

The First Missionary Journey Continued and Completed

A Study in Acts Chapter 14



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Acts Chapter 14

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Introduction

In this chapter Paul and Barnabas continue and complete their first missionary journey. After Paul's powerful ministry in Antioch in Pisidia (Acts 13), the missionary team traveled to Iconium (13:51), then Lystra (14:6, 8), and then Derbe (14:6, 20). Paul and Barnabas then revisited three of the cities where they had been, namely Lystra, Iconium and Antioch in Pisidia (14:21), which cities were in the Roman province of Galatia. Paul would later write to these believers in his epistle to the Galatians and share his concern that they had departed from the principles of grace. Paul and Barnabas also preached in Perga before sailing back to Antioch in Syria where they reported to the church from which they had been sent (14:26).

Acts 14:1

We are thankful that some Jews in each of these cities believed. In Iconium, according to his custom, Paul preached in the synagogue and a great number of Jews and Gentiles believed. This demonstrates that when Paul said "we turn to the Gentiles" in Acts 13:46, he was not suggesting that he would never again evangelize Jewish people gathered in synagogues. The meaning simply was that if the Jews should reject the gospel, he would turn to the Gentiles instead, and make known the good news to them. It did not mean he was done with Jewish evangelism forever. A number of Gentiles were in the synagogue at Iconium and many of them believed the gospel. These must have been either full proselytes who were circumcised and considered to be Jews or "proselytes of the gate," meaning that they were interested in the religion of the Jews but had not yet been circumcised and did not embrace all of the law of Moses.

Before examining these verses, let us take a look ahead. After Paul and Barnabas left these cities in Galatia and returned to Antioch in Syria (Acts 14:26), they began to hear horrible reports of compromise, defection and heresy in the churches where they had ministered: Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe. Judaizers had influenced these churches with their attack on the true grace of God. The Judaizers were apparently Jewish disciples of Christ, and yet their message was defective: "You must keep the law of Moses in order to be acceptable to God." Paul had to write a very strong letter, the letter to the Galatians, in order to combat this error. Paul challenged them as to whether they were saved by keeping the law. "O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you, that ye should not obey the truth before whose eyes Jesus Christ has been evidently set forth, crucified among you" (Gal. 3:1). It was as if Paul had to lead them to Christ all over again, and remind them of the gospel truths he had first taught them. Their legalism had blinded them to the liberating truths of the gospel of the grace of God.

Paul also reminded the Galatians that he had been very sick while with them, sick with some kind of very painful physical affliction. Yet the Galatians had received him as an angel of God (Gal. 4:14). If possible, they would have even plucked out their own eyes and given them to Paul (Gal. 4:15). We marvel that they turned away so quickly from Paul and his message.

Here in Acts chapter 14 we see the establishment of certain churches which were later attacked viciously by compromising Judaisers. These false teachers almost destroyed the work of God accomplished through Paul and Barnabas on this first missionary journey.

Acts 14:2

Opposition on the part of unbelieving Jews was fierce (cf. Rom. 11:28). We have the same pattern in this city as in other cities where Paul preached. The great Satanic resistance to the gospel message came from the unbelieving Jews. These Jews stirred up the Gentiles in order to influence them against Paul and his message. The term “stirred up” is the same term that is found in Acts 13:50 where the Jews tried to influence certain women and men to persecute Paul and Barnabas. These Jewish enemies of God in Iconium made the minds of the Gentiles “evil affected” against the brethren (the believers). Many versions render the phrase in this way: “they poisoned their minds” (NKJV, NIV, etc.). Paul put “sound doctrine” (healthy doctrine) into their minds but the unbelieving Jews tried to replace healthy doctrine with poison.

Acts 14:3

In light of such persecution we might suppose that Paul and Barnabas would flee to the next city. And yet we learn they did not do this. Instead, they stayed a long time in Iconium, speaking boldly and courageously. They were not cowards. At times it was expedient for these missionaries to flee in order to save their lives, but at other times, such as in this case, it was appropriate to stay. The Spirit of God was guiding them as to when to stay and when to go.

In order to confirm the message of His missionaries, God enabled them to perform miracles. The purpose of these signs and wonders was to bear an affirming witness to the message which they preached. We are not told what specific miracles they performed, but they probably included the healing of some who were sick, crippled or otherwise afflicted (compare Acts 14:8-10). We could imagine someone saying, “If these men could cause my blind wife to see, I’m certainly going to pay attention to the message which they preach!” Paul refers to these miracles in Galatians 3:5, keeping in mind that Iconium was in the province of Galatia. The New Testament considers such miracles as “the signs of an apostle”:

The miraculous sign gifts were “the signs indeed of an apostle” (2 Cor. 12:12), which served to authenticate the apostleship and message of the apostles, and operated *only* in them and in those to whom they imparted certain sign gifts (i.e., the *direct* converts of the apostles; see Mk 16:15-18 and “those who have believed,” v.17, directly through the ministry of the apostles, v.15). If this were not so, the sign gifts could not have been characterized as “the signs indeed of an apostle.” (That is, if anyone had sign gifts other than apostles and those to whom they imparted such gifts, then the sign gifts could not possibly be characterized as “the signs indeed of an apostle” for such a characterization would lose all meaning.) See Acts 2:43; 4:22; 5:12; 14:3;

15:12; 19:11; Mk. 16:20; Rom. 15:18-19; 1 Thess. 1:5; 1 Cor. 1:6-7 and 2:4 with 4:15; Heb. 2:4. We obviously haven't had any apostles since the First Century A.D. (cf. Eph. 2:20), nor do we have their direct converts/those to whom the apostles imparted "sign" gifts. As such, we have no more sign gifts. **This explains the prevalence of sign-gifts, e.g., among the Corinthians (1 Cor. 1:6-7 and 2:4 with 4:15) and the Galatians (Gal. 3:5), for they were originally direct converts of apostles.**¹

The message they preached could be summarized by one word: **grace!** They were testifying to the gospel of the grace of God (Acts 20:24). The fountains of God's grace pour out freely from Mount Calvary for the benefit of hell-deserving sinners. "Oh to grace how great a debtor, daily I'm constrained to be."

