

## **“Paul at Lystra”**

### **Acts 14:8-23**

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### **Introduction:**

Most of us would probably agree that we as a society enjoy designating the leaders in various fields. We want to know the world’s richest man. We want to know the world’s fastest runner. We want to know who the best is. If we were to apply this way of thinking to the Scriptures, and if we were to go looking for the world’s most effective missionary, I think we might agree that this position would most likely be held by the apostle Paul. And so as we preach the gospel in a land that is becoming more and more hostile to the Christian faith, certainly we can look to the apostle Paul for encouragement.

We remember when Paul was converted, the Lord had special plans—that Paul would eventually take the good news to the Gentiles, and over time, Paul certainly took that mission seriously. We know from the New Testament book of Acts that Paul traveled all over the Mediterranean world—not because he loved adventure, not because he was in competition with anyone, not to make money, not to break any world records. But rather, Paul traveled so that he could teach the good news to the whole world. The apostle Paul was motivated by the love of Jesus. He refers to his life of preaching in **2 Corinthians 5:14** as he says, ***“For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died.”*** And so when Paul looked at the sacrifice of Christ, he was motivated to teach and preach and to do it regardless of the consequences.

We know that Paul’s life after he became a Christian can be divided into four missionary journeys. And this morning, I would like for us to consider a rather interesting situation from the apostle Paul’s First Missionary Journey—recorded for us in **Acts 13-14**. **\*\*PPT\*\*** And specifically, I would like for us to study what happened in the city of Lystra. We know from the beginning of **Acts 13** that Paul and Barnabas and John Mark were sent out on a missionary journey from the church in Antioch. They sailed to the island of Cypress where they preached in the synagogue in Salamis before they moved on to Paphos and encountered a government leader who wanted to believe—a proconsul by the name of Sergius Paulus. They were being opposed by a magician, a Jewish false-prophet, named Bar-Jesus. Paul eventually blinded the man, and they sailed on to Asia Minor. It was somewhere at this point that Saul started to be known as Paul.

Somewhere along the way, John Mark (the author of the book of Mark) apparently could not handle it anymore, so gave up and went back home to Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas continued traveling north to Antioch of Pisidia, where Paul once again

preached in the synagogue. He was well-received by many, but after a short time he was run out of town by the Jewish leaders, and the Bible says that Paul shook the dust off of his feet in protest before moving on to the city of Iconium. This brings us to **Acts 14**, where Paul preaches in Iconium. In the opening verses of **Acts 14**, the Bible says that Paul and Barnabas spoke in the Jewish synagogue—even to the point where many people believed, until, **"...the Jews who disbelieved stirred up the minds of the Gentiles and embittered them against the brethren,"** and then at that point Paul and Silas were basically run out of town, where they continued to preach the gospel.

This morning, I would like for us to focus on what happens next—in the city of Lystra, in the middle of Paul's First Missionary Journey, a turning point in the life of Paul. If you will, please look with me at **Acts 14:8-23**...

**<sup>8</sup> At Lystra a man was sitting who had no strength in his feet, lame from his mother's womb, who had never walked. <sup>9</sup> This man was listening to Paul as he spoke, who, when he had fixed his gaze on him and had seen that he had faith to be made well, <sup>10</sup> said with a loud voice, "Stand upright on your feet." And he leaped up and began to walk. <sup>11</sup> When the crowds saw what Paul had done, they raised their voice, saying in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have become like men and have come down to us." <sup>12</sup> And they began calling Barnabas, Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. <sup>13</sup> The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates, and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds. <sup>14</sup> But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their robes and rushed out into the crowd, crying out <sup>15</sup> and saying, "Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of the same nature as you, and preach the gospel to you that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, WHO MADE THE HEAVEN AND THE EARTH AND THE SEA AND ALL THAT IS IN THEM. <sup>16</sup> "In the generations gone by He permitted all the nations to go their own ways; <sup>17</sup> and yet He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness." <sup>18</sup> Even saying these things, with difficulty they restrained the crowds from offering sacrifice to them. <sup>19</sup> But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having won over the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead. <sup>20</sup> But while the disciples stood around him, he got up and entered the city. The next day he went away with Barnabas to Derbe. <sup>21</sup> After they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, <sup>22</sup> strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." <sup>23</sup> When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.**

