And it's much the same for every believer as we experience victory and opposition

Of course we love the highs of ministry and much like Peter, John, and James on the Mount of Transfiguration we want to make it to the top of "Ministry Mountain" and just stay there and never come back down

Success is great! Emotional highs are great! And we would love to let the good times roll on forever!

But that's not the way it works because the gospel is designed to confront and it will cause conflict and division wherever it is preached

Look at what Jesus himself said in **Matthew 10:34-36**

Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household.

Wherever the gospel is preached some will respond positively and some will respond negatively – and some will even respond violently

That's the way it was for Paul and Barnabas as they began their first missionary journey and we will see that pattern continue in today's text as we look at the second part of that first missionary journey in Acts 14

In this chapter we will see Paul and Barnabas minister at **Iconium** and then at **Lystra** and **Derbe** and then we will see them as they take their return trip all the way back to Antioch in Syria from where they departed on their missionary journey that took the better part of 2 years

And we will glean insights from their experiences and attitudes that will inform us as we minister

We will see how they were determined to carry out their mission and were persistent in spite of opposition

How they remained in tune with the leading of the Holy Spirit and were adaptable in their plans and in their approach as their situation and audiences changed

And we will see how they exercised care and concern as they disciplined their converts

We will begin with their ministry at **Iconium**

I. Ministry at Iconium

Iconium is the Latin name of a city that still exists in Turkey today that is now referred to as **Konya**

In Paul's day Iconium was the capital of the region of Lycaonia and it was a very prosperous commercial and agricultural center which lay about 120 miles north of the Mediterranean on the major trade route across Asia Minor

Iconium had a large enough Jewish population to support a synagogue and that's where, true to form, Paul and Barnabas first headed to share the gospel

In **verse 1** we read –

Now at Iconium they entered together into the Jewish synagogue and spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed.

A. Evangelism

Clearly, the mission of Paul and Barnabas was evangelism and they enjoyed great initial success

When we looked at Acts 13 we determined that the reason Luke included so much detail of Paul's sermon is because it served as a kind of prototype sermon for how he preached the gospel in the synagogues

So we can reasonably assume that his sermon in Iconium followed the pattern laid out in Pisidian Antioch and that could be why Luke includes no details of it

In fact, Luke simply uses the shorthand phrase "spoke in such a way" to describe Paul's sermon in Iconium

The description, "in such a way" employed by Luke probably also shows not only what Paul said but how Paul spoke

Throughout this chapter we will see that **Paul spoke with great boldness** – he knew of that which he spoke - he was an eyewitness to the resurrection of Christ after all - and he didn't shy away from delivering his message **plainly and with confidence**

And after Paul's sermon, Luke reports that "a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed"

The term "Greeks" refers in all likelihood to Gentile proselytes who would have also been present in the synagogue

So we see that Paul and Barnabas experienced an initial ministry high as Paul's gospel presentation met with immediate success

B. Counter-Evangelism

But what goes up must come down it seems and they were quickly confronted with opposition as we read in **verse 2**

But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers.

As it always does, that little word "but" signals a change in direction and we find that where there is **evangelism** there will be **counter-evangelism**

When Luke refers to the opposition as "unbelieving Jews" he isn't referring to those who simply haven't yet believed or those who are innocently ignorant

The word he uses that is translated for us as "unbelieving" carries with it the idea of being **willfully disobedient**

So what Luke is saying here is that these particular Jews **refused** to believe which is a more active concept than we might initially recognize from the word "unbelieving"

These Jews closed their minds and hearts to the incontrovertible proof of Old Testament history and prophecy and Paul's eyewitness testimony

And Luke says that these unbelieving Jews "stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers"

Literally, this means that they "made the Gentiles' souls evil against" Paul and Barnabas

Remember, in first century thinking the soul was seen as the seat of feelings and feelings can be influenced by others

So the unbelieving Jews attacked the Gentiles on the basis of feelings and not intellect

In other words, they slandered Paul and Barnabas probably saying wicked things about them personally and turned the Gentiles who had not yet believed against them

How often we see this tactic repeated today when people can't refute the facts of the gospel and so they appeal to emotions and feelings and make *ad hominem* attacks

Luke doesn't elaborate on what things were said but the desired effect was to vindictively harm the effect of their ministry efforts and it appears they were successful in their smear campaign based on how Luke reports it

And in **verse 3** we see the response of Paul and Barnabas to this character assassination

So they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord...