Acts 14:4

The city was divided, as many sided with the Jews and many sided with the apostles.² Yet in verse 3 we learned that God performed signs and wonders by their hands. How then could anyone in that city reject the message of these miracle workers? According to Deuteronomy 13:1-5, if a man appeared in their midst and performed a sign or a wonder, but has the wrong message, he was to be stoned to death. In other words, the sign or wonder had no intrinsic, self-authenticating power. It could have been accompanied by an unbiblical Satanic message. What determines the genuineness of the messenger is not just the signs and wonders, but it is the message of the preacher and whether that message lines up with God's revealed truth.

Greater light and privilege brings greater responsibility and judgment. The witnessing of divine miracles never of itself produces real saving faith in anyone. However, such evidential privilege does make one more responsible. "To whom much is given, of him shall much be required" (Luke 12:48).

The Signs and Wonders movement of today can be very deceptive as it might appear that the people on the platform are really performing miracles before hundreds of people. We know that unregenerate magicians can greatly deceive people even apart from any supernatural powers. What determines whether a man is genuine are not the sign miracles but the message he gives. Indeed, the Lord Jesus was crucified because the Jews claimed that His message was wrong. He claimed to be God, which in their minds was blasphemy. Thus they claimed that His miracles were from Satan. This was also the case here in Acts chapter 14. The unbelieving Jews could easily attribute the miracles of Paul and Silas to the working of Satan. Keep in mind that Simon the sorcerer (Acts 8) and Elymas the sorcerer (Acts 13) both performed deceptive wonders by demonic powers.

The key is always the message. Regardless of signs and miracles, if the message is wrong, then the messenger is not of God. We can imagine what the unbelieving Jews were saying: "These men are telling you to abandon the law of Moses and to believe in Jesus, the very One that our Jewish leaders

¹Written by James Ventilato in email correspondence with George Zeller on 3/11/21.

²Here Paul and Barnabas are both referred to as "apostles" or "sent ones," having been sent by the Lord on this first missionary trip (Acts 13:2-4). See also verse 14 where Paul and Barnabas are identified as apostles or "sent ones."

in Jerusalem crucified as a blasphemer. Do not follow this new teaching.”

Acts 14:5

The enemies of the gospel were about to stone the missionaries. This was an obvious sign to Paul and Barnabas that the time had come to flee (v. 6). Paul escaped being stoned for the moment, but a stoning would soon take place at Lystra. The word “assault” (KJV) indicates a violent motion. These people were on the move, rushing forward to inflict harm upon Paul and Barnabas. The expression “use despitefully” (KJV) involves damaging mistreatment whether verbally (Luke 11:45) or physically (Matt. 22:6; Luke 18:32; 1 Thess. 2:2). Here it could refer to both forms of abuse, ultimately leading to stoning.

Acts 14:6

Somehow God allowed Paul and Barnabas to be made aware of the hostile assault coming against them, and they were able to flee in time. Sometimes God allows his servants to suffer persecution and sometimes He allows them to escape. In Lystra Paul would not escape persecution. Lystra was also the home of Timothy who was probably led to the Lord on this first missionary journey, although we do not find his name mentioned until later (Acts 16:1-2).

William Ramsay (1851-1939) was a great church historian and archaeologist. He decided that he would find out for himself whether or not archaeology could confirm what Luke said about these cities. He was determined to do this even if it would take years of his time. In his research he discovered that Lystra and Derbe were part of the province of Lycaonia only between 37 A.D. and 72 A.D., and that Luke’s statement here was absolutely correct. Ramsay was overwhelmed by the historical accuracy and precision of Luke’s writings.³ See Appendix 1 where the relationship of these cities to the province of Galatia is discussed.

We assume the missionary team went to Lystra first, which is where the healing miracle took place (verses 8-10) and where Paul was stoned (verse 19). After that they went to Derbe (verse 20) and later returned to places they had been, namely Lystra, Iconium and Antioch (in Pisidia).

Acts 14:7

Later in this chapter we will examine the actual message Paul delivered to these people. We might ask the question, “Did Paul really preach the gospel?” This will be discussed later, but for now, it is important to keep the clear statement of verse 7 in mind: “And there they preached the gospel.” Literally, “they evangelized” (proclaimed the good news).

³William M. Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen*, first published in 1895.

Acts 14:8

Paul began his ministry in Lystra with a spectacular healing miracle. This man was impotent, that is, without power and without the strength needed to walk. This crippled man had never walked, having been lame from birth. His physical condition was helpless and hopeless. Yet, with God all things are possible!

Acts 14:9

Paul fixed his eyes upon this man and gazed intently at him. He perceived that this man had faith to be healed.⁴ Some see this as similar to the man in Acts 3 (see Acts 3:19). Of course, there were many cases where the Lord Jesus healed people who did not have any faith. One chief example would be Lazarus. “Lazarus, do you have enough faith to come out of that tomb?” Dead people cannot exercise faith. Think also of the ten lepers (Luke 17:11-19). Only one of them returned to thank Jesus. This seems to suggest that only one of them really believed in Him. Yet they were all healed. As we go through the gospels we learn of thousands of people who were healed of various maladies. On many occasions the Lord Jesus healed them all whether they had faith to be healed or not. For example, in Matthew 12:15 great multitudes followed Him and “He healed them **all**” whether they had faith or not. In Acts 5:16 a multitude of sick folk were brought to the apostles, “and they were healed **every one**.” The healing was for all without any faith requirement. Not one sick person went away disappointed.

