

TUTORIAL
2.19

Paul's teaching journey continues

The Narrative now describes the continuing journey of Paul and Barnabas. They teach God's Word clearly in a number of cities, encountering both violent opposition and also those who listen to their message.

The portion of Scripture referred to in this tutorial is: **Acts 13:44-14:27.**

Last time

We noted that the Antioch church was led by a group of ethnically diverse leaders, equipped by God for their roles. Paul and Barnabas were sent out by the church to take the Good News to communities where it was not yet accessible. They took John Mark and travelled in Cyprus before heading to Perga in the area known as Asia Minor. After John Mark left them they headed north to the city of Antioch in Pisidia where they had opportunity to share the Gospel in the local synagogue.

Paul and Barnabas target the Gentiles

Paul's sermon in the Pisidian Antioch synagogue generates a great deal of interest and he's given opportunity to share again the next week. This time, Luke says, "almost the entire city" turns up to hear (Acts 13:44-49). But some of the Jews don't like all this attention the two visitors are getting and they begin to publicly argue with them. This brings a strong reaction from God's two spokesmen, and they make a dramatic declaration with implications that will echo out around the world and down through the centuries to us.

Certainly the life-bringing Word has to be offered first to the Jews - they are, after all, God's original Covenant people. It was to them the written Narrative had originally been given, and Jesus the Messiah had been born to a woman of that race. Also, as God stated through the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 49:6) centuries before, it was them as a people who He'd first tasked with being a light that would draw all the ethnic groups throughout the world to Him and provide them access to His salvation. But now that the Messiah has come and the Way has been made clear, the Jews have rejected that very way of

salvation. So, the Good News is going to be offered to the Gentiles. Another implication of all this - although not explicated in the Narrative at this point - is that the privilege of being God's light- and salvation-bearers to the world's ethnic groups will now also be handed over to His New Covenant people.

The God-fearing Gentiles in the crowd are, understandably, excited by this announcement that God's grace and salvation through Jesus is not limited to a Jewish ethnic identity. Luke makes an editorial comment that it is very much in line with God's purposes that these Gentiles who gratefully believe the Good News will receive eternal life. Their inclusion as non-Jews into God's family is not something they or Paul and Barnabas have orchestrated; it is the result of God's sovereign, gracious choice. Their effort to share the Gospel among the Gentiles results in many coming to faith throughout the whole area.

They move on and plant a church in Iconium

The Jews, of course, are outraged by anything that questions their assumptions of a privileged place in God's plans....they use their influence with the city leaders to stir up trouble and have Paul and Barnabas run out of town (Acts 13:50-14:3). Luke records that the two shake the dust of that city off their shoes as they're moving on. There's an irony involved here, as this symbolic gesture was something pious Jews were in the habit of doing as they left Gentile cities to symbolise a complete rejection of the heathen ways. It also seems likely Paul and Barnabas had heard Jesus' disciples recount how when He was sending them out on their first witnessing assignment, He'd said they should shake the dust off their feet if they were rejected by a household or community.

The experience of being evicted from the town doesn't make them lose heart or come to the conclusion that they are not 'called' to this kind of work after all. For one thing, they know that they've contributed to the existence of a group of new believers who are excited about their faith and are being guided by the Holy Spirit who is now living in them. No doubt too, Paul and Barnabas remind themselves that it was God Himself who'd told them and their fellow leaders back in Syrian Antioch to initiate this effort they are spearheading. They also clearly have a growing comprehension of how God is reaching out to the different people groups at this time, and a sense of the part He wants them to play. And finally, as Paul will later explain in letters he writes to believers in different places, it is the love of the Lord Jesus Himself that he feels propelling him forward into new areas with the Good News.

So they head east and south about 100 kilometres to Iconium, site of today's Turkish city of Konya - travelling, we can assume, along the well-made Roman road that joined the two cities. Here the same thing happens as in the last place...Paul and Barnabas go to the synagogue and proclaim God's truth. It's worth noting that despite their previous strong statements about God opening the door to the Gentile nations in the face of Jewish national rejection of their

Messiah, it does not mean He is no longer reaching out to the Jews as individuals. Luke doesn't give details, but the way the two travelers share the Gospel is extremely effective and a large number of both Jews and Gentiles come to faith in Jesus.

But just like in the previous city, it is some of the die-hard traditionalist Jews who reject the message and stir up trouble for the two church planters. Rather than direct open antagonism, this time Satan uses one of his favourite tactics - he encourages self-righteous religious people to indulge in poisonous slander and gossip against those who are sharing the truth that they find uncomfortable. Despite the controversy their message is creating and the opposition they're personally facing, Paul and Barnabas decide they're not walking away. They stay a long time - probably some months - "preaching boldly about the grace of the Lord" as the text records. To counteract the lies that are being told and to authenticate their message, the Lord gives them the ability to do what is described as "miraculous signs and wonders". With no authoritative New Covenant Narrative yet written to base their teaching on, these supernatural evidences of the Spirit's involvement were crucial in the early outreaches of the Church.

