

The Book of Acts

Lesson 20: Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe -- Acts 14:1-28

The first journey rolls on, and so does the pattern of belief and opposition. In Iconium, Paul and Barnabas preach so effectively that a great number of Jews and Greeks believe, but the city splits, a plot forms to stone them, and they flee. The gospel keeps advancing, and so does the danger. These men are not tourists; they are soldiers of the cross, pressing into hostile territory and paying for it.

In Lystra, Paul heals a man lame from birth, and the crowd loses its head. Convinced that the gods have come down in human form, they call Barnabas Zeus and Paul Hermes, and the local priest brings oxen and garlands to offer sacrifice. Paul and Barnabas are horrified. They tear their clothes and rush in among the people crying, we also are men, of like nature with you. Do not worship us; turn from these worthless things to the living God who made heaven and earth, who has never left Himself without witness, giving you rains and fruitful seasons and filling your hearts with food and gladness.

And then, in a stunning reversal, the same crowd that wanted to worship Paul is turned against him. Jews from Antioch and Iconium arrive, win the crowd over, and stone Paul, dragging him out of the city and leaving him for dead. But as the disciples gather around his battered body, Paul rises, walks back into the very city that just tried to kill him, and the next day moves on to Derbe to keep preaching. This is what devotion to Christ looks like when it costs everything.

Then comes a detail easy to overlook but full of courage and wisdom. Paul and Barnabas retrace their steps, going back through the very cities where they had been persecuted, to strengthen the new disciples and encourage them to continue in the faith. And they tell them a sober truth that the modern ear resists: through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. They appoint elders in every church, commit them to the Lord, and return to Antioch to report how God had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. The mission has cost them dearly, and they would not trade it for anything.

Group Discussion: When the crowd tried to worship them, Paul and Barnabas tore their clothes and insisted, we also are men, of like nature with you (vv. 14-15). Why were they so horrified by the honor being offered them, and what does their response teach us about where worship and glory truly belong?

Personal Reflection: Paul and Barnabas warned the new believers that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God (v. 22). Does that sober truth surprise or unsettle you? How does it change your expectations of the Christian life?

Read Acts 14:1-28

Study Questions

1. When the crowd at Lystra tried to offer sacrifice to them as gods, Paul and Barnabas tore their clothes and cried, we also are men, of like nature with you (vv. 11-15). Why did they react so strongly, and what does this teach about the worship and glory that belong to God alone?
2. The same crowd that wanted to worship Paul soon helped stone him (vv. 11-19). What does this dramatic reversal reveal about the fickleness of human approval, and how can we keep from living for the praise of the crowd?
3. Paul told the Lystrans that the living God had never left Himself without witness, giving rains, fruitful seasons, and gladness (vv. 15-17). What does this teach about how God reveals Himself through creation, and why is the gospel still needed beyond this witness?
4. Paul pointed to God's goodness in rain, harvests, and the gladness of daily life (v. 17). How often do you recognize God's hand in the ordinary gifts of creation and daily provision? How might growing in gratitude for these change your heart?
5. On their return journey, Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in every church and committed them to the Lord (v. 23). What does this teach about how God designed the church to be led, and about the importance of godly leadership in each congregation?
6. Paul and Barnabas committed the new churches and their leaders to the Lord with prayer (v. 23). How do you support, pray for, and submit to the godly leaders God has placed over your congregation? And how are you growing toward the kind of maturity God can use?
7. After being stoned and left for dead, Paul rose up and walked back into the very city that had tried to kill him (vv. 19-20). What does this resilience reveal about Paul's devotion and about God's sustaining power, and what enabled him to keep going?
8. Paul was knocked down but got back up and continued (vv. 19-20). When you are knocked down, by failure, discouragement, opposition, or suffering, do you tend to get back up or to stay down? What helps you rise and keep going in your walk with Christ?
9. Paul and Barnabas strengthened the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God (v. 22). What does this teach about the place of suffering in the Christian life and about the necessity of continuing faithful to the end?
10. Looking back over this whole chapter, the refusal of worship, the witness of creation, the appointment of elders, and the call to persevere through tribulation, name one specific way the Lord is calling you to grow, in humility, gratitude, support of His church, or perseverance, and what is one step you will take this week.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Psalm 19:1-4 and Romans 1:19-20, creation witnessing to God so that all are without excuse; 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9, the qualifications for elders who shepherd the church; 2 Timothy 3:12, all who desire to live godly in Christ being persecuted; Hebrews 10:32-39, enduring suffering and not shrinking back but persevering in faith; Revelation 2:10, faithfulness unto death and the crown of life