

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

by

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

WORSHIPPED AND STONED

(Acts 14:1-20)

OUTLINE

Key verse - 22

1. The manner in which the Word should be preached: **“and so spake, that a great multitude both of the Jews and also of the Greeks believed”** (v. 1)
2. The manner in which the opposition arises to the Gospel (v. 2).
3. The proper tenacity of missionaries (v. 3).
4. The theme of the missionary: **“The word of his grace”** (v. 3).
5. The effect of earnest mission work (v. 4). The hearers are divided - some are won - some antagonize.
6. Taking precautions for the preservation of one’s life (vv. 5-6).
7. The divine support given to the missionaries (vv. 8-10).
8. The greatest peril to the missionary (vv. 11-15). The temptation to receive worship (or human praise).
9. The evidence of God’s person and power (vv. 15-17).
10. The fleeting nature of popularity (vv. 19-20).

In continuing the study of the first missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas we find them first at Iconium. In this paragraph we follow them to Lystra and Derbe, and to the region round about in the province of Lyconia. The distance from Antioch of Pisidia to Iconium, over the road which was commonly traveled, would be about ninety miles; from Iconium to Lystra would be about forty miles.

Though they had been cast out of Antioch by reason of persecution, yet as they went on their way they **“filled with joy, and with the Holy Ghost”** (13:52). They would travel to the southeast over the Roman road. It had been built about half of a century before that time. It was the road which bound the nations of the east to the great “Mistress of the World.” They would see caravans bearing their burdens and the Roman post whose swift horses carried the mail of the Imperial Government. While they knew the importance of these burden bearers and fleet-footed messengers, they believed that the message which they were bearing was of more importance than that of all the others.

Though they were traveling over the road along which the Roman legions had been hurled to subdue the nations from Britain to the Euphrates and to bring a season of quiet among the nations the like of which the world had possibly never known; yet they believed that they represented a greater King who through them was proclaiming a message which should bring a greater blessing and a more lasting peace to the world. With this thought in their hearts they hastened on toward the next important city.

When they came to a certain fork of the road which turned to the left, they climbed the side of the hill, up over the shoulder of two mountains and came out on the border of a plain. From there, in the distance, they could see a walled city. They knew they were near the city of Iconium. Did Paul think of another city, Damascus, which was similarly located with mountains on the west, and a river running out of the mountains which lost itself in the plain below? Iconium and Damascus are said to be the two oldest cities because they are places where men find water after long stretches of arid country. They are like oases in the desert. Would it be possible that here, in this somewhat isolated city, they could preach the Gospel without being molested by the Jews? Paul and Barnabas did not likely so deceive themselves. Whatever might be the result they would tell the people the Good News; they were in the service of the great KING and as soldiers of the cross they would do their duty.

AN EXAMPLE TO PREACHERS

Paul and Barnabas set an example as to the manner in which the Word should be preached. They entered into the synagogue, at Iconium, **“and so spake, that a great multitude both of the Jews and also of the Greeks believed”** (v. 1). They *so spake* that a great multitude believed. We remember that they **“were filled with joy, and with the Holy Ghost”** (13:52). Paul’s preaching must have been, as it was in sowing the seed of the Word in order that, through **“the demonstration of the Spirit and of power.”**

This is an instance of how Jesus continued to work by His Spirit through the disciples. Jesus had said: **“greater works than these shall he do”** (John 14:12). Jesus was still, however, the cause of the *“greater works.”* He was using their voices to bring the message and the Holy Spirit to change the hearts of the hearers. They were giving all the honor to Christ. This is at least the fourteenth time since Pentecost that we are told that a multitude believed as a result of preaching the Gospel.

The value of the human instrument, however, should not be overlooked. The manner in which the minister or the missionary speaks has much to do with the result. Paul was well trained in the use of the Bible. He made careful preparations, as is evident from all of his recorded sermons or addresses. He was very careful to adapt himself to his surroundings. He spoke clearly and logically. He used the recognized methods of oratory. He appealed to the emotions as well as to the will. He besought men *“with tears”* when urging them to receive Christ. He depended upon the Holy Spirit to change men’s hearts but he exerted himself to the utmost, as man, that he might be a fit instrument in His hands. There are those who misinterpret the Scripture in this regard.

