

Acts 13:44-14:7: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Acts chapter 13 verse 44 to chapter 14 verse 7. The next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy, and began to contradict what was spoken by Paul, reviling him.

And Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you, since you thrust it aside and judge yourself unworthy of eternal life.

And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.

And the word of the Lord was spreading throughout the whole region. But the Jews incited the devout women of high standing, and the leading men of the city, stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district.

But they shook off the dust from their feet against them, and went to Iconium. And the disciples were filled with joy, and with the Holy Spirit. 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.

[1 : 1 7] But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles, and poisoned their minds against the brothers. So they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord, who bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands.

But the people of the city were divided, some sided with the Jews, and some with the apostles. When an attempt was made by both Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to mistreat them and to stone them, they learned of it, and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding country.

And there they continued to preach the gospel. At the end of Acts chapter 13, we see that the message of Paul and Barnabas has an impact on all levels of society in Antioch and Pisidia.

The whole city, Jews and Gentiles, gathers together to hear them the next Sabbath. Despite the fact that they are gathering to hear the word of the Lord, the reaction of the Jews is not joy at the receptivity of their Gentile neighbours, but jealousy.

They dislike the fact that Paul is receiving such a response, and they try to slander Paul and to close people's ears to his message. Their concern is ultimately a selfish one, driven by their personal desire for influence and power, unwilling to allow this newcomer to receive such attention.

[2 : 3 3] Likely an important part of this jealousy comes from their conviction that the covenant gives them an exclusive status, preaching to Gentiles that they can become recipients of the promise of Abraham, in the way that Paul and Barnabas are doing, undermines their privileged status, and lowers their standing relative to proselytes and God-fearers.

Paul and Barnabas' message implies that Gentiles can enjoy equal standing in the people of God. Note the way that Jesus had also received an extremely hostile reaction when he had spoken about God's grace to the Gentiles, and the failure of the people of Israel to receive it, in Luke chapter 4, in his first sermon in Nazareth.

Paul had earlier concluded his sermon by quoting the prophetic warning, Look, you scoffers, be astounded and perish, for I am doing a work in your days, a work that you will not believe, even if one tells it to you.

This word of warning very directly applies to the Jewish opponents in this situation. As the Jews reject the message of Paul and Barnabas, they declare that they will bring the word to the Gentiles. The Jews have cast judgment upon themselves by their failure to accept the message. They have judged themselves to be unworthy. Paul and Barnabas will now turn their attention to the Gentiles.

[3 : 4 6] This is not yet a complete turn to the Gentiles, just a more local one. When they move on to Iconium, Paul will again begin in a Jewish synagogue. One of the Davidic promises associated

with the Messianic servant is found in Isaiah chapter 49 verse 6, which Paul cites here.

Paul and Barnabas are fulfilling Israel's calling to be a light for the blind nations. This statement, though connected first and foremost with the servant of Isaiah, Paul and Barnabas take as an instruction for their own ministry.

Presumably as the body of Christ, they extend and continue Christ's ministry by his spirit. Even when the gospel message of Paul faces harsh rejection, God remains in control.

Verse 48 speaks of as many as were appointed to eternal life believing. God makes the word of the gospel effective in the hearts of hearers. The word of God is described as if it had a life and vitality of its own.

God's word acts and brings about new situations, and here it is spreading throughout the whole region. However, the Jewish leadership in the city is determined to stamp out Paul and Barnabas' influence.

[4 : 53] They achieve this by inciting the devout, God-fearing women and the leading men of the city against Paul and Barnabas, so that they will be driven out. It's most likely, as Ben Witherington notes, that the high-status women among the God-fearers were the means by which the Jews influenced the leading men of the city.

It's important to appreciate some of the considerations that might have driven the Jews here. If Paul and Barnabas were to be successful, especially in gaining a large number of God-fearers, they stood to lose a great deal of their own social influence and status within the city, which would have depended in large measure upon groups such as the well-connected women, who would have been very effective at influencing the most powerful people in the city on their behalf, as they seem to have been here.

Considering that women were typically much less educated than men in ancient society, yet could nonetheless enjoy considerable influence within their households, Jews and various other sects might have especially targeted women, as they were more open to conversion, less able to be critical of their teaching, and much more apt to spread it and to increase the social influence of the religious teachers who taught it.

In 2 Timothy, Paul warns Timothy about false teachers who would target weak women in such a fashion. Richard Hooker makes similar observations about the behaviour of certain sectarian Christian teachers in his own day.

The following passage is from a modernised version of his Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity. He speaks here about the way that some radical Christian teachers, particularly aimed at women, This eagerness to proselytise them, it would seem, arises from the fact that they are more apt helpers of the cause than men.

[6 : 30] They are more apt because, regardless of which side they are on, their great eagerness of affection makes them diligently draw in their husbands, children, servants, friends, and allies after them.

They are more apt because of their natural inclination to pity, which makes them readier than men to be generous to their preachers when they suffer want. They are more apt because they have many opportunities to bring encouragement to the brethren.

Finally, they are more apt because they especially enjoy sharing news with one another about where all of their friends and neighbours stand when it comes to the cause. False teachers and religious leaders will often prey upon the virtues of the more vulnerable, whether the trusting innocence of children, the generosity of poor widows, the whole-hearted passion of youths, the receptivity of new converts, the greater empathy of women, or the religious devotion of the devout yet unlearned.

One of the tasks of faithful pastors is to guard the goodness of these traits, protecting such persons from those who would prey upon them. Also, over time, to equip such persons with the means by which to protect themselves without hardening them.

Jesus had instructed his disciples when he sent them out in Matthew 10, verses 11-23,

[8 : 42] Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, and you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.

When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next. For truly I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes. Paul and Barnabas are then following

