

# What If? Influence Factor: The Book of Acts

## What If I'm in a Spiritual Battle?

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**Digging Deeper (Questions are on the last page)**

*What If? Influence Factor: The Book of Acts — What If I'm in a Spiritual Battle?*

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### Background Notes

**Key Scripture Text:** Acts 14:1-28

### Introduction

Paul and Barnabas were men of courage and not easily frightened by their opponents. When, some ten years later, Paul wrote to the Philippians, he encouraged them with words drawn from these very early experiences we are studying in Acts 13-14:

<sup>27</sup> Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind **striving side by side** for the faith of the gospel, <sup>28</sup> and **not frightened in anything by your opponents**. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. <sup>29</sup> For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, <sup>30</sup> engaged in the **same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have** (Philippians 1:27-20).

Chased out of Antioch-Pisidia by a coalition of Jewish zealots who turned the aristocracy of the city against them, Paul and Barnabas faithfully proceeded east to Iconium in order to continue preaching the Gospel. Nor was any of this opposition unexpected. We recall the words of the heavenly vision to Ananias in Acts 9, namely, that Saul would "suffer much" for "my name" (9:16), even Jesus as called him to proclaim the Good News to the Gentiles. Repeatedly, the Gospel message encountered strong attacks from the Jewish community, although some Jews embraced its message.

As we noted in the case of Simon Magus (Acts 8), Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12), and Elymas-Barjesus (Acts 13), influential Jewish figures fought the arrival of the new message about Jesus. In his letter to the "Ephesians," Paul spoke about the "struggle, not against flesh and blood, but against the powers of this world...spiritual ones...in high places" (Ephesians 6:10ff). Just as the appearance of Jesus on the banks of the Jordan River was immediately followed by his temptation in the wilderness, so the arrival of Paul and Barnabas in the Gentile world was met by immediate animosity. *Diaspora* Jews were keenly aware of the social pressures from the Hellenistic and pagan worlds on their way of life. Away from mother Jerusalem, they felt like exiles in a foreign land — because they were exactly that! Any movement which seemed to undermine Jewish efforts to maintain Jewish culture and faith outside of Israel, would have been viewed with hostility. Of course, no one knew this better than Paul himself, who, as the Pharisee zealot, Saul of Tarsus, fought the Jesus "Way," traveling long distances (to Damascus, for example), to bring the Christ agitators back to Jerusalem for trial and disposition.

This week's study reveals yet new forms of spiritual conflict. Not only did the Jewish community raise the standard against the Gospel, but also the thoroughly pagan world presented its own problems to the preachers, Paul and Barnabas.

### Outline

1. Mission: Iconium (14:1-6a)
2. Mission: Lystra (14:6b-20)
3. Mission: Derbe and Return (14:21-25)
4. Home to Antioch-Syria (14:26-28)

The structure of this week's reading is fairly simple, following again the geographical tracings of the various missions undertaken by our two travelers. Refer to last week's map for the relative relationship of these various cities to each other and to the larger region/province in which they are located.

## Brief Chronology

The following summary chronology originally appeared in my *Background Notes* for September 13/14, 2008. This gives the reader a better idea of when the events we are studying took place. This week's material is noted by the ►◀ symbols.

	Event	Date (C.E./A.D.)
	Death, Resurrection, <b>Ascension of Jesus, and Spirit at Pentecost</b> (Acts 1-2)	33
	Stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:1ff)	35
	Saul's conversion/commission on the Damascus Road (Acts 9)	35
	Saul in Damascus and Arabia (Acts 9:8-25; Galatians 1:16-17)	35-37
	Saul's first visit to Jerusalem since conversion/commission: Meets Peter and James (Acts 9:26-29; Galatians 1:18-20) ( <b>End of "three years" mentioned in Galatians 1:18</b> )	37
	Saul in Syria (Antioch) and Cilicia (Tarsus) (Acts 9:30; Galatians 1:21)	37
	Saul's trip to Antioch at Barnabas' invitation (Acts 11:25-26)	43
	Saul's second visit to Jerusalem with famine relief: Meets the leadership (Acts 11:30; Galatians 2:1-10)	47
	Saul in Antioch (Acts 12:25-13:1)	47-48
►	<b>Saul/Paul's first missionary journey (Acts 13-14)</b>	<b>48-49</b> ◀
	Paul and Peter meet in Antioch; emissaries from James arrive creating controversy over Gentiles and circumcision (Acts 15:1-3; Galatians 2:11-16) ( <b>End of "fourteen years" mentioned in Galatians 2:1</b> )	49
	The letter to the Galatians written from Antioch	49
	Paul's third visit to Jerusalem: The Jerusalem Council led by James, attended by the leadership along with Paul and Barnabas. Reach agreement and draft a letter to be carried by Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:4-35)	49

## Mission: Iconium (14:1-6a)

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. <sup>2</sup> But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> But the people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews and some with the apostles. <sup>5</sup> When an attempt was made by both Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to mistreat them and to stone them, <sup>6</sup> they learned of it and fled...

Were we to travel throughout the eastern half of modern-day Turkey, we would encounter a city called Konia. This is the site of the biblical Iconium mentioned in this section. It is the easternmost city of the Phrygian portion of the Roman province of Galatica (or Galatia). In the writings of Xenophon (*Anabasis*, i.2.19), we learn that Iconium was a frontier town between Phrygia and Paul's next destination, Lystra, in Lycaonia. Phrygia has a long ancient history, reaching back to the days of the fall of Hittite Empire when Indo-Europeans and Sea Peoples filled the vacuum left by this event. The Romans simply divided up this region, the westernmost area becoming part of the province of Asia (Minor), while the eastern section was incorporated into Galatia. Towns like Antioch-Pisidia and Iconium are sometimes included in the designation "Southern Galatia," and thought to be the recipients, among others, of Paul's letter to the *Galatians*. Continuing references to Phrygia during the Roman period (when the events of *Acts* are taking place), simply underscore the ancient history of the region, and thus carry a *cultural* rather than a *political* significance. Though in the province of Galatia, these residents were still Phrygian at heart.

The mythic past of this region contained the names of Gordias and Midas who were made famous for their "knot" and "touch" respectively! Josephus claimed the Phrygians were founded by the biblical figure Togarmah, grandson of Japheth and son of Gomer. The Phrygians spoke an Indo-European language. The Phrygian language was most likely close to Greek and Thracian. In most cases the Phrygian language used an alphabet originating with the Phoenicians. Although the Phrygians adopted the alphabet originated by the Phoenicians, and several dozen inscriptions in the Phrygian language have been found, they remain untranslated, and so much of what is thought to be known of Phrygia is second-hand information from Greek sources. From Acts 2:10 we know that a Jewish community existed in this region, having some representatives present on the day of Pentecost who heard Peter's sermon and witnessed the unusual events surrounding the giving of the Holy Spirit.