C. Bold Determination

Undeterred by slanderous words, Paul and Barnabas kept on speaking boldly for the Lord

And the word "for" here also carries with it the sense of reliance upon a thing – so the pair not only spoke out on behalf of the Lord but spoke out **as a sign of their dependence on him**

Proclaiming the gospel will always result in opposition - write it down; it will happen

In **Luke 8:12**, Jesus while explaining his parable of the four soils says that when the gospel is preached

The devil delights in coming to take the word away from their hearts, so that the hearers can't believe and be saved

And that's precisely what they unbelieving Jews were doing at Iconium – they spread malicious lies and made appeals to feelings and emotions in order to take the gospel away from those who might believe

But bold perseverance in the face of opposition can be as much an evidence of the power of God as having success in seeing large numbers of people come to Christ

I have a childhood friend who became a missionary in Mongolia shortly after he graduated college and during his time there he has seen more opposition than he has success

The fact that he continues to labor there year after year is a very real testimony to his reliance on God

Think about it – is it more difficult to stay with a task that's going well or one that is going badly?

Which one requires more faith in God?

I believe we would all agree that it shows greater faith in God to stay with a ministry that isn't flourishing

So Paul and Barnabas, confident in what God had sent them to do, continued – not timidly or apologetically – but with boldness

Affirmation by the Lord

Notice what happened as a result in the latter part of **verse 3** – Paul and Barnabas spoke boldly for the Lord

...who bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands

The Lord affirmed the message the pair was preaching by doing signs and wonders through them

Once more, as we have seen in the past, we see miraculous signs confirming the words of truth spoken by the apostles

Miracles were used consistently in Acts, not for their own sake but, to establish the full, genuine authority of the gospel that the apostles preached

Resulted in division

So many people throughout history have clamored for a sign and many still do today

"Show us a sign" they cry "and we will believe!"

But miracles in and of themselves are very weak things

We see this clearly in **verse 4** where in spite of signs and wonders done by the apostles

The people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews and some with the apostles

If a person is not convinced by the teaching of the gospel seeing a miracle won't do any good

Jesus taught this very thing as we see in **Luke 16:31** where he says if they didn't believe Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead

This fact was proven when Jesus rose from the dead and those who refused to believe remained in their unbelief

And the people of Iconium were no different as they sought to turn up the heat on Paul and Barnabas

In **verse 5** we read that an attempt was made to mistreat them and to stone them

The conditions in Iconium had deteriorated from orchestrated slander to planned violence and even murder

The apostles fled

And in **verse 6** we see that the apostles became aware of the plot to do them in so they fled the city

But notice that they didn't just run away from Iconium to hide – they fled **to** Lystra and eventually to Derbe not simply to put distance between themselves and their opponents but **to continue preaching**

This was not cowardice on the part of Paul and Barnabas

They remained bold in the face of insults and lies but they knew God had not called them to suffer martyrdom at this point in their lives

So they moved on to carry on as they took their mission and their message elsewhere

II. Ministry at Lystra and Derbe

Their sojourn at Lystra also begins with a bang as they continue their ministry of evangelism

The one difference is that they don't seem to begin in the local synagogue and that could be because it's possible Lystra didn't have a synagogue

Lystra was a fortified Roman outpost on what at that time was the edge of civilization so whatever Jewish population was there may not have been large enough to support a synagogue

Lystra lay about **30 miles to the southwest of Iconium** and was, as one reference work described it, a city "in a wild district among a rude population" – not the most glowing of descriptions

It was a place filled with idolatrous pagans and would present new and unique challenges to the apostles

But, that's where Paul and Barnabas went and when they arrived they got busy with evangelizing the populace

A. Evangelism and Affirmation

The account begins in **verse 8** by introducing a man who was lame from birth sitting in public

Luke is actually very emphatic about describing his condition as he says he "could not use his feet" that he was "crippled from birth" that he "had never walked"

And it's not until **verse 9** that we see that he was sitting and listening to Paul present the gospel

The account that follows closely parallels the account of Peter healing the lame beggar in Acts 3

Perhaps Luke was showing that Paul was every bit the apostle that Peter was

Anyway, Paul notices the man is listening intently and that he had the faith to be made well and, as we saw when we looked at Peter's healing of the lame man in Acts 3 this description also means that he had the faith to be saved

How Paul recognized this we aren't told but Paul orders the lame man to do what he had never done in his life

He commanded him in **verse 10** "Stand upright on your feet" and the man immediately obeyed by leaping up and he began walking around

This was a complete healing not only of his physical defect but also of ability to stand upright and to move about

As we discussed when we talked about Peter's similar healing in Acts 3 this demonstrates the spiritual healing that also came upon the man as he accepted the gospel message and was forgiven of his sins

But you need to notice that the preaching of the gospel came **before** the affirmation by way of the miraculous healing

It always works that way because the miraculous sign is meant to authenticate the teaching

B. Gross Misinterpretation

Of course the healing of this man who was well known in Lystra didn't go unnoticed and it led to a **gross misinterpretation** amongst the citizens of Lystra

Let's look at **verses 11-13**

And when the crowds saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in Lycaonian, "The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!" Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. And the priest of Zeus, whose temple was at the entrance to the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds.