In Acts 20:9-12 we find Paul healing a man from the most serious ailment of all, death itself. Here was a young man who actually had died. Certainly a dead man cannot exercise faith! How silly it would be for a modern-day faith healer to say, “I was not able to raise that man from the dead because he did not have enough faith!” This raises an interesting question: If modern-day faith healers have the same healing powers as Christ and the apostles, then why do they not raise the dead?

God is sovereign. He can choose to heal people even if they have no faith or He can choose to honor a person’s faith by healing him, as apparently was true in this case.

We can assume that this man believed in the gospel which he had heard from Paul and Barnabas. If God were great enough to forgive his sins, then certainly God could heal his physical problem as well (cf. Matt. 9:2-6).

Acts 14:10

Imagine the scene. This handicapped man had never walked in his entire life. Suddenly Paul with a loud voice commanded this man to stand up. What happened next was breathtaking. Not only did

⁴The verb translated “healed” is the common Greek verb meaning “to be saved, delivered.” Literally, Paul perceived “that he had faith to be saved.” Is he referring to spiritual deliverance (“healed”) or spiritual deliverance (“saved”)? The man was listening to Paul preach the gospel (v. 7). He was saved from his wretched condition of being a crippled man. He most likely was also saved or delivered from the penalty of sin. He apparently was delivered both spiritually and physically. Both deliverances put on display the power of God (Rom. 1:16).

he stand and walk, but he even leaped for joy! It takes time and much trial and error for little children to learn to walk. This man instantly learned how to walk and jump! How the crowd must have been impressed!

Oh, the wonders of the name of Jesus! What was done for that man physically was just a picture of what down through the centuries the Lord has been doing for people spiritually. Millions of people have been unable to take one step toward God, one step toward heaven, until the gospel came and they believed it. When they did so they found they were able to rise out of their sinfulness and helplessness and walk in the way of the Lord, glorifying Him. This is one of the evidences that Christianity is really a revelation from heaven. It proves itself by what it does for the people who believe it.⁵

Acts 14:11

The people recognized that ordinary men could never perform such a spectacular miracle, so they assumed that “the gods have come down to us in the likeness of men.” These pagans held to a twisted concept of incarnation on many levels, in contrast to the one and only true incarnation of our blessed Lord, God in human flesh (Matt. 1:21-23; John 1:1-3, 14; Rom. 1:1-4; 9:5; Phil. 2:6-11; Gal. 4:4-6; 1 Tim. 3:16; Heb. ch. 1; Heb. 2:6-10; 2 John 7-11; Isa. 9:6-7; etc.).

The miracle was so striking and spectacular that it could not be denied (compare Acts 4:14,16). And yet, they attributed the miracle to their false deities. They were speaking in their native Lycaonian dialect, a language Paul and Barnabas did not know, so it seems Paul and Barnabas did not realize what was happening immediately due to the language barrier.⁶

Acts 14:12

Barnabas was called “Jupiter” (Zeus) the king of the gods and they called Paul “Mercury” (Hermes) because he was the chief speaker. Most of the planets in our solar system are named after pagan gods (such as Jupiter and Mercury). Mercury was the messenger god. Venus was the god of love. Mars was the god of war. Jupiter was the king of the gods, and the biggest planet was named after him. Saturn was the god of sowing seed (agriculture). Who wants to live in a solar system named after all these pagan gods? We have a similar problem with the days of the week. Saturday (Saturn), Sunday (sun) and Monday (moon) are named after the celestial bodies, but the other days are named after Germanic gods. For example, Thursday is named after Thor. As believers, we are in the world, but thankfully we are not of the world. We know that all of the planets owe their origin to the living God, having been created on the fourth day of creation (Gen. 1:14-16).

Barnabas probably looked important and dignified, having an impressive appearance. He was

⁵Harry A. Ironside, *Acts*, p. 338.

⁶Everyone in the Roman Empire understood the Greek language, but every area had its unique local dialects. Paul would preach in the Greek language which was the lingua franca of the Mediterranean world and was also the original language of the New Testament.

probably taller than Paul (compare 2 Corinthians 10:10) and perhaps looked older than Paul. He did not say very much, but stood in the background while Paul did most of the speaking and communicating. The people thus assumed Paul was the messenger god Mercury or Hermes.⁷ “Orientals consider the leader to be one who sits still while his subordinates speak and act for him.”⁸ Mercury was the herald of the gods and the spokesman of Zeus, his father.

There is a parallel to this in the Old Testament account of Moses and Aaron before Pharaoh. Which of those two was the chief speaker? Initially it was Aaron. Yet, behind Aaron was the person who was really important who did not do as much speaking, because he claimed that he was not eloquent.

There is something similar to this even in the Godhead. In God’s plan for the ages, we have God the Father whom no man has ever seen. Then we have God the Son who is the chief Speaker. He is the “*logos*” (John chapter 1, “the Word”), the communicator. He communicates from the heart and mind of God to the heart and mind of man. And yet this does not imply any superiority of one divine Person over the Other in the Triune Godhead.