The journey from Antioch-Pisidia to Iconium was slightly less than 100 miles. At the end of his life, Paul referenced this travel log in 2 Timothy 3:11. Most likely, Paul and Barnabas took the *Via Sebaste*, a finely paved road built by the Romans, connecting the main colonies, and accommodating a variety of conveyances. The Gospel missionary was blessed by the timing of God's providence: Roman roads were among the advantages for Christians bringing the Gospel to Gentile soil.

The Greek phrase *kata to auto* tells the reader that Paul and Barnabas followed the "same practice" of going into the Jewish synagogue *first*, as they did in previous cities. Once more a significant Gentile contingent was present and joined with the Jews in a "great number" (*polu plēthos*) of those who believed (*pisteusai*, "to believe"). By contrast, those Jews who *did not believe* (*hoi apeithēsantes*, "the unpersuaded ones"), mounted a campaign against "the brothers" (*kata tōn adelphōn*). Their initial strategy was to "poison their minds," literally (from *ekakōsan tas psuchas*) "do harm to the souls/minds" of the Gentiles. When someone "harms the soul," the net result is to "poison" it against someone or something, thus the metaphorical translation. The notion of "mislead" is also present in the phrase. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul would later make similar charges against the so-called "Judaizers" who sought to plant seeds of doubt in the minds of the converts. These believers in Iconium would have been among this group of Galatians to whom Paul addressed his concerns.

How do Paul and Barnabas respond? Until violence forces a new strategy, they do the following things:

1. Spent considerable time in the city (Greek: *hikanon...chronon*; the adjective implies whatever time would be "adequate" or "required"). Luke uses the Greek word *diatribō* to communicate that they remained where they were.
2. Spoke "boldly for the Lord." The notion of "boldness" is conveyed by *parrēsiazomenoi* which denotes boldness and courage (see 1 Thessalonians 2:2). This quality first appears in connection with Saul immediately after his conversion in 9:27-28. We also find it in 13:36; 18:26; 19:8 and 26:26. It appears at the end of Paul's teaching about spiritual warfare in Ephesians 6:20. In the present context, it occurs in the present tense, suggesting an ongoing and persistent boldness, not easily upset by the opposition lodged against them. What they defend is not *themselves*, but the *Lord* (*kurios*). They are "servants of the Lord" and serve at his pleasure, not at their own. Both men know that the most important quality found in a servant is "faithfulness" (1 Corinthians 4:2).
3. Gave witness to the "message of grace." Literally, Luke writes, *tō logō tēs charitos*, "the word of grace." The emphasis of "grace" is on the idea of the "gift" given by God, though not deserved by the recipient. Within the highly structured institutions of Second Temple Judaism, even in the *diaspora*, "works of law" took precedence. Certainly every observant Jew knew that they required God's grace for salvation. But in order to hold fast their time-honored traditions, they put excessive emphasis on the "markers" which distinguished them from all the other peoples. Grace got lost in the shuffle. However, the Gospel Paul proclaimed restored that emphasis, but also invited criticism from those Jews who supposed that the sort of grace Paul offered would erode the discipline of a well-ordered Jewish life.
4. Performed "signs and wonders." In order to "witness" to something, there must be some concrete evidence for it. The *evidence for grace* takes the form of the familiar "signs and wonders" which appeared early on in Luke's narrative (see Acts 2 for the beginning). Recall that signs (*sēmeia*) refer to meaningful God-sent

events which draw attention to some specific truth about Him: they have "significance" and are not merely pulled from a "bag of tricks." "Wonders" (*teras*) capture the heart and inspire the soul — they literally "move" those who see them.

The consequence of this persistent and faithful ministry was a division in the Iconium community. Luke uses the word *eschisthē* to describe this separation between those who "sided with the Jews" and those who "sided with the apostles." This reminds us of Jesus' words: "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword..." (Matthew 10:24-26). He proceeded to tell his audience that families would be divided because of him (Luke 12:52-53). Later in Acts 23:7 the Jewish community itself would experience a division because of Paul's preaching. The decision to hear and respond to the Gospel is laden with potential conflict, and it will cost the follower of Jesus to make that choice. The verb Luke uses is the basis for our English word "schism," which means "a division." "You cannot serve two masters," Jesus once said. "You cannot serve both God and money." Followers of Jesus soon discovered that their conversions led to isolation and ostracism from the majority community. It often meant they could not keep their jobs or membership in the guilds.

We also observe that this is the *first time* (14:4) that the word "apostles" is applied to Paul and Barnabas, even though, all along, they have acted in ways which fulfill the role of those who have been "sent" (*apostellō*) by the church in Antioch. Normally *apostolos* was reserved for "the Twelve" — the original eyewitnesses of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. However, Paul will freely adopt this term and apply this word to himself, stating that he was "the least of the apostles" (1 Corinthians 15:9), "not worthy to be called an apostle, because he persecuted the church of God." On other occasions, when his role as an apostle was questioned, he rose to his own defense with the words: "Am I not an apostle...Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? (1 Corinthians 9:1-2)." He made clear that he was an apostle by the authority of God, not human beings (Galatians 1:1), and was so "by the will of God" (2 Timothy 1:1). The various ministries Paul performed were often linked together, as in "preacher, apostle, teacher" (2 Timothy 1:11). Still, it seems odd that Luke waits until this point in his narrative to explicitly apply the word to these two men. Perhaps the surrounding atmosphere of opposition and persecution, met with courage, boldness and faithfulness, warranted Luke's application of this honored title to Paul and Barnabas. Had they not shown themselves, through these actions, to be *authentic* apostles indeed!

According to 14:5, there was a *hormē* afoot to stone Paul and his companion. This Greek word actually means "a rushing motion," and figuratively comes to mean an impulse or desire of the will to do something. In James 3:4, the writer applies it to the pilot of a ship who "wants" to turn it this way or that using the rudder. Perhaps our idea of *conspiracy* applies in the present case. The classical writers used it for a violent movement forward, as in an assault, attack or onset of a battle or march. Used of natural things, it referred to the raging of a fire or the shock of a wave. The term seems limited to the *first impulse* but not to the actually fulfillment of the affair. Before the plotters could carry out their intentions, Paul and Barnabas got wind of it and left town. Luke uses the word *kataphugon* from the verb *kataphugō*, "to flee for safety." There is no dishonor in this action, since what they escaped was the first stirrings of a plot against them. Jesus himself quietly avoided an early death by taking steps to simply "slip away" (see Luke 4:28-30 for one example). There was no point of an early martyrdom for our two missionaries — they had much more work to do. Recall the words of Jesus: "Be wise as serpents and harmless as doves" (Matthew 10:16).