The people of Lystra were pagans who worshipped the false gods Zeus and Hermes

So when they saw the healing they thought that Paul and Barnabas were those two gods come in human form

According to their way of thinking the god who was superior would rely on the lesser god to talk for him while he remained more aloof and dignified

Therefore, since Paul was doing all of the talking they thought he was Hermes the messenger of Zeus and that Barnabas was Zeus himself

And, as if this case of mistaken identity wasn't bad enough there was a complication involved that made the citizens of Lystra go overboard in their response

It seems there was an ancient legend that Zeus and Hermes had come to the area before disguised as men seeking lodging

The story was that though they asked at a thousand homes, no one would take them in until they came to a humble cottage occupied by a poor, elderly couple named Philemon and Baucis

The old couple eagerly welcomed them and made them a feast from whatever meager provisions they had

In appreciation, the gods blessed the couple, turning their cottage into a temple and making the couple the priest and priestess of the temple while the inhospitable homes and their occupants were destroyed

And when Philemon and Baucis eventually died they were immortalized as a pair of great trees

Of course the present-day citizens of Lystra were not going to risk making the same mistake as their inhospitable forebears

And in their excitement they switched to their native tongue of Lycaonian as they made their plans to properly honor Paul and Barnabas with a suitable sacrifice

Since Paul and Barnabas didn't speak Lycaonian they didn't understand what was going on until they saw the priest of Zeus show up with the garland festooned oxen that were meant to be sacrificed

Paul's Speech

Of course Paul and Barnabas reacted swiftly and decisively as they tried to stop the unrighteous sacrifice once they caught on

They tore their garments as any upstanding Jew would do in the face of blasphemy and rushed into the crowd trying to halt the sacrifice

Let's look at Paul's speech in **verses 15-17** where we will see a completely different approach than he typically made to a Jewish audience

"Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness."

This was an impromptu speech suitable for the situation

Instead of using an historical approach showing fulfilled prophecy, Paul instead used an appeal to nature

He met them where they were and adapted his approach to address a point of common contact

He began with God the Creator and Sustainer – both roles that the citizens of Lystra would have attributed to Zeus - and showed how it was actually God who was responsible

And verse 18 tells us that the people were "scarcely restrained from offering sacrifice to them"

In other words, Paul was successful in halting the sacrifice but just barely

Satan's attack

What should we make of this account?

For one thing we see a shift in tactic by the enemy, Satan

Whereas he had tried intimidation and been partially successful in stopping the apostles' preaching and causing them to keep moving he now turns to flattery as he attacks the apostles at the point of pride or vanity

Having just been run out of the last two cities they had witnessed in, how tempting might it have been to allow the people of Lystra to venerate them?

Of course just long enough to get a hearing and fully expecting to straighten things out at the earliest convenience

Thankfully, the apostles reacted quickly and quelled the undue adoration before it could get out of hand as they demonstrated adaptability in tailoring their message to fit the audience and situation before them

C. Violent Rejection

Unfortunately though the rebuff of false worship likely set them up for what happened next as we see one of the fastest turnarounds in Scripture – after all, no one likes to be made to look foolish and will often act to restore their dignity

Verse 19 tells us that their Jewish opponents followed the apostles – some from clear back in Pisidian Antioch and some from Iconium to carry out their plans to murder them

And they were successful in convincing the crowds to stone Paul – presumably because he was the chief speaker

Stoning is a brutal way to die and it is still practiced in some parts of the world today and one can scarcely imagine the horror of being pummeled to death by rocks large enough to do damage but small enough to throw from a distance – stoning is an horrific death of accumulated injury

So they stoned Paul and, thinking that they had killed him, they dragged him, no doubt battered, bruised, and bloodied out of the city

In **verse 20** Luke recounts how the disciples gathered around Paul – whether to weep or pray over him we aren't told

Perhaps they were taking a moment before taking him away for burial

When Paul suddenly got up and walked back into the city!