There are ministers and missionaries who believe that immediate preparation is not necessary for the minister. They make no special effort to follow the ordinary principle of logic or to make their speech impressive. They affirm that they speak as the Spirit leads them. But may not the Holy Spirit lead one, a few hours or a few days before he is to speak, just as truly as at the moment of speaking? We believe that it is necessary that we shall sow our wheat if we are to reap a crop. It is just as important to make the best preparation for sowing the seed of the Word in order that, through the power of God, we may reap a harvest of souls.

THE MANNER IN WHICH OPPOSITION ARISES

“But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles, and made their minds evil affected against the brethren” (14:2). When a multitude were believing, and happy in their faith, why might they not be allowed to go forward in peace? It was not the people in general who objected to the preaching of the Gospel and the growth of the church in Iconium. The trouble was caused by the hardened Jews. As it was in Iconium, as it was in Antioch, as it was a little later in Lystra, so it was generally in the history of the missionary journeys of Paul, and so it has ever been. The multitudes heard Jesus gladly but their leaders aroused bitter opposition against Him. The preaching of Peter and the apostles brought joy in Jerusalem but the rulers began to persecute them. The Devil makes use of some disobedient and hardened men to misrepresent and blaspheme and maltreat the Gospel and its messengers, and they find many who are willing to listen, until finally open and perhaps violent opposition is aroused.

There are groups throughout our land and throughout the world who are, by vast organizations, and immense sums of money, arousing men and women against the Christian religion. Atheists from Russia have stirred up trouble and persecution against the missionaries in China. Atheists in America are endeavoring to enlarge their organizations in order to destroy the Bible and the teaching of Christianity. Fanatical opponents of the Christian religion have stirred up feeling and have aroused mobs which have massacred multitudes of Christians in Turkey. Satan’s methods at present are, to a large extent, a repetition of his methods in the past.

THE PROPER TENACITY OF MISSIONARIES

The reason is given for a period of teaching in Iconium: **“Long time therefore abode they speaking boldly in the Lord, which gave testimony unto the word of his grace, and granted signs and wonders to be done by their hands”** (14:3). To what does the “therefore” refer? It evidently refers to the fact of the opposition and the difficulties which the missionaries had to face. They had won a great number to Christ. There were no doubt many who were still being led to Christ. When they were permitted to do so, Paul and Barnabas wished to help the newly found disciples. They would not hurry away because of opposition and leave them to fight their battles alone. They remained to instruct and encourage the weak, to endeavor to convince their adversaries, to witness for Christ, and to work signs and wonders that all might see and believe. There were times when they were compelled to shake off the dust of their feet against a city, but they would not do so until they had tried to their utmost to win them and to encourage those who should be left behind.

The history of the centuries is full of names of men, yes and of women, who have remained at their post in the face of desperate opposition and sometimes at the cost of their lives. They did not want to leave the disciples whom they had won until they were well established in the faith; they did not want their adversaries to think that it would be an easy matter to drive out any and all missionaries; they hoped if possible to win even their most bitter opponents to Christ. John G. Paton did not leave the island of Tanna until he had suffered the most thrilling and dangerous perils. When he was finally driven out he longed to go back as soon as possible, and when later he began work on the neighboring island of Aniwa he still longed to teach and encourage those who had been awakened to seek Christ on Tanna. Fifty years ago Hiram Bingham and his wife went from Hawaii to the Gilbert Islands, then inhabited by cannibals, "sullen, passionate, cruel and treacherous," as they were described by the navigators of that day. What if they had left because of their first opposition and cruelty? There would have been no report such as there has been recently, that thirty thousand Christians of the Gilbert Islands met to celebrate the emergence of their race from savagery to civilization, and all the pastors of these people had been trained by their first missionary.