### **Mission: Lystra (14:6b-20)**

...fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding country, <sup>7</sup> and there they continued to preach the gospel. Acts 14:8-20 <sup>8</sup> Now at Lystra there was a man sitting who could not use his feet. He was crippled from birth and had never walked. <sup>9</sup> He listened to Paul speaking. And Paul, looking intently at him and seeing that he had faith to be made well, <sup>10</sup> said in a loud voice, "Stand upright on your feet." And he sprang up and began walking. <sup>11</sup> 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!" <sup>12</sup> Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their garments and rushed out into the crowd, crying out, <sup>15</sup> "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. 16 In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. 17 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." 18 Even with these words they scarcely restrained the people from offering sacrifice to them. 19 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. 20 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.

A certain strategic choice followed their departure from Iconium, a border town of Galatia-Phrygia, as previously noted. Luke informs us — and his geography is especially accurate — their arrival in Lystra meant that they had entered a region known as **Lycaonia**, still in Galatia but no longer in Phrygia, located between Iconium and the foothills of the Taurus Mountains. For a time, this might well put them outside the jurisdiction of Phrygian authority. According to 14:11 the residents of this region still spoke their own dialect, though perhaps a form still related to Greek. There is a theory that the name "Lycaonia" is a Greek-adapted version (from a Greek named Lycaon) of an original word, "Lukkawanna," which meant "the land of the Lukka people" in an old Anatolian language related to ancient Hittite. The dialect may also have affinities with ancient Assyrian. Some scholars think the name means "wolf land." Lycaonia is for the most part a dreary plain, bare of trees, destitute of fresh water, and with several salt lakes. It was about 20 miles long from east to west, and 13 miles wide. A certain ethnic and national independence persisted among the people of Lycaonia, perhaps such as we find among the Irish who largely speak English, but whose pride of culture causes them to nurture a love for all things Gaelic, including that language. Coincidentally, the Celts are present in both Galatian and Irish history.

Within Lycaonia, Paul and Barnabas arrive at the city of Lystra. Though located in a distinctly independent region, Lystra, like Antioch-Pisidia, had been made a Roman colony in 6 C.E. by Caesar Augustus. A military road connected both colonies, but was not accessible from Iconium. Some eighteen miles separated them from their previous destination. Choosing a city with the status of a Roman colony was consistent with an emerging missionary strategy: to bring the Gospel to important centers of the Empire. And it proved worthy of the detour.

"They continued to preach the Good News" (14:7). With these words, Luke introduces Paul and Barnabas to their latest mission. The Greek word *kakei*, roughly translated "there also," opens this new phase of their missionary efforts. Nothing changes except the location — this seems to be Luke's point. Same Gospel; different place. And, surprisingly, the same sort of human affliction greeted the two men as met Peter and John in Acts 3.

They encountered a man "weak" (*adunatos*) in his feet who had this condition *chōlos ek koilias mētros autou*, "from his mother's womb." This descriptive phrase parallels exactly what Luke told us about the man Peter and John met on their way to the Temple in Jerusalem (3:2). Moreover, the same words are used to describe Paul's direct gaze at the man and the command to "rise up" (14:10b). We also witness the man's recovery in terms reminiscent of the earlier healing — "jumping and walking." What are we to make of these striking parallels? It has been suggested that Luke, like many Greek historians, delighted in the *patterns of history* — those otherwise hard-to-explain events which, though separated in time and space, yet bear marked resemblance to each other. Such occurrences imply *order, purpose and meaning* within human events. The historian's task is not merely to report the facts in a rote stenographic fashion, recording the "who, what, where" without paying any attention to the "why and the wherefore." As we have noted in previous studies, it's one thing to tell the readers "what happened," but quite another to let them know "what was really *going on*." Looking for significance is also part of the task.

The same God who healed the lame man in Acts 3 extended the same grace and mercy to the afflicted man in Acts 14. It did not matter that one was Jewish and one was Gentile, any more than the conversion of 3000 Jewish worshippers in Acts 2 was more important than the saving of Cornelius' house had been in Acts 10.

"The same God" becomes an important phrase at the outset of the Christian era. Or, as Paul put it in his Roman letter:

29 Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, 30 since God is one. He will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith (Romans 3:29-30).

Ironically, though the pagan Roman cities like Lystra boasted many gods, yet it is in these cities that the Gospel proves trustworthy, healing Gentiles and Jews alike, and proving that, after all, "God is one."

However, that's not how the Lystrans interpreted what happened. Overcome with emotion that flowed from deep within their ancient national soul, they cried out in the Lycaonian language what was already very much a part of their ancient mythology: "The gods have come down to us in human form"(14:11). We have solid evidence that this seemingly impromptu outburst had roots in the distant past.

According to Ovid (43 B.C.E. – 17/18 C.E.), a famous Roman poet, the following event took place. In the hill country of Phrygia, the gods Jupiter (Greek: Zeus) and Mercury (Greek: Hermes) once came disguised as two human beings in search of lodging. This tale, found in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (viii, 626ff), no doubt existed as a local tale and would have been familiar to the residents of Lystra. As the story continues, the two humanly veiled gods are turned away by "a thousand homes" until at last the old couple, Philemon and Bacis, poor in possessions but not in spirit, receive the gods (yet disguised) with all the warmth their meager fare might offer. Mysteriously, their cooking pot remains full and their wine flagons overflowing, a source of gratitude to the kindly couple who offer prayers therewith. As they are about to kill their only goose to feed the gods, the twin deities reveal their identities and explain the calamity about to befall the inhospitable humans who turned the gods away. By contrast, they offer the couple any wish, and the grateful pair replies, "We ask that we may be your priests, and guard your temple; and since we have spent our lives in constant company we pray that the same hour may bring death to both of us — that I may never see my wife's tomb nor be buried by her," a request readily granted. On the rest of the Phrygians, the gods pour out a flood, destroying the inhabitants and raising up a temple in place of the former buildings.