Luke doesn't give any indication that this was a miraculous return from the dead as he makes it clear that the people of Lystra were mistaken in presuming that Paul was dead when in fact he was not

But just imagine the powerful, physical sermon that Paul preached as he walked back into Lystra all bloodied and battered and imagine the courage it took to do so not knowing if they wouldn't finish the job

This is undoubtedly the stoning Paul referred to in **2 Corinthians 11:25** which Kathy read for us earlier and he likely carried the marks of it with him for the rest of his life as he relates in **Galatians 6:17**

I have to say, I'm amazed that Paul was able to travel the next day

I don't know about you but the next day is always the worst day for soreness

But Luke writes that the next day after the stoning Paul and Barnabas walked the 30 miles to Derbe

III. The Return Trip

Luke gives us no details other than to say that when they had successfully preached the gospel in Derbe they began to retrace their steps visiting the cities where they had witnessed previously – Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch

Paul is often thought of only as a church planting missionary

But on this **return trip** Luke provides us with a glimpse of Paul's pastoral side as he takes time to care for the flocks that he had established on the outward leg of his trip

A. Provided Discipleship

The first thing we see is that Paul and Barnabas **provided discipleship** to the believers in these cities

Verse 22 says that they returned strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.

First Luke says the apostles "**strengthened** the souls of the disciples" which means they taught them in such a way that they became more firmly established in biblical truth

Their faith was buttressed and fortified as Paul and Barnabas remained with them

Then we see that Paul and Barnabas "**encouraged** them to continue in the faith" which means that they exhorted them, they pleaded with them to remain faithful in continuing in the disciplines and mission of Christian life

They **revealed** to the new believers that tribulation, opposition, and suffering were to be considered as the normal, temporary conditions that must be endured on the way to heaven

B. Established Leadership

Then in **verse 23** we see that they **established leadership** for the new churches

And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

In this verse we see the necessity of a church leadership structure and the idea of a plurality of elders in each local church

Thankfully, although sometimes frustratingly, Scripture doesn't give us a detailed account of how these elder "appointments" were carried out

It's frustrating because in many ways life would be simpler if God had just given us specific instruction in these matters

But it's also a blessing that he didn't do that as we are allowed a certain amount of flexibility that gives us the opportunity to seek the best way to honor God in our time and place

About the only thing we see here clearly is that there was a **plurality** of elders in each church

And we know that the elders **came from within the church** even though the churches were only weeks or months old which means that these new elders were relatively recent converts

Paul gives more specific requirements for eldership in **1 Timothy 3** and **Titus 1** but it seems clear that spiritual maturity is specific to each individual and not a fixed metric based on length of time as a believer

In any event, Paul and Barnabas were confident of the well-being of the churches and their leaders because they knew well that these were God's churches and that he would protect them

So they fasted and prayed and committed the churches to the Lord as they departed

Luke tells us that they headed for the port city of Attalia stopping this time to preach in Perga which they had just passed through before and they set sail to return to Antioch in Syria

C. Gave an Accounting

And when they arrived in Antioch they **gave an accounting** of their trip

The church in Syrian Antioch had a vested interest in the trip as they were the church that sent the missionaries out roughly two years earlier

No doubt they were eager to hear from Paul and Barnabas and perhaps a little surprised that their roles had reversed during the trip

And the pair was faithful to give God the glory as they declared what God had done through and alongside them

God had opened the door to intentional evangelism to the Gentiles on this trip and many had walked through that door and become followers of the Lord Jesus

After all of the highs and lows they had experienced, it's not difficult to believe that they were ready to stay put for a while in friendly surroundings

And in **verse 28** Luke says they remained no little time in Antioch – we know that they remained there about one year

Conclusion

In our study of Acts we have seen that our mission is to continue the mission that Jesus began while he was on the earth

That's exactly what Paul and Barnabas were doing on this missionary journey and we see that it resulted in very high highs and very low lows

That's the nature of ministry – it has its ups and downs

And doing ministry the way Paul and Barnabas did ministry; the way Jesus did ministry will result in similar reactions

So often we think that if we're doing God's work all should go smoothly but Peter writes in **1 Peter 4:12-14** –

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.

And Jesus himself tells us that the servant is not greater than the master and since the world hated him it would hate us also

So we need to be prepared and strengthened through the study of the Word and remain diligent to keeping the faith in spite of ministry's ups and downs

Because they will happen

Then, like Paul and Barnabas we need to remain sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit as we adapt our efforts in both evangelism and discipleship to those we are working to reach

So that, by our perseverance through the roller coaster ride we call ministry, we might demonstrate an abiding faith in the power and protection of the Lord

Let's pray