THE THEME OF THE MISSIONARY

We are told that Paul and Barnabas "**gave testimony unto the word of his grace**" (14:3). Their theme was, the Word of His grace. This was always the central theme of Paul's preaching. It included the message of the Cross; it included the fact of the resurrection; in fact it included the whole record of the work of Jesus. All that He did was done that He might save men by His grace. Paul always emphasized the grace of Christ and it is well if we follow his example as we preach or as we teach. In Syria, and Asia Minor and Greece and Rome the message which was both applicable and convincing was the Word of His grace. It emphasizes the fact that all that we are, all that we ever hope to be we owe to the favor of God which He bestows on account of the work and the death of Christ. The Word of His grace, will be the theme of God's messengers while the world shall last, and it will be the theme of the redeemed in glory.

THE EFFECT OF EARNEST MISSION WORK

The effect of the preaching of Paul and Barnabas was, in part, to divide the hearers. "**But the multitude of the city was divided: and part held with the Jews, and part with the apostles**" (14:4). Men who have no vital message; men who speak in vague, pointless phrases do not cause division. They do not antagonize men, nor do they win them. Paul was not there merely to discuss some abstract subject of philosophy, he was there to preach Christ. He preached the love of God, but he also preached the eternal verities of life and death. As a result the city was divided.

The earnest, faithful preaching of the Gospel always causes division. It wins some men to the way of life; it antagonizes those who are set in the way of wickedness. Jesus said, upon one occasion, I came not to send peace but a sword. The sword of the Spirit pierces to the dividing asunder of the soul and spirit, but it also divides asunder man from man. It sets the righteous in one camp and the wicked in another.

When Paul and Barnabas fled from Iconium the mob had already gathered to stone them. It is not necessarily a condemnation of the minister or of the missionary because many enemies are aroused. It is a sad fact that many Christians have not yet learned that the Gospel must bring division, and so they, like the enemies of Christ, often blame the minister of God when division arises. But they should remember that it is inevitable that division shall arise. **“Suppose ye that I am come to give peace on earth? I tell you, Nay; but rather division: For from henceforth there shall be five in one house divided, three against two, and two against three. The father shall be divided against the son, and the son against the father; the mother against the daughter, and the daughter against the mother; the mother in law against her daughter in law, and the daughter in law against her mother in law”** (Luke 12:51-53).

“He hath no enemies you say,
My friend your boast is poor.
He who hath mingled in the fray
Of duty, that the brave endure,
Must have made foes. If he has none
Small is the work that he has done.
He has hit no traitor on the hip;
He has cast no cup from perjured lip;
He has never turned the wrong to right;
He has been a coward in the fight”

PRECAUTIONS IN CARING FOR ONE’S LIFE

There is need of care for life on the part of the missionary: **“And when there was an assault made both of the Gentiles, and also of the Jews with their rulers, to use them despitefully, and to stone them, They were ware of it, and fled unto Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and unto the region that lieth round about”** (14:5-6). The missionary is likely to receive criticism whether he remains and is injured or dies, or whether he flees to protect his life. In the former instance some will say he risked too much, in the latter, he should not have been so cowardly.

The missionary, however, should take reasonable precautions to protect his life. Paul was not a coward, and yet he fled; John Knox was not a coward, and yet he fled; Patrick Hamilton was not a coward, and yet he fled from his persecutors upon one occasion. Later Hamilton was seized and put to death. Paul’s life ended, at last, by violence; he was beheaded. Paul, however, did not teach us to take undue risks of life. He saved his life again and again because he fled. Sometimes he escaped under the cover of darkness. Sometimes he appealed for protection to the Roman government because he was a Roman citizen. The soldier of the Cross is to be a true soldier but there are times when the Captain of his salvation orders a temporary retreat.

DIVINE SUPPORT GIVEN

Divine support was given to the missionaries by the ability to perform miracles:

“Granted signs and wonders to be done by their hands . . . And there sat a certain man at Lystra, impotent in his feet, being a cripple from his mother’s womb, who never had walked: The same heard Paul speak: who stedfastly beholding him, and perceiving that he had faith to be healed, Said with a loud voice, Stand upright on thy feet. And he leaped and walked” (14:3, 8-10). Wonders and signs were wrought in Iconium by the hands of Paul and Barnabas. Thus God testified to the Jews and the Greeks that the missionaries were of God, and that the Christ whom they preached was the true Messiah. Many hearing and seeing believed.