The readers of Luke's account, once aware of this mythological account, can only imagine how the Lystrans interpreted the miracle performed by Paul and Barnabas for the man lame from birth. Seen through the lens of their own religious narrative, the event looked like what *had happened long ago and was now happening once again*. "The gods have come down in human form to us" (Greek: *Hoi theoi homoiōthentes anthrōpois katebēsan pros hēmas*). The old myth just got fresh breath for the Lystrans! How else could they interpret the remarkable healing event? Before we attack the paganism of their response, we might want to consider the strange similarities between the myth and the truth. After all, C.S. Lewis once called the Gospel the Christian myth — but one that just happened to be true! He explained himself in an essay called "Myth Become Fact" which can be found in his collection, *God in the Dock*. The full quotation which bears the weight of his meaning follows here:

The heart of Christianity is a myth which is also a fact. The old myth of the Dying God, without ceasing to be myth, comes down from the heaven of legend and imagination to the earth of history. It happens — at a particular date, in a particular place, followed by definable historical consequences. We pass from a Balder or an Osiris, dying nobody knows when or where, to a historical Person crucified (it is all in order) under Pontius Pilate. By becoming fact it does not cease to be myth: that is the miracle.<sup>1</sup>

That is, evidently, the way this played out for Paul, Barnabas, the cured lame man and his fellow Lystrans. Seizing upon the similarity, the townsfolk want to honor the gods who have come down, while, all along, Paul and his companion want to preach the Good News about the true God who *actually did come down* in the form and likeness of human beings so that he might deliver them from death into life. It is especially intriguing to note that the words "likeness of human beings" come from the same Greek roots as can be found in Philippians 2:7-8 and which describe the incarnation of Jesus, God's son, as a human being.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, "Myth Become Fact," in *God in the Dock*, Grand Rapids, 1970, pp.66-67.

<sup>2</sup> Perhaps a brief clarification about the word "myth" is in order. We tend to associate this term with something that is *made-up* or *untrue*; a *fiction*. While most myths might well turn out to be invented, that interpretation misses the point of the Greek term *mythos*.

Sometimes the only presence of divinity others see is other human beings full of the presence of God. Not knowing what to do with Paul and Barnabas, the residents of Lystra declare Paul to be Hermes (Roman: Mercury) and Barnabas to be Zeus (Roman: Jupiter). Since Hermes was the messenger of Zeus, it stood to reason that Paul the speaker should be accorded the honor of his name, while silent Zeus stood by, older and perhaps appearing commandingly wiser. If the old myth had any currency (and it surely seemed to), we are not surprised to find the "priest of Zeus" showing up and wanting to fulfill his end of the ancient promise made by the grateful couple of Ovid's tale. In brief, the old, old story had come alive and everybody who had a stake in it within Lystran society wanted to do their part. "Offer sacrifices to them..." The honor being proffered to the two missionaries verged on idolatry within Jewish belief. "One God...no worship of any but Him..." That was the heart of the Hebrew faith and these pagan hosts, filled with wonder at the otherwise unexplainable healing, overstepped it by a mile!

"Tearing their clothes..." within Jewish society marked mourning but also horror in the face of blasphemy (see Mark 14:63). This response stands in stark contrast to the actions of Herod Agrippa I whom we studied in Acts 12. He was more than willing to be called "a god" (12:22-23), but paid a high price for accepting such accolades from his flattering subjects from Tyre and Sidon. Not so with the apostles. Knowing that they themselves were only human beings just like their hosts (14:15), they scold the Lystrans for treating them as something more. Luke uses the Greek word *homoioipatheis* ("like feelings") to express the apostles' sentiments, and does so to contrast with the earlier adoration of the two by the Lystrans when they used the word *homoiothentes* ("like divine beings") to assert their divinity.

Following the apostles' protest, perhaps taking the form of an *exordium* (the *introduction* rhetoric) in their subsequent speech, they proceed to explain to the people of Lystra the nature of true belief. That account is given in 14:15b-17. Several key points are put forth:

1. We are bringing you Good News.
2. Turn from these worthless religious practices and serve the Living God.
3. The true God made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them.
4. This God has overlooked the private ways of the nations.
5. This God has given a clear witness of Himself through His kind providence:
  - a. Rain from heaven
  - b. Crops in season
  - c. Sufficient food
  - d. Hearts of joy

Did Paul and Barnabas ever get their opportunity to "flesh out the Good News"? Certainly what they *did* communicate had the foreshadowing of that Good News: something we call in theology, *Common Grace*. Later, in the Greek city of Athens (Acts 17), Paul would communicate similar ideas, suggesting that "God is not far from everyone of us" (17:27). He would also remind the Romans that "God can be known from what He has made," assuming those who see His creation do not worship it (Romans 1:19ff).

The Creator God, singular in His being and gracious in His dealings with his creation, remained for Paul the centerpiece of his preaching. The Good News begins with this affirmation. It continues with the truth that God is willing to forgive the sins of ignorant Gentiles who had not been blessed with further revelation — the sort of revelation treasured by a Jew like Paul. Unlike classical theology which usually divides revelation into two compartments — natural and special — Paul knew only One God and One Revelation of Himself. God was the gracious Creator and the merciful provider. And, as Paul states so beautifully in his final affirmation, God has a

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The word itself means "story" or "narrative," and might well contain more than a kernel of truth within in. To the ancients, telling such stories gave them access to the reality behind everything they experienced. When no satisfying reason could explain an unusual event, the telling of a story would frequently do the trick. In the case of the Lystrans, they were incredulous toward the healing of the lame man but quick to retrieve the *myth*, that is, *the story* in an effort to make sense out of the unusual miracle.

single goal: to reach the human heart and fill it with His joy! That's not so far from the question and answer of the familiar catechism: "What is the chief end of man? To glorify God and to enjoy Him forever!"

At this, the crowds become more intense in their determination to sacrifice to their honored guests. How might this story have ended differently? As it is, it ended abruptly, not because the overwhelmed Lystrans did anything *on their own*, but because the spiritual battle arrived at their doorsteps from Antioch-Pisidia. In the days before cell phones and email, news traveled remarkably well, following well-paved Roman roads and using a postal system perfected by the ancient Persians. "Then some Jews came from Antioch(-Pisidia) and Iconium and won the crowd over."

That seems hard to imagine. One minute Paul is a messenger god, the next a fallen form beneath the weight of his accusers well-thrown stones. A deeper and darker reality fills the Lycaonian air of Lystra. It's not suppose to be pagan. It's not suppose to bring death and destruction in its wake. Yet Israel's darker side turns its face toward the messengers of God's Good News. The arrival of the Jews from cities Paul and Barnabas had recently fled suggests something of a conspiracy, but not one concocted in careful ways by the Jerusalem high priest. This opposition appears driven in much the same way as cells of terrorists in our post-modern world. Operating without central command, they are prepared to attack *on their own*. They belong to "the rulers of the darkness of this world," guided by "spiritual wickedness in high places" (see once more Ephesians 6:10ff). And their target is the spearhead of the Good News, the advance guard of God's kingdom to the Gentiles: Paul, apostle of Jesus Christ, set apart for the Gospel of God (see Romans 1:1ff).