The people claimed that Paul and Barnabas were gods. What was this based on? Fifty years before Paul and Barnabas arrived in this region, there was a certain Roman writer, Ovid, who wrote a narrative poem entitled, *Metamorphoses*. He told about an ancient legend that may have been well-known in southern Galatia and may help to explain the wildly emotional response of the people as they called Paul and Barnabas gods. According to the legend, Zeus and Hermes once came to the local area disguised as mortals, seeking lodging. Although they asked for lodging at a thousand homes, none took them in. Finally, at a humble cottage of straw and reeds, an elderly couple, Philemon and his wife Baucis, freely welcomed them to a banquet that strained their poor resources. In appreciation, the gods transformed their cottage into a temple with a golden roof and marble columns. Philemon and Baucis were appointed as the priest and priestess of the temple. When it came time to die, they were transformed into an oak and a linden tree. As for the inhospitable people, the gods destroyed their houses. Just where in the hill country this took place Ovid does not say, but it appears that in seeing the healing of a crippled man and possibly remembering this legend, the people of Lystra believed that Zeus and Hermes had once again returned and they felt they must pay them homage lest they incur a similar wrath from the gods.

Acts 14:13

The priest of Jupiter (Zeus) was planning to offer a sacrifice to Barnabas and Paul in order to properly honor these deities, and appease their anger. A garland is a wreath of flowers and leaves, worn on the head or hung as a decoration. In this case it was probably to be worn around the necks of the oxen.

⁷The name “Hermes” and the term “hermeneutics,” come from the same Greek term and both involve “interpretation.”

⁸Merril F. Unger, *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, p. 22, published in *Bible Expositor and Illuminator*, Vol. XXXIX, July, August, September, 1967, No.3.

Acts 14:14

When Paul and Barnabas found out what the people intended to do, they were horrified and they were determined to stop this foolish ceremony. The rending or tearing of clothes was recognized as a sign of deep grief, showing these misguided people that they were making a terrible mistake. The tearing of clothes was also a reaction to blasphemy, showing shock that these people would deify them even though they were mere men.

Acts 14:15

The very first thing Paul and Barnabas did was to un-deify themselves: We are not gods but “we also are men of like passions with you,” and we desire to tell you about the true and living God who created all things. We have the same human nature that you have and we want to tell you about the One who created all things and sustains all things.

What would have happened if Paul and Barnabas had not protested publicly and violently? We need to remember what happened to King Herod in Acts chapter 12 as the people said (paraphrased), “Your speech was absolutely spectacular. Indeed, it was not the voice of a man, but it was the voice of God.” For a moment Herod must have thought, “Yes, I am quite impressive!” Right then God leveled a death blow against him. If anyone comes to you and says, “You’re so magnificent and so perfect and so eloquent and so brilliant that you must be divine,” then what are you supposed to do? “Thank you, I appreciate your comments so much.” Not a wise choice!

Paul and Barnabas were horrified at the thought of claiming any of the glory of God for themselves. May we learn from this never to assume for ourselves anything that belongs to God. May we ever be careful to give God all the glory, for He alone is worthy. God will not give His glory to another.

In Paul’s message to the people at Lystra, beginning in verse 15, we do not find a gospel presentation, even though we know from verse 7 that they did indeed preach the gospel in these cities. Their message was this: “Turn from these vanities (these false gods) to the living God who made heaven and earth, and the sea, and all things that are therein” (compare Exodus 20:11). Paul did not give the reference because most likely these people had never heard of Exodus, never heard of Moses, and never heard of the Old Testament. Paul gave them basic fundamental truths from the Old Testament about God, beginning with His uniqueness as the Creator of all things. That is a wonderful way to start any systematic presentation of the living God. He created the world! But do not stop there. That is essential truth, but it is not sufficient for man’s salvation. It is fine to start there, but do not stop there! Gospel truth is needed. The cross and the empty tomb must be proclaimed (1 Cor. 15:3-4).

Today we have a significant movement, spreading around the world, called “Intelligent Design.” This movement has been the source of many wonderfully written books proving that the universe, the solar system, planet Earth, and all living things could never have originated by blind chance. They had to be designed by an intelligent being. With this we would heartily agree. The problem is that Intelligent Design advocates will not tell you who this intelligent Being is. They are extremely reluctant to identify Him. This is the colossal failure of the Intelligent Design movement. They want to defeat evolution on a horizontal level of intellectualism and rationalism. They are able to demonstrate the bankruptcy of the theory of evolution very easily. Scientifically and logically they

are able to defeat the arguments of materialistic evolution, often embarrassing their opponents in public debates. Yet all their efforts are insufficient when it comes to bringing people to a saving knowledge of Christ. Our goal is not merely to bring people out of evolution, but to bring people to Christ.

It is essential to understand what God says about how the world was created and by whom it was created. The Creator's name is Jesus Christ the Lord through whom all things were created. People need to hear the good news that this great Creator became our Savior. If you do not bring people face to face with Jesus Christ, then there is no gospel. Sadly, there are many people who reject evolution and believe in intelligent design, and yet they have never believed the gospel. What will it profit them?

Acts 14:16

In past generations, God has permitted or allowed men to walk in their own ways (compare Acts 17:30). God's permission does not indicate God's approval. On the one hand God allows men to do evil; on the other hand God is angry with the wicked every day (Psalm 7:11). God allowed men to walk in their own ways before the flood, and "the wickedness of man was great in the earth" (Gen. 6:5). God allowed men to walk in their own ways after the flood resulting in a massive abandonment of the living God (Rom. 1:21-32). God allows each one of us to walk in our own ways: "All we like sheep have gone astray; **we have turned every one to his own way**" (Isa. 53:6). The people of Lystra walked in their own ways which is why they were found worshipping "vanities" and false gods (Acts 14:15).

