

THE TRUTH

Acts 14:11-23

Let's assume we turned on the TV and the program we expected to see was being interrupted by a late-breaking news alert. There was a report about a strange greenish light that was seen in the sky and some people saw something land in an open field near the airport. Camera crews from the local TV stations were starting to show a fairly flat glowing round object about thirty feet in diameter on the ground with strange noises coming from it. What is the first thing that pops into your mind about what is going on?

It would not be surprising if we thought about "flying saucers" or "space aliens" or even "ufos." We have heard about such things for decades and movies such as Star Wars have added to the idea of such a possibility happening. The point is that "whatever we see is interpreted in light of our beliefs and our past experiences."

The church was given an assignment (commission) to go into all the world and make disciples of all nations starting in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. What the early apostles and other believers found was that what they did in Jerusalem to share the gospel was a lot different from what would be needed in a Gentile metropolis such as Athens and still different from what would be needed in a medium sized town in Asia Minor that was off the well-traveled roads of the world at that time. The back ground of the people and their beliefs were different in these various areas and different approaches were needed to effectively share the good news and make disciples.

When Paul and Barnabas were visiting cities and towns on the missionary trip that started in Antioch of Syria they took a ship to Cypress and arrived at Salamis. They then move to Paphos on the western side of Cypress. There they encountered an official of the island who wanted to know what they were teaching. They received some opposition from a sorcerer who was an advisor to the official. Paul rebuked this character and told him that he would be blinded because he opposed what God was doing through Paul and Barnabas. This demonstration of divine power gave credibility to the message in the mind of the official and he believed the gospel message.

The next stop was Antioch of Pisidia where Paul and Barnabas shared the message with a group of Jews and Gentiles who were either proselytes (or studying to be) and were familiar with the Law and the Prophets. The first meeting was successful in that many wanted to hear more. The second meeting did not go as smoothly as the previous one in that many of the Jews were angry that so many of the Gentiles (who were not proselytes) were getting the good news of God's salvation which they apparently thought was for them (and their converts) only.

At Iconium those they encountered in the synagogue were both Jews and Hellenists (Heathen) Gentiles. Many believed and there were signs and wonders happening there. As in previous times, opposition arose and they left that area.

The next opportunity to share the message of the gospel came at the town of Lystra. Apparently, there was not a large Jewish community there in that Paul and Barnabas did not go first to the synagogue to proclaim their message. Since there was no synagogue, Paul went to where the people were which was probably in the marketplace and began preaching. This situation was totally different from the previous five opportunities they had to share the gospel,

Paul was proclaiming the message of salvation by God's grace through faith and people gather around to hear. You can imagine how it must have been, with such a crowd milling around, some just halfway listening and others just ignoring what was happening. However,

Paul's attention was drawn to one individual in the crowd that was listening intently to what he was saying. This man could not walk and never had walked because he had a birth defect. The defect is not described, but was something for which they had no known cure in that day.

As Paul observed the man, he noticed something about him, which Luke describes as "faith." Many times, when you are talking to people you can tell how they are responding to what you say. If they are doubting what you say or if they believe what you say, you can usually tell. Paul sensed that this person was believing the message. So, he did something very bold in that he stopped his preaching and called out to the man telling him to stand up. Then the amazing happened. The man jumped up and walked around.

Misdirected Worship – 14:11-13

¹¹ When the crowds saw what Paul had done, they raised their voice, saying in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have become like men and have come down to us." ¹² And they *began* calling Barnabas, Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. ¹³ The priest of Zeus, whose *temple* was just outside the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates, and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds. Acts 14:11-13 (NASB95)

Instant healing of a person who was not able to walk because of a birth defect got everybody's attention. The people had never seen anything such as this before. They had never witnessed obvious supernatural power happening at the word of a person. To them, the only obvious conclusion was that Paul and Barnabas were gods in human form. This was a polytheistic society in that they had many gods that they worshiped. The chief god was named Zeus (Jupiter) and his messenger was Hermes (Mercury). So, they decided that Barnabas was Zeus (since he was older and quieter) and that Paul was the messenger god Hermes since he did most of the speaking.

In the introductory remarks we had noted that "whatever we see is interpreted in light of our beliefs and our past experiences." While the people there that day had never experienced anything like what they had witnessed that had happened to the lame man at the words of Paul, there were legends that in the ancient past that Zeus and Hermes had come to that very area in human form and had been treated with hospitality by a shepherd who lived there. In fact, it was a commonly held belief by many different pagan religions that the gods would occasionally take on human form and associate with people. This idea of the divine taking on human form was used in Greek art and poetry. The Romans believed that the gods had led their armies and had given their laws. Hinduism and the religion of ancient Egypt had accounts of such incarnations. Just as we have heard legends of flying saucers and our first thought about a thirty-foot diameter glowing object that had landed near the airport was influenced by the legend, so these people in Lystra immediately concluded something that fit with their beliefs of possibilities.

It was probable that Paul spoke to the people in the Greek language which was not the common language of these people. When something exciting happened (such as a lame man being healed) they immediately switched from Greek to the Lycaonian language which Paul and Barnabas did not understand. It would be difficult to imagine their shock when they realized that the people and a priest of Zeus were about to make a blood sacrifice to them as gods.