"They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead" (14:19). In his choice of Greek words, Luke writes: *nomizontes auton tethēkenai*, using the present tense form of the verb *nomizō*. The word means "to regard something as presumably true, but without particular certainty; to suppose, to presume, to assume, to imagine, to believe, to think." The verb "to be dead" is the perfect form of *thnēskō*, suggesting that the death of Paul was an accomplished fact with continuing results. Ironically, the verb to "know" is less certain in its confidence than the verb "to be dead." Though less certain, it is continuing in its acceptance. In some ways, the crowds supposition about the death of Paul was as tentative and fragile as their faith in many other things — such as the idea that Zeus and Hermes had come down in human form as Paul and Barnabas. Had not that supposed *fact* fallen flat in the face of the messengers from Antioch-Pisidia? How quickly do fickle beliefs of human beings yield to the harsh realities of human life. Although the supposed "truth" brought by the Jewish instigators was no more "true" than the silly mythology of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, one thing the Lystrans could not soon forget, once the dust settled and the strangers left their midst: a man lame from his mother's womb remained well in their midst.

Indeed, "God does not leave Himself without a witness" (14:17), but this time in a way more profound and personal than rain from heaven or fruitful crops. Should all of Lystra turn its hands against Paul and beat him into the ground, yet one man remained standing, walking and jumping in their city, and in his healing resonated the Good News Paul had a chance only to partially proclaim that day. The lame man made whole would be God's new witness in Lystra.

Fortunately, Paul was not dead. And, it seems, he was never stoned again! In his second letter to the Corinthians (11:25) he informs us that, among his many trials, he was "stoned once" (Greek: *hapax elithasthēn*). Presumably, he ought to know! Furthermore, he ought to know who his friends were also. Lying in the posture of death, pummeled by stones thrown by an erratic mob, he was surrounded by those whom Luke calls "the disciples" (14:20). Perhaps the man-once-lame was not alone after all, in a city where religious loyalties change like the Galatian winds blowing atop the Taurus range. What could be more amazing: a lame man walking or a dead man rising? That's the heart of the Gospel, of course, and it gains strength as the disciples "gathered around" Paul. The construction of the Greek phrase containing the verb *kukloō*, "to surround, encircle," is a genitive absolute and it supplies the *reason* for Paul's unexpected rising up.

Was Paul actually dead? That is a perplexing question. If we rely on Paul's rather comprehensive catalogue of personal sufferings in 2 Corinthians 11:23-33, we have no evidence that he died in Lystra, though in 11:23 he tells his readers he was "exposed to death again and again." Then we have the mysterious passage in 2 Corinthians 12:1-10 where Paul speaks in third-person terms about "a man in Christ" who was taken up into the third heaven where he saw things he was forbidden to speak about. But he shows uncertainty about his physical state: "In the body? Don't know! Out of the body? Don't know!" Certainly his experience described there looks a great deal like an "out of the body" occurrence, but even Paul did not know for certain that it was. Might this have been what happened to him in Lystra? The timetable he offers in 12:2 ("fourteen years ago") poses problems for this theory if we accept a date of 56/57 C.E. for the writing of 2 Corinthians, since the first missionary journey likely falls between 48 and 49 C.E. Fourteen years prior to 57 C.E. would place Paul's mysterious vision close to 43 C.E., simply too early for the Lystra event. So, did Paul die in Lystra? Probably not, but he was seriously injured and some manuscript variants suggest that when he "got up," he did so with difficulty.

None of this speculation must detract from the wonderful picture Luke paints of Christian community encircling Paul in his desperate need, and the miraculous recovery which followed. Healing flourishes in the context of caring community. Without fanfare, the narrative informs us that Paul and Barnabas returned to the city and, seemingly, left for the city of Derbe *without further incident*. We are left with many questions. Did the Jewish instigators simply evaporate after the presumed death of Paul? Did the Lystrans change their mind about Paul? Was there further opportunity to preach the Gospel *in full* before leaving for Derbe?

Some of these perplexities find solutions in the next few verses, as we shall now see.

### **Mission: Derbe and Return (14:21-25)**

Little Derbe gets short shrift in Luke's treatment (14:20-21a), but what he tells us is as off the beaten path as the town itself! Good News is preached, large numbers of disciples are won and the two apostles leave. Add to these concise assertions the simple fact that the location of Derbe is debated and doubtful. The one theory places it about three miles north of modern-day Karaman, Turkey. Another, some thirty miles southeast of Lystra. It was not located on the main Roman road, and so provided a suitable "escape" from the Lystran tumults. Derbe was, by all accounts, a little town with no significant history. Yet, in spite of its scant fame, Derbe bore much fruit for the Gospel.

After Derbe...then what? Perhaps the most telling clause in Luke's account is 14:21b, "Then they returned..." Which is more amazing: that Paul got up after his stoning, or that he and Barnabas returned to the very cities where they confronted the most strident opposition? "Then they returned..." from *hupostrephō*, commonly used of travelers simply "going back home." In the case of the two apostles, their *return* entailed retracing their journey, stopping in Lystra, Iconium, Antioch-Pisidia, and Perga. Nothing is said about Cyprus, presumably because the two set sail from the key port of Attalia in order to arrive in Antioch-Syria as soon as possible.

What did Paul and Barnabas do during their re-visits? Luke supplies key information:

1. **They strengthened the disciples.** The underlying Greek word for "strengthen" is *epistērizō* which means "to make to lean on." That is, the new disciples are taught to lean on the Lord for their strength. One of the Hebrew words for "believe or trust" uses this metaphor of leaning on a walking stick or other support. "Do not lean on your own understanding...trust in the Lord with all your heart...in all your ways acknowledge the Lord..." are words from Proverbs 3:5-6, and no doubt formed the foundation for what Paul and his companion told the new converts in the cities they revisited. The ever-present pressures of both the pagan culture and the Jewish instigators would require diligence from these new Christians. We are inclined to make the equation between "strengthen" and "fortify" — a more military expression consistent with the "battle" in which the Christ followers are engaged.
2. **They encouraged them to remain true to the faith.** There were huge temptations to defect, faced with the pressures noted above. As Paul would later reveal in his letter to these Galatians, some would defect

or nearly do so (refer to my *Background Notes on Galatians* in their September/October 2008 editions). The Greek word for "encourage" is *parakaleō* which we have encountered before. It combines the meanings of "call to aid, summon to attend when under trial" with "comfort, console, cheer" as well as with "exhort, require." This range of meanings implies both a heart-felt support of another person who is in need, along with placing responsibility on that person. In this instance, the emphasis falls on the requirement that the new disciples "remain true to the faith." The apostles have in mind "remaining true" in the sense of being "faithful." Luke uses the Greek word *emmenō* in this regard, taking the root word "to remain or abide" and intensifying its meaning with a variant form of the preposition *en*. That is, remain "in" or abide "in" their present faith commitment to be the followers of Jesus Christ. Faith involves commitment.