At Lystra there seems to have been no synagogue. There Paul could not begin with the history of Israel or with the prophets because these people were unfamiliar with them. He, however, preached Christ and soon noticed that a cripple who was in the crowd and who heard him speak was showing signs of having faith. He could possibly see a new light beaming in his countenance. The Spirit evidently guided him so that he knew that the man was a true believer. He saw **“that he had faith to be healed”** (14:9). Paul, therefore, said with a loud voice, **“Stand upright on thy feet.”** The man leaped up, at once, and walked. Paul did not pray, he did not make an appeal in the name of Christ, he simply commanded the man to stand upright on his feet. The record makes clear the fact that Paul did not intend to convey the impression that he had divine power. The man was healed on account of his own faith in Christ. So soon as he found that men had mistaken the power which caused the miracle he began to set them right.

There are those about us who continue to affirm that they have, or may have, such power as the apostles had to heal. They should note however, that the apostles did not always have power to heal. Paul, upon one occasion had to go and leave his friend sick. He did not have the ability to heal him. God gave the apostles and early disciples, at times, power to perform miracles. At other times that power was withheld. The Spirit of God directed them in these miraculous works. Miracles, even with the apostles, were not the usual, but the unusual part of their work.

That men cannot work miracles today, is not because Christ does not have as much power as formerly, but because he does not see fit to continue to work miracles through His disciples. They do not need to speak with tongues today because they can secure an interpreter or a language teacher. They can secure the Bible written in almost every language and dialect. Men do not need the miracles of tongues in order to bear the light of the Gospel to the various nations of the world. They do not need to heal miraculously because God has so guided the mind of man that he has discovered many of the secrets of nature and can find cures for various forms of illness. Moreover, the original reason for the bestowal of power to work miracles was not primarily to cure diseases, but to testify to the Deity of Jesus Christ. We have that evidence in the history of the Bible and more clearly manifest in nature and in the growth and power of the church today. The great work of the disciples of Christ in the early church was not to heal but to preach, and that is their great work today.

A GRAVE PERIL

The greatest peril to the missionaries and ministers of God’s Word is not opposition, but praise. Paul and Barnabas were placed in grave peril by mistaken worshippers:

“And when the people saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in the speech of Lycaonia, The gods are come down to us in the likeness of men. And they called Barnabas, Jupiter; and Paul, Mercury’s, because he was the chief speaker. Then the priest of Jupiter, which was before their city, brought oxen and garlands unto the gates, and would have done sacrifice with the people” (14:11-13). The peril was not that of body, at first, but of soul. The people of Lystra offered to worship them. Before the main gate of the city there was a splendid temple of Zeus (Jupiter), the chief of the gods, where sacrifices were offered by white-robed priest. There was a legend in Lystra which declared that someday Zeus, with his messenger Hermes (Mercury), would come and visit the city. Ovid, in speaking of a mythological scene which was supposed to be laid in this very vicinity, represents Jupiter as speaking as follows:

“I will descend, said I,
In hope to prove the loud complaints a lie,
Disguised in human shape, I traveled round
The world, and more than what I heard I found.”

When idolatrous people of Lystra heard Paul command the man who had been a cripple from his youth to stand up, and when they saw the man leap up and walk, they at once concluded that the chief of their gods had actually come. They knew this man who had been healed; they knew it was no traveling fakir in disguise who had straitened up and begun to walk. They knew that his cure was supernatural and they ascribed the result to the greatest of their gods. They had never seen or heard of anything like it. They would prepare for a sacrifice in his honor at once. They were convinced that Barnabas was Zeus (Jupiter) and Paul was Hermes (Mercury). They called Paul, Hermes because he was the spokesman, as they thought, of Zeus.

Paul and Barnabas were busy teaching and possibly did not make an effort to notice what was going on. Moreover, in all probability, they could not understand the dialect of the people of Lycaonia. At least they had no idea that preparations were being made for offering a sacrifice to them until the priest of Zeus brought oxen and garlands and all was ready for the sacrifice. When they perceived what was being done they put a stop to it immediately.