Acts 14:17

Even though God permits men to walk in their own sinful ways, He did not leave Himself without a witness. That is, He always gives to men evidence of His existence; here in particular, He gave evidence of His goodness. Paul draws attention to God's providential working in supplying people with rain allowing for bountiful harvests. The result is ample quantities of food which men can enjoy. Zeus was the god of the sky and thunder, so these pagans believed that he gave or withheld rain. Mercury was the god of commerce and trade, so these heathen gave him credit for their ability to obtain food and other goods. Paul's preaching pointed them to the one true God, the Creator, who alone should get credit for rain, fruitful seasons and food. He meets the needs of His creatures.

Paul's presentation to these pagans differed significantly from his presentation to Jewish audiences. In addressing Jews he would quote from many Old Testament scriptures, but with the heathen he would establish the fact that God is the Creator and point out His kind providential dealings with men. Those who have learned to present the gospel in only one way (such as using the "The Romans Road," etc.) need to be flexible and allow the Spirit of God to guide them in every unique situation and with every unique audience. Paul was a master at this.

Where is the gospel in Paul's message here in Acts 14? It seems absent from the verses we are reading, but we shall find a clue to this puzzle when we come to verse 20.

Acts 14:18

Even with these words, Paul and Barnabas could hardly stop the crowds from sacrificing to them. They were barely able to restrain them.

Acts 14:19

Hostile Jews came from cities where Paul had already preached, namely Antioch in Pisidia and Iconium. They were not content to have Paul leave their cities, but they were determined to pursue him. So they came down to Lystra and persuaded the people to stone him to death. They traveled 90 miles or more in order to do the missionaries harm. “Bad men will often travel farther to do evil than good men will to do good; and wicked men often show more zeal in opposing the gospel than professed Christians do in advancing it.”⁹

The stoning was so severe that they dragged Paul out of the city thinking or supposing that he was dead. Paul refers to this incident in 2 Corinthians 11:25: “Once I was stoned.” Most men do not live to tell about their stoning experience. Paul also mentions this persecution to Timothy: “Persecution, afflictions, which came unto me at Antioch, at Iconium, at Lystra; what persecutions I endured: but out of them all the Lord delivered me” (2 Tim. 3:11). In Galatians 6:17 Paul wrote, “I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.” Perhaps he was referring, at least in part, to bodily scars which he received from this stoning. Paul, who had witnessed the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:58), was now permitted by God to suffer through the same harrowing experience.

It is curious as to why Barnabas was not stoned along with Paul, but the text does not supply any information about this.

Consider the fickle crowd who one moment thought these men were gods and were prepared to worship them, and the next moment considered them to be deceptive false teachers worthy of being stoned to death. The same was true of the Lord Jesus. He who was honored as King at the triumphal entry into Jerusalem was hung on a cross less than a week later by an incredibly fickle, changeable, shallow, and unthinking mob. Another example would be found in Acts 28:4-6 showing how certain heathen people changed their view of Paul very rapidly. He went from being a murderer in their eyes to being a god in a matter of moments (Acts 28:4-6)!

The text says that the people who stoned Paul considered him to be dead. That is, they assumed that he was dead and thought that this was the case. The question naturally arises as to whether Paul actually died on this occasion or not. Dr. Whitcomb, in his lecture on Acts 14, indicated his belief that Paul actually died as the result of this stoning, although he did not elaborate on this point. The only other passage which speaks of this stoning is 2 Corinthians 11:25 where Paul simply says, “I was stoned,” but says nothing about being raised from the dead. On other occasions in Acts when people actually died and were raised back to life, Luke made it very clear that they were dead (compare Dorcas in Acts 9:36-42 and Eutychus in Acts 20:9-12). Here Luke makes no such statement.

⁹Albert Barnes, *Barnes Notes*, under Acts 14:19 (page 220 in the Baker Book House edition).

The text does not state that Paul died; yet it does state that those who stoned him assumed that he was dead. If Paul did not actually die, his injuries must have been so severe that he appeared in a lifeless condition. The signs of physical life are normally quite obvious, such as breathing and having a pulse. His persecutors thought Paul to be dead, which seems to indicate that he appeared to be a lifeless corpse, showing no signs of life.

There are really only two options. Either Paul actually died or he was so close to death that his enemies considered him dead. In either case God must have done something quite miraculous. As the disciples stood around him, “he rose up,” and the very next day he was healthy enough to endure the rigors of travel (Acts 14:20). No prolonged period of recuperation was needed. So either God raised Paul from the dead or He resuscitated Paul from his near-death experience, and healed him from his injuries so that he could continue his ministries without hindrance. Either way we cannot help but see the miraculous, sustaining hand of God.

Paul now undergoes the very thing he had helped to bring upon Stephen. In the case of Stephen God did not intervene; in Paul’s case He did. Whether Paul was really dead, or whether only battered nearly to the point of death, we have no means of knowing: whichever it was, his restoration, almost in an instant, to ordinary health and strength, was a miracle. The next day he journeyed forth to preach the Gospel in another city, just as though nothing had happened to him.¹⁰

Some think that Paul actually died and went to the third heaven, a trip which Paul described in 2 Corinthians 12:1-4. The problem with this theory is that the chronology does not match. Paul said that this trip to heaven took place over fourteen years before he wrote the book of 2 Corinthians. Since 2 Corinthians was written about 55 A.D., over fourteen years prior to that would go back to about 40 or 41 A.D. At that time Paul was mostly likely in Tarsus, prior to the time when Barnabas found him and brought him to Antioch. Yet Paul’s first missionary journey was around 47-48 A.D. Thus the chronology does not match.¹¹ Another problem with this view is stated as follows:

As for identifying this event with Paul’s being caught up to the third heaven/paradise in 2 Cor. 12, that cannot be. For Paul twice states that whether it was in the body or out of the body he did not know, only God knows. Well, if he had been caught up to paradise when he was stoned, the disciple who “encircled him” would have noticed had his body disappeared for some time or not. In which case they would have told Paul one way or the other, and it would not be the case that “whether in the body I know not, or out of the body I know not, God knows.”¹²

¹⁰F. B. Hole. See <https://stempublishing.com/authors/hole/NT/ACTS.html>.