3. **They taught this principle: "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God."** We cannot help but admire the honesty of the apostles in portraying the future. Our present-day churches and their leaders could well learn a lesson or two about "telling the truth" to their new converts. There is no sugar-coating of the Gospel and no false images of being a Christ follower. It was not about "health and wealth" or "come to Jesus to find the happy life." Christianity has never been about success, personal fulfillment or freedom from trouble. Anyone who presents it that way is side-stepping the realities of the cross.
4. **They appointed elders in each city.** As I. H. Marshall observes, "This is the first reference to elders outside the church at Jerusalem."<sup>3</sup> Appointing such leaders continues in the Gentile mission: Ephesus (Acts 20:17); the churches referenced in Paul's pastoral letters (1 Timothy 5:17; Titus 1:5); James (5:14); and Peter (1 Peter 5:1, 5). The term *presbuteroi* ("elders") does not appear in Paul's earlier letters, but he uses other terms to express the same meaning (see 1 Corinthians 16:15f; Philippians 1:1; 1 Thessalonians 5:12f).
5. **They prayed and fasted as they committed each disciple to the Lord in whom they placed their trust.** Knowing that they would soon leave their catechumens behind, Paul and Barnabas devote themselves to "prayer and fasting," fully aware that the dangers, temptations and attacks of Satan awaited their young converts. As Jesus counseled his disciples concerning spiritual warfare with especially vigorous demonic opponents: "These are cast out only by prayer and fasting" (see Mark 9:28-29; we are inclined to accept the reading of those Greek manuscripts which add *kai nēsteia*, "and fasting..." which has the support of a number of ancient witnesses, including *p45*). The act of "committing each disciple" strongly implies placing someone into the care of another for their protection. The object of this special act of "committal" is clearly the elders themselves. As leaders of the new movement, they will become targets, just as the Twelve had been singled out, first by the high priest in Jerusalem, then later by Herod Agrippa I. "Jesus is Lord," they no doubt pronounced over each elder, seeking the Lord's anointing and his watchcare.

Large crowds tell an insufficient story of the apostles' work in these cities of southern Galatia. What mattered to them during their reprise was the spiritual health and well-being of those who had become disciples of Jesus. Nor could they count on the synagogues to support or nurture the growing Christian communities. Most telling in this regard is the appointment of "elders," or *presbuteroi* "in each city." This word suggests that an alternative community — separate and apart from the synagogue, but with similar structures — had arisen on Gentile soil in Galatia. The Jewish *diaspora* networks dogged the work of the apostles in nearly every population center they preached the Gospel. In spite of this, they offered a *bona fide* invitation to the "Jew first," without omitting "...and also to the Gentiles."

At the center of the five main apostolic activities was the sobering truism about "hardship" as people enter the kingdom of God. The Greek idea *thlipsis* suggests the sort of hardship created by social pressure, affliction and distress. Based on the verb *thlibō*, it implies "pressure" or "straits." Tribulation is also intended by the term. Christian theology took over the concept of "the Messianic woes" which accompanied the arrival of God's new

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<sup>3</sup> Marshall, p. 241.

kingdom. Jesus himself passed through these woes when he went to the cross, but his followers expected to share his sufferings if they remained faithful to him. In Biblical terms, the so-called "Great Tribulation" extends from the first coming of Jesus to his second coming, becoming more intense near that latter event. Revelation 12 depicts God's people as a "hunted woman" driven into the wilderness until she finds her way to glory at the end of the age. The account of her persecution at the hands of Satan's agents fills the pages of *Revelation*. In this world, followers of Jesus are *the church militant*, while at the second coming they become *the church triumphant*. The sort of tribulations Paul and Barnabas described point to the *battle* in which we find ourselves, even now.

A certain realism marked the kind of discipleship the two apostles practiced among their fledgling churches. The appointment of competent leadership was both practical and spiritual in nature. No authorization from either Antioch-Syria or Jerusalem was required in order to install these new leaders. Having commissioned Paul and Barnabas, the church at Antioch-Syria entrusted the *manner of their ministry* to these Spirit-filled men.

### Home to Antioch-Syria (14:26-28)

What did homecoming mean for the two apostles? Luke sketches the significance of their return:

1. **Returning to the place where they had been committed to the grace of God.** Antioch-Syria originally sent Paul and Barnabas *at the initiative of the Holy Spirit*. This is part of the meaning in the expression "committed to the grace of God." The Greek word for "committed" is *paradidōmi*, "to hand over to or to convey something to someone, particularly a right or an authority; to give over, to hand over" (Louw-Nida, 57.77). The grace of God had the role of a supreme authority to which the Antioch church, Paul and Barnabas submitted themselves. This also implies that Antioch placed the two apostles into "the *care* of God." The biblical idea of "grace" includes God's favor, freely given but undeserved. Antioch released its missionaries from its own authority and placed them into the hands of God. This brings us to the question of outcomes: how things turned out for them. "May it go well with you" would have been an appropriate benediction for Paul and Barnabas as they left Antioch. Now they are returning to the place where they had been released into the favor of God; now they will report how things went for them and for the Gospel.
2. **The work they fulfilled.** Luke hints at the nature of their report by making this statement. God's grace was, in the final analysis, "for the work" (Greek: *ergon*), the achievement of their mission. The Greek word simply suggests "that which is done." What had they gone forth to accomplish? Their mission was to bring the Good News to the Gentiles, a work for which their lives had been gradually shaped until they set sail. We are told that work was "fulfilled," and the aorist tense of the verb *plēroō* implies a decisive action in the past. Put simply: they *did* what they set out to *do*. Some years later, Paul would counsel young Timothy: "As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, *do the work* of an evangelist, *fulfill* your ministry" (2 Timothy 4:5). Similarly, to the Thessalonian Christians, "With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may *fulfill* every good purpose of yours and every *act* prompted by your faith" (2 Thessalonians 1:11).
3. **They gathered the church together.** The underlying Greek of this clause combines the idea of "synagogue" and that of "church." Luke wrote: *sunagagontes tēn ekklēsian*. Taken together, the Christ community in Antioch were both "gathered *together*" and "called *out from*." Paul and Barnabas affirm this distinct identity as they make their report. The early Christian community operated in a united fashion, and the two missionaries recognized their responsibility to inform the "sending community" about what had been achieved on their first missionary journey. Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, makes quite clear that he took seriously his relationship to all dimensions of the church's leadership, while reaffirming his belief that it had been Jesus himself who commissioned him for his work (see Galatians 1-2).
4. **They declared what God had done with them.** Their "report" takes the form of an official "announcement." Luke uses the verb form *anaggellō* to communicate this idea. This verb shares a root with the word "to preach the Gospel" (*euaggelizō*). What Paul and Barnabas told their home church was not just "here's what happened," but instead proclaimed authoritatively *what God had done*, using the prepositional phrase "with them" (*met' aoutōn*). We expect to see the preposition "through" or "in" or "for" in this context. F.F. Bruce thinks *meta* ("with") implies that they were God's "co-workers," and he cites 2

Corinthians 6:1 in support of this reading.<sup>4</sup> God's work preceded that of Paul and Barnabas, preparing hearts, shaping cultures, sending rain from heaven, and bringing joy to hearts — something Paul told his Lystran audience. The work of evangelism and discipleship has been a cooperative effort, as Paul would tell his Corinthian audience:

"I planted, Apollos watered, but **God gave** the growth. 7 So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only **God who gives** the growth. 8 He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. 9 For we are **God's fellow workers**. You are God's field, God's building. 10 According to **the grace of God given to me**, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. 11 For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 3:6-11).