“they rent their clothes, and ran in among the people, crying out, And saying, Sirs, why do ye these things? We also are men of like passions with you, and preach unto you that ye should turn from these vanities unto the living God, which made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are therein” (14:14-15). All nature is a witness to His providential government, for He gives us rain and food and happiness. Even then the people wanted to carry out their plans and go forward with the worship which they had planned.

We have no hint in the record, that this was a temptation to the missionaries. And yet the temptation must have come to them as it comes to all men. At one time, even the apostles strove as to who should be the greatest. Some wanted to sit at either hand of Jesus when He was on the throne. More men fall through the temptation to receive honor than through opposition. It caused the fall of the angels from heaven. It caused the fall of king after king in Israel. It was one of the greatest temptations offered to Jesus. It caused the fall and terrible death of Herod. He received the praise which was due to God when he was only a sinful man.

The false gods have not all perished from the earth in enlightened lands. Though men in our midst are not tempted to bow down before a graven image, yet they do bow down to gods of wealth and honor and fame. The American girl who recently renounced the Christian religion, that she might accept the Hindu religion in India and marry a rich prince there, no doubt did not profess to change her faith because she had learned to love the idol gods of India, but because she had become a worshipper of the millions of gold which her prince possessed. She had evidently been a worshipper of gold in America before she went to India, so, after all, she probably did not change her religion at all, but continued to worship wealth there as she had done here.

It would have been easy for Paul and Barnabas to say, we will let these people alone, we do not want to offend them, and perhaps if we are given a place of honor by them we will have the better opportunity to win them to Christ. They knew that any acceptance of honor which was of the nature of worship was displeasing to God. They resisted a peril, before which multitudes have fallen, when they declined every honor at Lystra that would place them in a class of superior men.

THE EVIDENCE OF GOD

Paul and Barnabas not only declined divine honors but they showed the people of Lystra the evidence of a living God: **“Nevertheless he left not himself without witness, in that he did good, and gave us rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness. And with these sayings scarce restrained they the people, that they had not done sacrifice unto them”** (14:17-18). With these people he could not base his argument upon the revelation of the Bible because they did not know its record. Paul based his argument upon the revelation of nature. He began with what the people knew. They knew the regularity of the seasons and the fruitfulness of the summer. Paul declared that these are evidences of the existence and power of the living God. The stories of mythology and the gods which men make are vain things. The God whom we serve made heaven and earth and the sea, and all that is in them. The writer of Ecclesiastes said, **“He hath made every thing beautiful in his time: also he hath set the world in their heart”** (Eccl. 3:11). Paul depended upon the intuitive principle which is in the human soul, say some; rather we would say that he depended upon the light given by the Holy Spirit.

He adapted the argument to them in a remarkable manner. Paul did this elsewhere when speaking to the heathen. He trusted in God to open the soul, but he would give them the best reasons which his skill and intellect could prepare. Others have followed Paul in all ages. The argument from design in nature is ever an impressive one. A great and supreme mind and power must be back of all the wonders of nature. Who is it sends the rain from the sky? Who holds them in their fixed positions?

We who have the Word of God to guide us today are more guilty than the heathen if we do not believe in Christ. We who have the history of man's creation and providential care in the world are guilty in the sight of God if we substitute an imaginary theory in place of the facts as revealed in the Word.

Paul had not arrived at the place of supposed enlightenment of the men who declare that all things have evolved by a slow process from a single speck of life, or indeed perhaps from dead matter, and complex life has made its way upward by its own resident forces without the guidance of any intelligent mind. Such a view is just as blind and unsatisfactory as the view of the Lycaonians with their many gods. Nevertheless this view, as it is being propagated today is blinding multitudes to the truth of the Word of God and is leaving them groping the darkness of skepticism. Why should we leave the Word of God and turn to fables? We think it ridiculous that they should believe in the fables about Zeus and Hermes, but what better is it for us to believe in the fables of the evolutionary biologist? Both are perversions of the revealed Word of God which teaches that God is the Author not only of all life, but of all kinds of life which have been created in the world.