As we look at what happened in Lystra, I would like for us to consider the healing of the man who couldn't walk, I'd like for us to consider Paul's sermon, and then I'd like for us to close by considering the persecution that they endured.

**I. First of all, though, let us consider THE HEALING OF THIS MAN WHO COULD NOT WALK. **\*\*PPT\*\*****

In **verse 8**, we find that this man had no strength in his feet, that he had been this way from birth, and that he had never walked. Obviously, none of us here this morning has ever been in that situation. Several weeks ago, our family went shopping at Savers over on the west side of Madison. They had an old wheelchair for sale, and the highlight of my night was wheeling myself around the back corner of that store! And for just a moment I tried to imagine what it would be like to be confined to a chair. It was interesting for the first five minutes, but after that, I was basically stuck. There was something lying across the aisle in one direction (a piece of clothing or something), and I could not get over it. In the other direction the aisle was too narrow—something was sticking out into the aisle, and it was a barrier that I could not cross. And this was all in the first five minutes. We can hardly imagine what it would have been like nearly 2,000 years ago in the city of Lystra.

In **verse 9**, we find that he was listening to Paul, and Paul (in **verse 10**) told the man to stand up on his feet. The Bible says that the man leaped up and began to walk immediately. I find it interesting that Paul was following the example of Christ, because in **Matthew 9:35-36**, the Bible says that, "**Jesus was going through all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness. Seeing the people, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd.**" What an impact this healing would have had on a man in this situation! Paul was following the example of his Lord!

But unfortunately, we find that Satan gave it a little twist. Instead of celebrating the power of the one true God, we find that the people started praising Paul and Barnabas as pagan gods. And so Satan goes for flattery. In **verse 12**, the people identified Barnabas as Zeus and Paul as Hermes. Apparently Barnabas was more mature, and Paul was doing most of the speaking, so Paul was identified as Hermes, the spokesman for Zeus. And these are not minor gods—Zeus was the most powerful of ancient Roman gods, and Hermes was right there at the top. And so we might wonder: Why were these people so quick to identify Paul and Barnabas as gods?

Well, we can look to secular history, and we can find an answer to that question. There was a legend in the area that Zeus and Hermes had once come to earth in disguise. No one had offered them any hospitality except for one older couple, and the legend says that everyone died in punishment except for the one older couple. And so when Paul and Barnabas came to town and healed the man, the people assumed that they were being given a second chance and they were determined not to make the same mistake twice. And so they even went a little overboard in

welcoming Paul and Barnabas. In **verse 13**, we find that the local priest of Zeus even brought sacrifices and wreaths and was getting ready to offer a sacrifice right there on the spot.

We can only imagine being praised as gods and how tempting that might have been. There are many people today who would have gladly accepted the praise. It would have been so tempting to exploit these people for all of their money. Out of pride, they could have very easily taken all the credit for themselves. But Paul and Barnabas were humble, God-fearing men—they tore their clothing out of grief, out of agony for what was being done—and they rushed out into the crowd shouting and explaining that they were only human, just like the rest of them. On our upcoming trip to Europe, I have read something very interesting about the Vatican that I hope to see in person. Apparently in St. Peter's Basilica, there is a statue of Peter. From what I have read, the statue is all dark and tarnished—except for Peter's toe. Apparently, people will stand in a long line for an opportunity to rub Peter's big toe. How sad—evidently, people are still paying more respect to a mere man than they are to God. And so we find that the miracle in Lystra was amazing, but it was taken in the wrong way, and the impression of the people had to be corrected.

