

Acts 14:8-28: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0:00] Acts chapter 14 verses 8 to 28. Now at Lystra there was a man sitting who could not use his feet. He was crippled from birth and had never walked.

He listened to Paul speaking, and Paul, looking intently at him and seeing that he had faith to be made well, said in a loud voice, Stand upright on your feet. And he sprang up and began walking. And when the crowd 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 of the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds. But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their garments and rushed out into the crowd, crying out, 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.

[1:06] 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.

Even with these words they scarcely restrained the people from offering sacrifice to them. But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead.

But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city, and on the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe. When they had preached the gospel to that city, and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, 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.

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. Then they passed through Pisidia, and came to Pamphylia, and when they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Ataliah, and from there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had fulfilled.

And when they arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles, and they remained no little time with the disciples.

[2:33] Acts chapter 14 is the completion of Paul's first missionary journey. Paul and Barnabas had fled from Iconium after an attempt to stone them, and they had gone on to Lystra. At Lystra they encounter a lame man, and Paul, either with prophetic insight, or with careful observation of indications that the man was giving, recognises that the man has faith to be healed.

He has been listening to Paul as he speaks, and after looking intently at him, Paul calls out in a loud voice, telling him to stand upright on his feet. The man being healed, he immediately leaps up and walks.

This is a fulfilment of prophecy, as we see in Isaiah chapter 35, verses 5 to 6. It's also very similar to the healing of the lame man at the beautiful gate in chapter 3.

It's similar to Jesus' healing of the lame man in Luke chapter 5, verses 17 to 26. Craig Keener notes some of the parallels between this and Peter's healing of the lame man in chapter 3.

The man in chapter 3 is a lame man from birth, and the man here is a lame man from birth. Peter gazes intently at the man in chapter 3. Paul gazes intently at the man here.

[3 : 50] Once healed, the man in chapter 3 leaps and walks, and the same thing happens with the man here. The events of chapter 3 occur near the temple gates, and this occurs, as we see in verse 13, near the temple and the gates.

The man is healed through faith in both cases, and in both cases the apostles resist the praise of the people, declaring that praise should go to God alone. After healing the man, there is a surprising twist.

The people respond by treating Paul and Barnabas as gods, Paul as Hermes, and Barnabas as Zeus. There were various myths of the gods appearing as men, and the pagans of Lystra think of Paul and Barnabas in this way.

The fact that Paul is the main speaker leads to him being identified as Hermes. Zeus, whom Barnabas is perceived to be, would have been the principal deity in their pantheon. This, we should note, is the first direct interaction with purely Gentile pagans that we've seen in the book of Acts. And one of the things that it gives us a window into is the message that Paul brought to such people. Misapprehension of various kinds is a common theme in the book of Acts. We see it in tongues being recognised as drunkenness, Simon the sorcerer and his attempt to purchase the gift of the spirit.

[5 : 01] And here idolatry is challenged as another form of misapprehension. The pagans of Lystra think that the gods have come down to earth in the likeness of men. And there is a measure of irony here, because in Christ, God has come in human flesh.

Yet God's manifestation in the flesh is a very different sort of thing from the supposed incarnation that this would represent. The idolatry of such pagans projected humanity onto God in a way that lessened God, whereas the Christian teaching of the incarnation never effaces or loses sight of the transcendence of God, the fact that he is the uncreated one above all earthly things, and not reducible to the realm of idolatrous worship and its images.

The crowd has a purpose for Paul and Barnabas. They know who Paul and Barnabas are before they ever speak. They are Zeus and Hermes. Idolatry is always characterised by this projection onto things, by a sort of spiritual ventriloquism, whereby inanimate objects or silenced persons or realities have the voice and the beliefs of the worshipper projected into them, leading to them being misrecognised as if they were other, rather than simply a mute receptacle into which the worshipper is projecting things that will confirm them in their own way.

Paul and Barnabas respond to this blasphemy by tearing their clothes. They speak to the people of Lystra. In contrast to places elsewhere, they are not summarising Israel's history and speaking about the way that Christ fulfils it in this speech or sermon, nor are they condemning the Jews for their crucifixion of Christ.

This is a message tailored for pagans, for this particular situation, where they are worshipping the apostles as if they were gods. Paul is mindful of the fact that his hearers do not share the biblical background that Jewish hearers and also God-fearers would share, and so he addresses them with a message that though rooted in biblical history, does not depend upon a prior knowledge of it.

[6 : 55] The message is one of good news, beginning with the news of creation. He is addressing them as the representative of the uncreated God who created all things, calling them to 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.

The time of God's permission and the ignorance of the Gentiles has passed. The time of idolatry and spiritual blindness has passed, and worship of the Creator and the true God has come.

As the hero of Acts should recognise, the good news is one that is achieved by Christ. It is Christ who has brought an end to this time of ignorance. By coming in human flesh, God has come down. He has not come down in a way that reduces God to the size of man, in a way that serves our idolatrous projections, but in a way that lifts man up to knowledge of and communion with his Creator.

In Acts chapter 17, he develops this message further, in verses 30 and 31 of that chapter. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.

[8 : 07] Even after all of this, it is only with great difficulty that the crowd is prevented from sacrificing to them. Yet the instability and volatility of the crowd is revealed when Jews come from Antioch and Iconium.

One moment they are treating Paul and Barnabas like gods, the next they are trying to stone them. The Jews coming from Antioch and Iconium seem to be tracing Paul and Barnabas' steps. There is a sort of a shadow missionary journey here, much as there is a shadow Jew and Gentile community forming in opposition to the Gospel. Paul and Barnabas are opposing paganism, but the Jews here join with the pagans.

Earlier in the book, Paul had been involved in the stoning of Stephen, and now he himself is stoned. He's stoned and left for dead. The disciples gather about him, perhaps to see if he is still alive, or maybe to pray for him.

It would seem as though he was extremely seriously wounded, at the very least, but he rises up and he enters the city. We should consider the possibility that some miraculous healing occurred here, as the next day he's well enough to go on with Barnabas to Derbe.

[9 : 11] He seems to have more success in that city, and makes many disciples, before returning to Lystra, to Iconium, and then to Antioch, retracing his steps. On the way back, he encourages the communities of disciples that were formed on his first visits.

He exhorts them to continue in the faith, and he braces them for the sort of persecution that they will face in the future. He forms the believers in faithful churches, with elders appointed for each one, and with prayer and fasting, commits them to the hands of the Lord.

From Antioch, they go down through Pisidia, down towards Perga, where they had first landed in Asia Minor, and then from Ataliah, they sail back, returning to their sending church in Antioch, having completed the full mission.

With them, they bring news of the way that God has blessed their mission among the Gentiles. These are not just Gentile God-fearers. Pagan Gentiles had been brought to the faith also. Their sending church in Antioch will be blessed by the news of what God is achieving elsewhere in the world, knowing that they are part of a greater mission that the Spirit of God is accomplishing within the world and their day.

A question to consider. Where else in the New Testament do we see Paul unpacking the message that he gives to the churches here, that it is through many tribulations that they must enter the kingdom of God?