¹¹These dates are based on the *New Testament Chronological Chart* by James Boyer, published by Whitcomb Ministries. See also the discussion by MacArthur who reaches a similar conclusion in his *New Testament Commentary—Acts 13-28*, pages 53-54.

¹²Written by James Ventilato in personal correspondence with George Zeller.

Acts 14:20

This verse sheds light on our previous question as to whether Paul preached the gospel in these cities. Notice that Paul had disciples around him. You cannot have a disciple unless you preach the gospel. Disciples do not spring up out of nowhere. Gospel preaching must have taken place. Why do we not read of Paul's gospel preaching in the city of Lystra? The book of Acts is very condensed. Luke assumes that you know that Paul and Barnabas were in that city long enough to make the gospel clearly known so that some people could be saved and become disciples. These disciples could then get the message out to people in their own language.¹³ Paul's sermon in Acts 14 was just a brief summary of some of the things Paul said. We assume that he must have made clear to them who Jesus really was and what Jesus really did. What is the greatest proof that Paul preached the gospel? The Bible tells us so in Acts 14:7—"And there they preached the gospel." Indeed, later Paul would write, "Woe is unto me if I preach not the gospel" (1 Cor. 9:16).

Paul was stoned inside the city (not outside like Stephen), and then dragged outside the city. As the disciples were circled around him, perhaps mourning the loss of their dear friend, he suddenly rose up and went back to the city. The following day he departed to Derbe, enjoying sufficient health to be able to travel, and travel in those days was rigorous and not for those with physical limitations.

It is difficult to imagine a ministry so fraught with terror, horror, torment and suffering for the sake of the gospel of the Lord Jesus. Yet, in spite of the opposition, people were coming to a saving knowledge of Christ, one of whom, as we learn later in Acts 16, was Timothy. Out of all the disciples God gave to him, it was of Timothy that Paul could say, "I have no man likeminded who will care for your state" (Phil. 2:20). Some sufferings are worth the price in the plan and purpose of God. One of the greatest disciples Paul ever had came to know the Lord on this difficult occasion.

Acts 14:21

Paul proclaimed the good news in Derbe which was another 60 miles from Lystra along the Sebastian Way (see our notes under Acts 13:51).

Paul was fulfilling the Great Commission in which the risen Lord instructed His followers to "make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19). Here we see that Paul "taught many" (KJV), or "made many disciples" (literally "having disciplined many"). And discipling involves more than simply leading people to Christ. It also includes teaching them to observe all things that Christ has commanded them (Matt. 28:20).

What courage this missionary team displayed as they boldly returned to the very cities where they had experienced such extreme persecution! This is excellent mission policy, namely to engage in follow-up ministry. Do not just preach the gospel and bid farewell, but whenever possible return to confirm and encourage the disciples and to establish them even further in the truth. Disciples need further teaching, instruction and admonition. Even in spite of Paul's efforts, we know that these

¹³The people in the Roman Empire understood the Greek language, which was a great help to evangelism. Yet each area had their own local languages and dialects as we saw in Acts 2:5-11.

disciples would later be led astray by Judaizers and Paul would need to sharply rebuke them in his letter to the Galatians.

Paul returned to the cities where they had previously preached the gospel, including Lystra. If they had not yet heard of Paul's recovery, imagine the shock on the part of those who thought they had stoned Paul! The one they counted as dead had returned to their city alive and well, still peaching the message they despised! Paul and Barnabas could have chosen a different path back to Antioch by proceeding on to the Cilician Gates and onto Paul's home city of Tarsus, and from there back to Antioch of Syria. Instead they returned to the cities where they had suffered persecution because strengthening the new converts was a priority even though it was dangerous. Possibly, as a precaution, they ministered privately to the disciples rather than publicly to all men so as not to invite further threats to their lives.

Acts 14:22

Great emphasis is put on the necessity of "confirming the souls of the disciples" and instructing them. The word "confirming" (KJV) means they strengthened the disciples and made every effort to establish them firmly in the faith. Luke uses the same verb in Acts 15:32; 15:41 and 18:23. The believers were to be instructed, admonished and taught over and over again. There is never too much teaching; yet sadly, in our day there is often too little teaching. May we not be weary in the work, but keep on indoctrinating believers in the precious truths of the Word of God.