## **II. As we continue looking at the situation in Lystra, we should also take a look at PAUL'S SERMON (in verses 15-18). **\*\*PPT\*\*****

We need to remember that there were very few Jews in this crowd. In most cities, Paul started in the synagogue, but we find that Lystra is different. And so as Paul starts addressing a pagan crowd, as Paul starts speaking to a Greek audience that believes in the Roman system of mythology, Paul changes his approach. Up until this point, Paul has always started preaching by going back to the Old Testament—by looking at the prophecies and proving that Jesus is the Messiah. But Lystra is different. These people had never been accountable to the Old Testament. Many of these people had probably never even heard of the Law of Moses, and so Paul starts out by appealing to the natural world. In **verse 15** he says, ***"Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of the same nature as you, and preach the gospel to you that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, WHO MADE THE HEAVEN AND THE EARTH AND THE SEA AND ALL THAT IS IN THEM."***

In other words, Paul takes it back to the creation, and he says, ***"You need to turn away from your pagan gods to the one true and living God who made everything we see around us!"*** He refers to the fact that God left them a witness by caring for them through the years—with rain, and harvests, and food. And so Paul, as a Pharisee of Pharisees, preaches a sermon without a single reference to the Law of Moses! Very interesting! Paul started where they were. God had focused on the Jews, but He did not ignore the Gentiles. We remember what Paul would later write to the church in Rome concerning the Gentiles (in **Romans 1:20**), ***"For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse."*** And so Paul preaches the gospel

to the Gentiles. He uses a different method. He uses a different starting point, but the basic message is still the same (for Jews and Gentiles)—“**Repent, and turn from your sins to the Living God!**”

The apostle Paul set a pattern for our teaching and preaching even today—very rarely will we ever preach the gospel to a Jew. In fact, I can only think of one Jewish man I have ever taught here in Madison (it did not end well, by the way). But a vast majority of people we run into these days are Gentiles. Most people have no clue about the Old Testament. Most people have no clue about the Law of Moses. And so I would say, like Paul, that we are to be flexible in our method. As Paul said in **1 Corinthians 9:22**, “***...I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some.***” We can adapt our teaching method without compromising the truth of God’s word. If we want to reach our neighbors who have never read the Bible, Paul gives us the pattern right here in Lystra—we can start with nature and go from there. He gives us a great example.

And yet we find in **verse 18** that even after Paul’s sermon he and Barnabas were just barely able to restrain the crowds from offering sacrifices to them.

### **III. With that in mind, we turn to the results of all of this as we see THE PERSECUTION THAT PAUL RECEIVED. **\*\*PPT\*\*****

In **verse 19**, we find that certain Jews came all the way from Antioch and Iconium. If we were to look at the map, we would find that Antioch was at least 60 miles away, so they traveled for at least two days to get there (probably more), and when they get there the Bible says in (**verse 19**) that they, “***won over the crowds.***” It reminds us of what happened in Iconium back up in **verse 2**, where it says that, “***...the Jews who disbelieved stirred up the minds of the Gentiles and embittered them against the brethren.***” The Jews “***poisoned***” their minds, as one translation puts it. And how sad: Paul and Barnabas were doing such a great job preaching the word of God, but others come along and undo the good that had been done. Some people are not content with being lost, but they want to bring others with them. The same thing happens today. A Christian will explain the need for repentance, and someone will come along and say, “***No, no, you’ll be just fine.***” A gospel preacher will explain the importance of baptism, and maybe a spouse will come along later and say, “***No, no, that’s just a matter of opinion.***” A faithful Christian will explain to a friend the importance of the one true church, and another friend comes along and says, “***No, no, we are all headed to heaven, just by different roads.***” Satan loves to sabotage our efforts, and so minds are still poisoned even today.