5. **God opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.** As Dunn points out, this is a favorite metaphor for Paul (see 1 Corinthians 16:9; 2 Corinthians 2:12; Colossians 4:3). The opening and closing of "doors" are common ways of speaking about access to God. The word "door" derives from the Greek *thura* which can also mean "gate." The famous text in Revelation 3:20 depicts Christ "standing at the door" of his own church, seeking entrance. Heaven and earth are connected by a symbolic door which is sometimes "opened" heavenward (see Revelation 4; also, Psalm 78:23). The "house of the Lord," whether the Tabernacle or the Temple, had doors which restricted or granted access to the presence of Yahweh (see 1 Samuel 3:15; 2 Chronicles 29:3). Luke writes about prison doors being opened (Acts 5:19, 23; 16:26-27). With respect to the Gentiles, we know that Judaism drew sharp boundaries around Temple access, granting permission for Gentile observers in the "court of the Gentiles," but not full participation unless the worshipper had been circumcised and fulfilled all the requirements under Torah. But now, through the Gospel, Gentiles had been granted full access, the "wall of separation" having been torn down (another metaphor communicating a similar idea, Ephesians 2:14). An open door "of faith" is the way Paul and Barnabas describe this fresh work of God among the nations. As noted earlier, "faith" has to do with covenant trust and participation, not merely with "believing something" in an intellectual sense. Abraham was granted a favorable verdict before God because of his demonstrative trust in what God had promised him (see Romans 4:3; Galatians 3:6; James 2:23). Faithful Abraham operated within a covenant of grace, and, according to Paul and Barnabas, the Gentiles have been granted the same favorable verdict on the same grounds — saving faith — thereby receiving full standing among the people of God.

Having announced the Good News about the Good News, Paul and Barnabas remain among the Antioch Christians for an extended period of time until they would need to gather with their counterparts in Jerusalem to clarify further the implications of the Gentile mission. As noted in our last study, new ground had been broken through the first missionary journey. The visions of both Peter and Paul were being put to the crucial test "on the ground" in places like Antioch-Pisidia and Lystra. The initial results prove impressive, though beset by opposition from the Jewish community in each locale. Pressures continue to assail the efforts of preaching this law-free Gospel to new people groups. Undaunted, our missionary pair remain committed to the commission as well as to the community who sent them.

## Closing Comments

The completion of our two-week study of Acts 13-14, the first missionary journey of Paul (and Barnabas), leaves us a bit out of breath. A great deal happened in a comparatively short period of time, scarcely a year if our estimates and examination of the chronological data are correct. Faced with numerous trials, the missionary pair can finally report outcomes that boggle the mind. Roger Greenway in his essay, "Success in the City: Paul's Urban Mission Strategy,"<sup>5</sup> poses the question, "Enough Time to Plant a Church?" And he offers some likely answers which converge on the larger issue of reaching the cities for Christ.

One misconception might mislead the reader of these fast-paced chapters of *Acts*: that *all Jews* opposed the new movement. I would argue (as does Greenway) that had that been the case, the task of founding new Christian

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<sup>4</sup> Bruce, p. 286-287.

<sup>5</sup> *Mission in Acts*, edited by Robert L. Gallagher and Paul Hertig, Orbis Books, 2004, pp.183-195.

communities in the Roman Empire would have been much more protracted. The pagan population outside the synagogue community (and that not include the *God-fearing Gentiles*) was largely ignorant of the Hebrew Scriptures. True, versions of the Hebrew Bible in Greek existed in the form of the *Septuagint* (LXX), but without the printing press, most audiences relied on public readings to hear and understand the message of Torah. Synagogues were absolutely essential to this task, and the Christian student of *Acts* must firmly keep that fact in mind. We noted in the present study of Acts 14 that substantial numbers of both Jews and Gentiles believed the message of Paul and Barnabas. These people groups formed a vital nucleus for the fledgling congregations in major urban centers like Iconium, Antioch-Pisidia and Lystra. Somebody in those new churches needed to know the Hebrew Bible well enough so that they could teach and exhort the less informed Gentile converts. That was part of Paul's urban strategy: to make sure that a sufficiently grounded core-group of Jewish believers and God-fearing Gentiles led the new Messianic congregations.

While it might seem futile for Paul and Barnabas to continue their practice of "to the Jew first and also to the Gentile," we must remember that even *one or two well-educated Jews* who accepted the Gospel were an absolutely invaluable component for starting new churches. They were trained in Scripture, liturgy, social support systems, community life, and public speaking. Richard R. De Ridder has written:

The Synagogue represented for Israel an entirely unprecedented form of religious activity: the popular worship of God, without sacrifice, and the instruction of the community in the implications of Scripture as applied to living according to Yahweh's will. The wonderful jewel Israel possessed might not be wrapped in a napkin, hidden and buried, but needed to be displayed, offered to all to see and share. The Synagogue provided a means to that end.<sup>6</sup>

The key beliefs of Judaism were no secret to the Gentile world around the Synagogue:

1. One true Creator God who alone should be worshipped.
2. Idolatry and immorality offend God's law.
3. Torah is the sacred book and source of God's revelation, to be read and obeyed by Jew and Gentile alike.
4. The virtues of justice, truth and mercy lie at the center of the Jewish ethic.
5. Membership in the Jewish community requires circumcision and Sabbath-keeping.

Since the *diaspora* had placed Jewish people *out among the nations*, God had already planted His seed of the Word in strategic places long before Paul and Barnabas arrived in Phrygia and Lycaonia. And of course both men knew this, since they both belonged to such communities from birth. The problem with Judaism was its insistence on the "boundary markers" which separated them from the rest of the world. We know the Jewish people wanted Gentiles to convert to Judaism, but the membership requirements included elements which kept more people out than brought them in. What Paul and Barnabas preached was the Good News that the God of Israel had at last returned to Zion in the person of His son, Jesus of Nazareth. Through his death and resurrection, release from Israel's sins was freely proclaimed by the apostles. More recently, God revealed that Israel's newly acquire blessings of the Messiah were to be shared with the whole world: Israel was once more to become a light to the nations. However, Second Temple Judaism had proven recalcitrant in accepting this message, and engaged in heavy-handed measures to destroy the church of Jesus Christ. Even in the *diaspora* those efforts were evident. Still, none of these obstructions minimized the importance of having a Jewish presence through the Synagogue on Gentile soil.