They exhorted and encouraged the disciples to "continue in the faith." There is no implication here of real believers apostatizing from the faith, but simply to remain, rest in, hold closely and steadfastly to the foundational truths and principles of heavenly Christianity, and avoiding imbibing any errors and false teachings that would undermine the foundations of their faith. For while genuine believers cannot become apostates, it is possible to fall under the influence of very dangerous and pernicious doctrine (as we know the Galatian saints eventually did).¹⁴

"We must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God." Does this mean that we must go through the future tribulation period in order to enter the kingdom as posttribulationists teach? Notice that it does not say that we must go through "**the** tribulation" (that is, the great tribulation described in Matthew 24:21). Yet, every believer must pass through general tribulation (trouble, distress, affliction), even as our Lord taught in John 16:33, "In the world **ye shall have tribulation**, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." Indeed, Paul taught that believers are appointed unto afflictions and tribulation (1 Thess. 3:3-4), and yet we are not appointed unto wrath (1 Thess 5:9), that special outpouring of the wrath of God during the end of this present age. In this present age God allows His saints to be under persecution and to find great resistance to the gospel. We should not expect to be treated differently by the world than our Lord was (John 15:20-21). May the Lord help us to do what is right for His glory, and not to expect praise from men. Beware if all men speak well of you (Luke 6:26)! This does not mean we should go around provoking people to speak evil of us. Paul and Barnabas wanted believers to know that they should expect problems and tribulations because Satan is still the god of this world, even though he has been judicially defeated

¹⁴See George Zeller's study, "Can a True Believer Totally Depart from the Faith," accessible here: <https://www.middletonbiblechurch.org/freegrace/departff.pdf>

on the cross. Satan is still actively at work in this world (1 Peter 5:8), and yet our God has a plan to accomplish His purposes. In the end, the Lord Jesus will win!

“We must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God.” This is a statement of fact concerning all believers. It is not a conditional promise based on our merit or worthiness. It is not saying, “If you pass through much tribulation, then and only then are you qualified to enter the kingdom of God.” It simply means that it is necessary for believers, by virtue of who and what they are in Christ, to enter the Kingdom of God through varying degrees of tribulations. As long as we are in this wicked world of darkness, we will experience that hatred coming from Satan, Satan’s angels, and the children of Satan (John 15:20-21; Eph. 6:11-12; John 8:44).

Notice that these preachers presented the kingdom as a realm into which we have not yet entered, but which we will enter in the future following this present time of tribulation. This is an argument against the “kingdom now” theology that is prevalent in so many of churches today.

Acts 14:23

The word “ordained” (KJV) means appointed, designated or chosen. With Paul and Barnabas absent, these churches would need some men to assume leadership (compare Titus 1:5). Notice that at this early stage it was the missionary team who selected the leaders, not the local church. However, to what extent they involved the local church we are not told.¹⁵ Barnes believed that the missionaries and the church were both involved:

The word here refers simply to an *election* or *appointment* of the elders. It is said, indeed, that Paul and Barnabas did this. But probably all that is meant by it is that they presided in the assembly when the choice was made. It does not mean that they appointed them without consulting the church.¹⁶

The fact that they prayed in conjunction with fasting indicates how serious they were about determining the mind of God in selecting these leaders. These elders would be responsible for the spiritual welfare of the assembly in the absence of Paul and Barnabas.

They **commended** these believers to the Lord in much the same way that Paul commended the Ephesian believers to the Lord, where the same word is used (Acts 20:32). They commended them to God and to the word of His grace! New believers are spiritually immature, but God is able to keep His own and cause them to grow in holiness.

¹⁵An alternate view is that the Greek term “ordained” or “appointed” originally meant “to elect by a vote of raised hands.” This meaning suggests that the congregation was involved (compare the word’s usage in 2 Corinthians 8:19). In Acts 6:3 it was the Jerusalem congregation that chose the first deacons. For a discussion of this view, see Homer A. Kent, Jr., *Jerusalem to Rome—Studies in Acts*, pages 118-119.

¹⁶Albert Barnes, *Barnes Notes*, under Acts 14:23 (page 223 in the Baker Book House edition).

Acts 14:24-25

They did not preach the word in Perga on their initial trip to Asia Minor, but now on their return journey they did minister in this city. Luke does not record the results of his gospel preaching in Perga.

Attalia was on the coast and from there the missionary team was able to find a ship headed back to Antioch.

Acts 14:26

They returned to Antioch, their home base. This is very precious and important. The sending church received a full report of the ministry of the men that they had sent forth. We have to remember that there were no phone calls or emails or text messages going back and forth with reports of what they were doing and what they had experienced. The believers in Antioch must have been astounded to hear of the experiences of Paul and Barnabas. Perhaps they had not even heard that Mark had abandoned the team at the beginning of the tour. Perhaps they had not heard that Paul and Barnabas had been first worshiped and then stoned at Lystra, and all the other amazing things that had happened to them along the way. It may have taken many hours to give that full report to the saints at Antioch. It would have been fascinating to listen in. No doubt they provided details and additional information that Luke, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, chose not to include.

When we support missionaries, it is so important to know what they are really doing. As we pray for them and financially support them, how can we keep track of what is happening? We are accountable to God for the people we support, are we not? We need full reports. It is not enough just to post prayer letters on a bulletin board and hope that somebody will glance at them. Reporting and accountability is very important to the Lord.

They had been committed (lit., handed over) to the grace of God (compare Acts 15:40). They labored by the grace of God (1 Cor. 15:10). They fulfilled their mission by the grace of God. *“O let Thy grace inspire my soul with strength divine; May all my powers to Thee aspire, and all my days be Thine”* (Augustus M. Toplady).

On their total journey, it is estimated that they had traveled 1,250 miles, a good part of it on foot. It was a remarkable journey.

Acts 14:27

The whole church came together to hear all that God had done through Paul and Barnabas. The report was not just given to the church leaders, but to the entire congregation. They did not boast about all that **they** had done, but rather they rehearsed what **the Lord had done with them**. We are reminded of Mark 16:15: “And they went forth, and preached everywhere, the **Lord working with them**.”

God opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles as multitudes went through that door and passed from death unto life. Notice that these Gentiles came to know the Lord **by faith**, and not by the works of

the law. Paul and Barnabas never instructed these Gentiles to be circumcised or to keep the law of Moses. They proclaimed the gospel of the grace of God, and never taught that salvation was by the works of the law. No doubt, Paul and Barnabas stressed these points to the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15:12.