They travel to a different church planting context

The Gospel message, with its exclusive claims about Jesus Christ, is inherently controversial. When Jesus' messengers - then or now - are being guided by His Spirit they are, like Him, full of grace...they gladly reach out with love and empathy to those around them. But also like Him, they share His message in such a way that people have to either accept or reject Him. And that's the way it is in Iconium - the people are polarised. Eventually those opposing the Christian message win the upper hand and with the blessing of the city leaders they plan to attack Paul and Barnabas and kill them with stones (Acts 14:4-18). But the two hear about the plot and decide it's a wise time to leave and take the Good News to another community. They head southwest, to the town of Lystra on the eastern part of the high, rather barren plains of the Lycaonia region.

In covering the 30 or so kilometres between Iconium and Lystra, the two church planters have crossed an important frontier. Although as a Roman colony Latin is the official language, they are hearing Lycaonian being spoken around them...a dialect they can't understand. This minority language will actually survive for another 500 years before being overtaken by Greek. At this point, Paul and Barnabas are not much more than a day's walk from the limits of the Roman Empire proper. Just as Jesus had commanded some 20 or so years before, His *Body*, His *Ecclesia*, is reaching out with His Good News into the more far-flung ethnic groups.

Also different, is the fact that this is the first town they visit on the entire trip in which there's no mention of a synagogue. Educated Greek philosophy or Jewish monotheism have made little impact, and the prevailing worldview is a blend of Greek mythology and local cultish practices. These beliefs condition the people's response when they observe Paul being used to miraculously heal a physically handicapped man. Because of the language and culture barriers, the two visiting church planters don't understand at first that they are being hailed by the locals as gods. When it becomes apparent that elaborate preparations are being made to offer sacrifices to them, Paul and Barnabas protest in the strongest possible terms. They try to convince the people that they are only human beings who've come with a message from the living God.

In contrast to previous contexts where their audiences have been familiar with *God's written Narrative* from the Jewish Scriptures, it's worth noting how they engage with these people who know nothing of the true Creator. Here, understandably, they start much further back....with a pre-evangelism appeal to the *Narrative of God's Creation* and the natural blessings of life that speak clearly of His sovereign but gracious rule over the earth. Whatever level of access people have to God's revelation, they have no excuse - everyone is morally responsible to live up to His absolute standards.

Paul recovers after being attacked

It's not long before the town's adulation turns sour (Acts 14:19,20). The orthodox Jews from Antioch and Iconium have relentlessly followed them all the way here to Lystra. Somehow they are able to turn the crowd against the two Gospel teachers. Paul is particularly targeted and is brutally pelted with stones, then dragged outside the town and left for dead. But with those from the town who have become followers of Jesus standing around, Paul regains consciousness and gets to his feet...perhaps with God's miraculous help, Luke doesn't specify. But certainly the next day he is well enough to set out with Barnabas on the hundred-kilometre trip to Derbe. Luke doesn't give many details of their time in this town that was at the very eastern edge of the Roman province of Galatia, but he does say that through their sharing of the Good News they introduce many people to Jesus Christ who become His disciples.

They revisit the churches they've planted

At this point Paul and Barnabas decide not to go on to any new communities (Acts 14:21-27). Their most direct route home would be southeast across the Taurus mountains via the narrow pass then known as the Cilician Gates...today called the Gülek Pass, route of the Tarsus-Ankara Highway in Turkey. But instead they choose to retrace their steps, visiting the towns they've been through, including those where they were so viciously harassed. They know that the fledgling churches they've planted need encouragement to stand against the many challenges they will inevitably face...and so they spend time

strengthening them, no doubt teaching by building on the Narrative foundations already laid.

But the two church planters also know that these groups of disciples will need guidance and on going feeding from God's Word. No details are given here about the process, but we know that by the time Paul and Barnabas leave each fellowship they've made sure that there are qualified leaders in place. The term for this role that Luke used is *presbyterios* - traditionally translated into English as *elders*. This has links back to the Old Covenant when certain men in the Israelite tribes were looked to for guidance based on their wisdom and experience.

Now, as we'll see in the Narrative, this role of shepherding local groups of believers under the New Covenant is linked directly to particular Spirit-given gifts, abilities and personal qualities. Certainly the Acts account reflects that the two church planters took very seriously this step of appointing elders and then placing the believers into their care.

Paul and Barnabas continue to retrace their steps, until eventually they make it back to their home fellowship in Antioch of Syria. Their arrival must have been a real time of excitement and encouragement for the church that has been supporting them in prayer while they've been away. The two have great things to report...how so many Gentiles, in particular, responded in faith to the message of Good News about Jesus that they had shared with them.



DISCUSSION POINTS

Paul's teaching journey continues

1. Explain what you understand Luke meant when he wrote "and all who were chosen for eternal life became believers" (Acts 13:48). Note: as you attempt to answer consider:
 - a) the immediate narrative context in which the statement was made,
 - b) the changes between the Old and New Covenants,
 - c) what is taking place in the time of the Acts Narrative,
 - d) what God has shown of Himself and His purposes throughout the entire Narrative so far.
2. Do you believe that God continues to use "miraculous signs and wonders" to validate the Gospel message today?

Please explain.

3. What lessons or principles can you identify from the example of Paul and Barnabas as they revisited the believers in the cities they'd already been to? Try to describe this in terms of how you feel the Lord Jesus would want:
 - a) us to relate to an individual who becomes a believer through our witness,
 - b) a cross-cultural church planting team to relate to a group of new believers in a hostile community.