Proclaiming the Living God – 14:14-18

¹⁴ But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their robes and rushed out into the crowd, crying out ¹⁵ and saying, "Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of the same nature as you, and preach the gospel to you 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 the generations gone by He permitted all the nations to go their own ways; ¹⁷ and yet He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness." ¹⁸ Even saying these things, with difficulty they

restrained the crowds from offering sacrifice to them. Acts 14:14-18 (NASB95)

When they saw the oxen being brought in, all decorated for sacrifice, they figured out what was happening and they took immediate action to stop it. Paul and Barnabas knew that the healing had come from God's power and not their own; however, the tendency of most people is to relate to what they see and never look beyond the appearance of things.

This error of the people provided Paul and Barnabas another opportunity to tell them more about the true and living God. They started out by assuring the people that they were just human beings (not gods) no different from the people of Lystra. The unsophisticated people of Lystra still possessed a simple childlike faith in the legends of their pagan religion and were open to belief in spiritual realities.

During that time some two thousand years ago, different people groups would respond in different ways to events they could not explain. For example, the first thoughts of a typical Jew about something miraculous was that it was of the devil. Evidence of this is seen in the way they responded to Jesus. The sophisticated Greeks and Romans would have labeled it as sorcery. Today, people would associate the report of a miracle with an "overly excited imagination" or the person being on drugs. In the situation in Lystra, the people were closer to the truth than others would likely be. A miracle is evidence of divine power and while Paul and Barnabas were not incarnations of "gods," they certainly were operating in the power of the Holy Spirit who was present within them.

Paul also assured the people of Lystra that the message of the Gospel was intended for them even though they were not (at that time) followers of the one true God. This is important because they may have heard that the God of Israel was only for the Jews. The Good News is that all may come to God through Jesus Christ.

The second point that Paul and Barnabas made was that the religious exercises that they were going through in sacrificing to pagan deities were pointless and had no value since there is only one true God.

The third point was that they were now living in a new time when it would no longer be acceptable for people to do what was right in their own sight having only the evidence of the creation to point them toward God. Paul pointed out that the physical earth and the seasonal operations of crops growing and rains were parts of the providential care of the God of all creation for people and these benefits were evidences of His existence and His character. People recognized that such provisions were of divine origin; however, most tended to associate such providence with pagan gods that grew out of their imaginations. Now we have the message and revelation of God in Jesus Christ that is clear and all can know the true nature of God and can turn to Him through Jesus.

Opposition Faced – 14:19-20

¹⁹ But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having won over the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead. ²⁰ But while the disciples stood around him, he got up and entered the city. The next day he went away with Barnabas to Derbe. Acts 14:19-20 (NASB95)

Apparently, Paul and Barnabas were able to continue teaching the people before the unbelieving Jews arrived to stir up the crowds that were being taught by Paul. Apparently, some in Lystra believed. The evidence for this is seen in verse twenty that mentions "the disciples stood around him." Later on, we find (in verses 21 and 22) that after their visit to Derbe, they returned to Lystra and encouraged the disciples and appointed elders. Next, we see in Acts 16:1 that Paul and Silas went to Lystra and added Timothy to their team. Timothy's mother was Jewish but his father was a Greek.

The ability of the Jewish agitators from Antioch and Iconium to stir up the crowd to turn on Paul and Barnabas is an indication that the disciples (those who embraced the gospel message) were in the minority. This also showed the immaturity of the general population regarding spiritual matters. Alexander Maclaren noted that “few emotions are more transient than such impure religious excitement as the crowd had felt.” The excitement that resulted from the healing miracle of the lame man was short lived although such a miracle was needed to really get the attention of the people. However, without a serious commitment to the message that followed and without applying the teaching of the gospel message, the initial excitement faded and people returned to their basic beliefs until the next exciting thing would come along.

Some preachers have the ability to get all excited and to excite a crowd with constant demands such as “can I get a good amen?” Most of the time such methods do not produce lasting results and after all the shouting and hollering, the crowds become bored and drift away until the next entertaining speaker comes along.

There are different opinions regarding whether or not Paul actually died from being stoned. The text states that “they” stoned Paul. That reference could mean the Jews from Antioch and Iconium or the Jews and people from Lystra.

Paul revived (either came back to life or regained consciousness) and went back into the city. The next day he and Barnabas left for Derbe. That recovery seems to be somewhat miraculous. Some commentators have suggested that this was the incident to which Paul referred in 2 Corinthians 12:2-4 about a man who was caught up into the third heaven and saw things that he was not permitted to tell.

Encouragement Given – 14:21-23

²¹ After they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, ²² strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, “Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.” ²³ When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

Acts 14:21–23 (NASB95)

These accounts of the various experiences that Paul and Barnabas had in sharing the Gospel in various places with people of different beliefs and backgrounds give us some insight as to what we need to consider as we have opportunities to tell others about Jesus. One thing that is obvious is that one method does not work in every case. It takes a different approach when dealing with people who are familiar with the Bible compared to someone who has never seen a Bible or has never heard the name Jesus. When attempting to share anything with a person who speaks a different language is a significantly different challenge.

Becoming a disciple is not an instantaneous event. In several of the cities in which many people believed the gospel message, Paul and Barnabas left hurriedly before having an opportunity to help them grow in their faith. As a result of the hostility of those who opposed what God was doing, Paul and Barnabas needed to return to those cities to encourage the believers and to help them identify who could be effective in leading these new Christians.

One thing that is obvious from the accounts recorded in Acts is that without supernatural interventions such as the healing miracles and other happenings, much of what Luke recorded would be inexplicable. The success of spreading the gospel was tied to the supernatural intervention of God through the gifts and enabling of the Holy Spirit.