THE FLEETING NATURE OF POPULARITY

The changing attitude of those who hear the message of the missionary is here strikingly manifested: **“And there came thither certain Jews from Antioch and Iconium, who persuaded the people, and, having stoned Paul, drew him out of the city, supposing he had been dead. Howbeit, as the disciples stood round about him, he rose up, and came into the city: and the next day he departed with Barnabas to Derbe”** (14:19-20). The people who were ready to worship Paul and Barnabas were shortly found in the act of stoning them. The Jews were not satisfied to drive these men from Antioch and Iconium, but they trailed them to Lystra and in their underhanded manner persuaded the people to stone them as they had attempted to do. This time Paul did not get word in time to escape. They stoned him until they supposed he was dead, and dragged his body out of the city. There were, however, already some disciples who had been won to Christ in Lystra, and they did not desert Paul in this hour of peril. They stood around him as he lay on the ground, apparently dead. Soon he regained consciousness, rose up and returned into the city. The next day he, with Barnabas, left for Derbe.

“Once was I stoned,” (II Corinthians 11:25) said Paul. That was a fearful mob which had abused him so fiercely that they thought he was dead. He, himself, had stood by and held the garments of men who had taken part in the stoning of the first martyr. Henceforth he knew all the suffering and bitterness through which Stephen had passed. He had witnessed the death of that good man and had become a missionary. There was likely another young man who had witnessed the stoning of Paul who also was to become a great missionary.

His name was Timothy. His mother was a Jewess and his father was a Greek. He had evidently heard Paul at this time and had believed. Paul speaks later of Timothy being his son in the faith. When he came through Lystra on a future missionary journey, Timothy was then a disciple and so well and favorably known in all that vicinity, that Paul took him with him as a member of their missionary band.

The question may arise in the mind of some one, why did God permit him to escape on other occasions and allow him to be stoned at this time? This is a question that is impossible to answer. Sometimes God deals with men so today; on one occasion his servant is allowed to escape from danger without injury; on another he is injured or made to suffer.

Even this Paul counted a victory in the end. When writing to Timothy later he reminded him of the fact that he knew what persecutions he had endured at Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, but he added: **“Persecutions, afflictions, which came unto me at Antioch, at Iconium, at Lystra; what persecutions I endured: but out of them all the Lord delivered me”** (II Tim. 3:11).

This lesson is apparent: namely that it is unwise to put one’s trust in man. He who is ready to worship us one day may be ready to stone us the next. It was true of Jesus; it was true of Paul, and it has been true thousands of times through the history of the intervening centuries. Our only unflinching trust is in God. When the multitudes were forsaking Jesus, he said to His disciples: **“Will ye also go away?”** Peter answered: **“Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life”** (John 6:67-68). May God give us the conviction of Peter that we may cling to Him through the world may forsake Him. **“Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness”** (Isaiah 41:10).

QUESTIONS (Acts 14:1-20)

1. How far was Iconium from Antioch of Pisidia?
2. In what spirit did they go to Iconium? (13:52)?
3. In what manner did they preach?
4. What was the result of their preaching?
5. What was the relation of the manner of their preaching to the result?
6. From what source did opposition arise? Compare conditions today.
7. How was their tenacity as missionaries shown?
8. Did true courage forbid flight? Does it today?
9. What was the theme of the missionaries at Iconium?
10. Are the hearers usually united or divided as the result of earnest mission work?
11. Tell of the miracle which Paul performed at Lystra.
12. By whose faith was this man healed?
13. Was faith always necessary on the part of the one who was being healed?
14. Did the apostles always have power to heal every one whom they would have desired to make well?
15. What was the object of miracles?
16. Why was the offer of worship to Paul and Barnabas a greater peril than opposition?
17. What attitude does the true Christian always take toward the suggestion of worship to man?
18. How did Paul attempt to convince these heathen people of the evidence of the true God?
19. What are we taught here of the fleeting nature of popularity?
20. What young man lived at Lystra who likely witnessed the stoning of Paul who was to become a great missionary?

~ end of chapter 24 ~

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