Therefore, as Paul and Barnabas traveled, they seize the opportunity to *re-purpose* the synagogue idea and *re-incorporate* it in the free-standing Christian communities or churches. Ideally, they would loved to have seen whole synagogues respond favorably and accept the message of Jesus as their Messiah. That did not happen — at least for the most part.

The strategy of the apostles within the great struggle for the kingdom of God — the battleground of the whole world — had a number of key elements, some of which we have observed in this week's study. We mention them in summary form, acknowledging their importance in Greenway's essay:

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<sup>6</sup> De Ridder, *Discipling the Nations*, Baker Books, 1979, p. 77.

1. **They aimed at making converts.** They did not shy away from the notion of conversion. People needed to undergo real spiritual transformation, and the Gospel offered the royal announcement that Jesus was the Way for that to happen. "Repent and believe the Good News" remained the hallmark of preaching, even in the Gentile world. However, conversion of this kind was a strange idea in the ancient world.<sup>7</sup> Why? 1) Gentiles didn't correlate belief with worship. Offering the proper sacrifices at the temple of the god or goddess mattered more than believing in their existence. 2) The pagans didn't see ethics as part of religion. How a person behaved was divorced from their devotion to a certain deity. 3) Devotees to the gods were not exclusive in their loyalty, whereas the call to follow Jesus meant that if he is Lord, no other being can be. As Michael Green remarks, "Christian conversion was a new and unique thing in the ancient world; humbling, dynamic, stark."<sup>8</sup>
2. **They maintained a compassionate *meta-narrative* in their presentation of the Gospel.** This was especially important in places like Lystra which had narratives of their own, such as the gods coming down as human beings. Carefully, the apostles found ways of re-writing the old pagan narrative so that it finally connected with the new one. What were the key elements of this new story? 1) They preached a person; 2) they proclaimed a gift; 3) they looked for a response.<sup>9</sup>
3. **They endured persecution.** A moving passage from 2 Timothy 3:10-11 encapsulates much of what we have studied in Acts 14: "You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, 11 my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra- which persecutions I endured; yet from them all the Lord rescued me. 12 Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted..." (2 Timothy 3:10-12).
4. **They started and organized churches.** While structures should never be the main focus, they are vital for the effective conservation of discipleship. People need to be part of a community where someone cares about their spiritual well-being. That is why Paul and Barnabas ordained elders in their churches. Thanks to the model of the synagogue, many of the elements of worship and education had been refined and proven — even within the Gentile urban setting. The apostles and those who followed them proceeded to adapt and elaborate those older forms into newer contexts.

With the end of the first missionary journey, the Gospel beachhead in the Gentile world had been established. Anchored first in Antioch-Syria, the Jewish-Gentile community found beautiful expression in the lives and words of Paul and Barnabas, led by the Holy Spirit "to the regions beyond." The islands of the sea (Cyprus) and the highlands of the Taurus Mountains both heard the Good News that Jesus is Messiah and Lord of the world. For Saul/Paul of Tarsus fresh ground was beneath his feet, though the preparation of his whole life brought him to this precise moment in sacred history. How brightly would "the light of the world" shine when its enemies assailed its messengers from both Jerusalem and Rome in the near future? Would the beachhead withstand the battleground? Would the center hold? History is our witness: it *did*, and it *will*. For "...the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:16-18).

Glory to God! Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Green, in his *Evangelism in the Early Church*, (Eerdmans, 2003 [1970]) has an excellent chapter on "Conversion" (pp.203-233) which explains in more detail a number of points we are making here.

<sup>8</sup> Green, p. 208.

<sup>9</sup> Green, pp. 211-213.

**Digger Deeper:** *What If? Influence Factor: The Book of Acts — What If I'm in a Spiritual Battle?*  
(Bob Brown)

To gain a deeper understanding of *What If? Influence Factor: The Book of Acts — What I'm in a Spiritual Battle?*, carefully read the selected passages below. To aid you in your study, we invite you to visit the website <http://notes.chicagofirstnaz.org>, or pick up a copy of the *Background Notes* at the **Information** desk, or from your ABF leader. Now consider the following questions, as you ask the Lord to teach you.

1. As you read Acts 14, note the main section divisions and put together a simple outline with all the key points labeled.
2. What familiar strategy do Paul and Barnabas follow as they begin their ministry in Iconium? What were the outcomes in this particular case?
3. How did the two missionaries respond to the opposition they faced at Iconium? How did God "back them up" in their efforts? From what did they eventually escape? How do you feel about their "fleeing" from persecution?
4. Arriving in Lystra, what opportunity presented itself? Compare this encounter with Acts 3 and note the similarities and differences. Why do you think Luke presents the healing of the lame man as he does, in light of Acts 3?
5. What reaction follows the healing, and what does it tell us about the pagan view of the world? In what ways did the Lystrans false belief prepare them for the true one? Who was Zeus and Hermes in the Greek pantheon? Refer to a dictionary or online resources for further information.
6. How do Paul and Barnabas respond to the actions of the people and of the priest?
7. As you read Paul's sermon in 14:15-17, list his main points and suggest the reason he makes each one. How important is his closing statement that God "fills your hearts with joy" (14:17)? In what way might Paul build on that affirmation in more fully preaching the Gospel?
8. Who interrupts Paul and Barnabas in their efforts to steer the Lystrans toward the truth? Does this surprise you?
9. What is the immediate outcome of the opposition raised in 14:19-20? What happens to Paul and how is God's grace seen in these battleground circumstances?
10. "Disciples" are mentioned in 14:20. What does their presence in this setting tell us about the achievements of Paul and Barnabas in Lystra? What happens because they "surround" Paul?
11. Following the Lystra incident, what do Paul and Barnabas do next? Briefly list the events which follow in 14:21-25.
12. What important steps do the apostles take as they re-visit each community where they previously preached the Gospel? Be specific about their methods and the strategy they followed, listing each one.
13. Read 14:22 and comment on the realism contained in that verse. How should this statement shape our approach to reaching the lost in a hostile world? Also read 2 Corinthians 11:23-33 and 2 Timothy 3:10-11.
14. When the two apostles return to Antioch-Syria, what do they tell the church which sent them on their first mission to the Gentiles? How important was their "return" to the home church? To them? Who gets the credit for their achievements?
15. What does Luke mean when he writes about how God "opened the door of faith to the Gentiles"? In what ways does God "open doors" in our witness to the world around us? Why is this a fitting figure of speech?