Acts 14:28

Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch for a long time, perhaps for a whole year. It may have been during this time that Paul heard horrible reports about what had happened in some of these cities where they had been (Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe). He heard that they had defected from the pure gospel and had turned to another gospel, even a different gospel than the one that Paul had preached to them (Gal. 1:6-9). The preachers of this false gospel were probably Judaizers who had most likely come from the church at Jerusalem. The key issue in this enormous controversy involved how a person gets saved and how a person qualifies for God's heaven in relation to the law.

Sadly, the work that Paul and Barnabas had accomplished in these Galatian cities was hijacked by these anti-grace Judaizers, and this serious situation formed the occasion for the writing of Paul's letter to the Galatians. This doctrinal issue is also strongly addressed in the next chapter of the book of Acts.

Summary of Paul's First Missionary Journey¹⁷

1. Under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, Luke chose to write selected events of Paul's first journey. The only recorded message was at the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch and even that with minimum detail.
2. Large numbers of Greek-speaking pagans in the Greco-Roman cities were very open to the gospel. They responded positively in mass to the good news of salvation by grace through faith in the saving merits of Messiah's death and resurrection.
3. Paul and Barnabas stayed with each assembly of believers as long as possible in order to ground them in the faith. They even backtracked and arranged for leadership in the churches before heading home.
4. Spreading the gospel in the Greco-Roman world was not without severe opposition, most at the hands of antagonistic Jews who resisted the gospel of salvation by grace.
5. The strategy of Paul and Barnabas upon entering a town was first to seek a synagogue and begin evangelizing there.
6. Paul emerged as the chief spokesman and leader of missionary activity among the Gentiles.

¹⁷These points of summary are taken from *Verse-by-Verse Through Acts*, Vol. 2, by Ron Merryman, pages 96-97, published by Merryman Ministries, Tullahoma, TN 37388.

Appendix 1

Were the Cities Paul Visited on His First Missionary Journey Part of the Province of Galatia?

As this commentary reveals, Dr. Whitcomb taught that cities, such as Lystra and Derbe, were part of the province of Galatia, and that some time after Paul left these cities they were led astray by Judaizers. This led to the writing of Paul's letter to the Galatians in which he endeavored to bring them back to the principles of grace.

This may seem confusing in light of Acts 14:6 where the text says that Lystra and Derbe were cities of the province of Lycaonia. It does not say they were cities in the province of Galatia.¹⁸

Charles Ryrie, in his *Ryrie Study Bible*, summarizes the two main interpretations:

At the time of the writing of this letter the term "Galatia" was used both in a geographical and in a political sense. The former referred to north-central Asia Minor, north of the cities of Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe; the latter referred to the Roman province (organized in 25 B.C.) that included southern districts and those cities just mentioned. If the letter was written to Christians in North Galatia, the churches were founded on the second missionary journey and the epistle was written on the third missionary journey, either early from Ephesus (about A.D. 53) or later (about 55) from Macedonia. In favor of this is the fact that Luke seems to use "Galatia" only to describe North Galatia (Acts 16:6; 18:23).

If the letter was written to Christians in South Galatia, the churches were founded on the first missionary journey, the letter was written after the end of the journey (probably from Antioch, ca. A.D. 49, making it the earliest of Paul's epistles), and the Jerusalem council (Acts 15) convened shortly afterward. In favor of this dating is the fact that Paul does not mention the decision of the Jerusalem council that bore directly on his Galatian argument concerning the Judaizers, indicating that the council had not yet taken place.

William MacDonald has given another helpful summary:

The date of the Epistle (to the Galatians) depends on the precise meaning of the expressions "the churches of Galatia" and "Galatians." If it refers to the southern part of Asia Minor, an earlier date, even before the Jerusalem Council, is likely. If the northern part is meant, a later date is called for.

Geographically the term "Galatia" was used for the north and *politically* it was used for the south—the Roman province of Galatia.

¹⁸See a clarifying note on this in F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, pages 288-289.

The North Galatian theory was standard until the 1800's and is largely held by German scholars still. There is no evidence that Paul ever ministered to the "Galatians" of that area, but this certainly does not rule it out.

Especially since Sir William Ramsay made it popular, the South Galatian theory has been widely held in Great Britain and North America. Since Luke gives much space in Acts to Paul's missionary work in this area (Antioch in Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, and Derby), it would seem likely that the apostle would have written to his converts there. Since Paul evangelized southern Galatia on his First Missionary Journey and revisited it on his Second, an early date is possible for Galatians. If the letter was penned *before* the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 (A.D. 49), this would explain why the question of circumcision was still a very live issue. Theodor Zahn, a leading conservative German scholar, dates Galatians during Paul's Second Missionary Journey, from Corinth. This would make it his very earliest Epistle.

If the northern theory is correct, Galatians was probably written in the 50's, perhaps as early as 53, but probably later.

If, as we believe, the southern theory is correct, and especially if Galatians was written before Paul attended the Jerusalem Council, which decided the issue of circumcision for Gentile Christians, the book can be dated A.D. 48.¹⁹

Those who hold to the southern theory would include William Ramsay, F. F. Bruce, William Hendrikson, Herman Ridderbos, John Whitcomb, Homer Kent and a large host of others.

It is not a crucial issue because Paul's arguments in the book of Galatians stand on their own regardless of the exact audience he was writing to.

¹⁹William MacDonald, *Believer's Bible Commentary*, pages 1873-1874.