The Bible then tells us that, “***...they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead.***” We remember that this account was written by Luke, a medical doctor. What a brutal form of execution—to throw rocks at a person until that person is dead.

As I was preparing this morning's lesson I wondered: What was Paul thinking as the people were throwing rocks? What was Paul thinking as he was being beaten and bruised—as his teeth were being smashed—as perhaps his bones were being broken? As he was drifting out of consciousness, what was going through Paul's mind? Maybe we can ask him someday, but I would imagine that Paul was thinking back to another stoning—the murder of a gospel preacher by the name of Stephen—recorded for us in **Acts 7**. The Bible says of Stephen in **Acts 7:58**, "**When they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him; and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul.**" **Acts 8** goes on to explain that, "**Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death.**" But back in **Acts 14**, we find that Paul is left for dead, and then we have a touching picture (in **verse 20**): As the disciples stand there encircling the body of the great apostle Paul, he gets up and goes right back into the city.

This morning's passage certainly helps to explain several other New Testament passages. For example, it helps to explain a verse that we are about to study this coming Wednesday evening—**Galatians 6:17**, where Paul says, "**From now on let no one cause trouble for me, for I bear on my body the brand-marks of Jesus.**" From looking at the apostle Paul, it was obvious that he had been abused for his Christian faith. As far as I can tell, the stoning in **Acts 14** is the first real physical abuse that Paul received.

Not only that, but this passage helps explain **2 Corinthians 11:24-25**, where Paul said, "**Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned...**" and he goes on to explain all of the abuse that he suffered. But the one stoning he referred to happened here, in the city of Lystra. Now we know the details of what Paul was talking about.

This morning, in light of what we have learned from the apostle Paul, perhaps we need to recommit to stepping out and taking a risk to explain the good news to a friend, or neighbor, or co-worker. Even after being left for dead, Paul gets up—bloody, and swollen, and limping—whatever it was, and he immediately goes directly back to the city where he had just been stoned. The apostle Paul was willing to risk it all—not only his finances, and time, and friendships, but he was willing to risk his life for the sake of teaching the good news of Jesus Christ.

The Bible goes on to tell us that Paul and Barnabas basically retraced their steps. They appointed elders at the churches they had just established, and they eventually made their way back to the city of Antioch where they gave a report on what they had accomplished with the help of the Lord.

### **Conclusion & Invitation:**

As we close this morning's lesson, we need to ask ourselves: Why was this recorded for us? What good ever came out of what happened here? Well, first of all, there was a congregation established in the city of Lystra. As we already noted, elders were appointed. This would have happened very quickly—right there on the same

journey, and so they were a rather energetic group of Christians who were eager to learn. Paul went back and visited them again on the Second and Third Missionary Journeys. They were consistent through the years.

But secondly, it also appears that there was a young man in that crowd by the name of Timothy. Several years later, Paul would go on a Second Missionary Journey, and we find in the opening verses of **Acts 16** that Paul returned to Derbe and Lystra. The Bible says, ***"And a disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek, and he was well spoken of by the brethren who were in Lystra and Iconium."*** Several years after that, Paul would write to the young preacher Timothy, and he would say (in **2 Timothy 3:10-11**), ***"Now you followed my teaching, conduct, purpose, faith, patience, love, perseverance, persecutions, and sufferings, such as happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium and at Lystra; what persecutions I endured, and out of them all the Lord rescued me!"*** Apparently, this young man was inspired by the apostle Paul, and he also dedicates his life to preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In a similar way, I hope that Paul's example will also inspire each of us here this morning to be more courageous in our daily walk with Christ. If you are not walking with Christ, the Bible tells us that we accept the sacrifice of Jesus by turning away from all forms of sin, by allowing ourselves to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of our sins, and by coming up out of the water determined to live our lives for God. If you are ready to obey the good news, you can let us know about your decision as we sing the next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: [church@fourlakescoc.org](mailto:church@fourlakescoc.org)