

Acts of the Apostles – Paul and the Spread of the Church

New Testament Survey – Lesson 17 (Part 3)

Yesterday, Becky and I were in a really cool store. We went in because I had decided that I need to be a “hat guy.” Not just any ordinary hat either. I wear ball caps all the time; I was not looking for another one of those. I wanted a hat that combines Indiana Jones, Clint Eastwood (in his western days), and a 1969 Woodstock attendee.

Now perhaps you are thinking, “Mark is off his rocker!” to which I would respond, “So?” I am pretty sure Becky was thinking that as well. But she is always real supportive of what I am trying to do, so I expected nothing but praise as I doffed the first hat and turned to her saying, “What do you think?” She did a good job muffling her laugh as she told me, “No! That looks bad!” I tried on a few more getting no better reception. When I pushed her on *why* a certain hat looked bad, she responded, “It’s too fussy.”

20 hats later... I found one that passed the Becky test. I bought it and began wearing it with great pride. It was official! I was no longer an ordinary lawyer on vacation in the Rockies. I was a really cool Indiana Jones, Clint Eastwood (western version), hippie lawyer! The hat stayed on my head almost four full hours before our youngest Sarah finally said, “Dad, please take that hat off! It just looks plain silly!”



Well, maybe in spite of my Colorado dreams, me in my new hat was a case of mistaken identity. I am not sure I really am an Indiana Jones, Clint Eastwood (quick-draw variety), Woodstock guy. I’m not sure the hat really makes the man. For that matter, I’m not sure the man makes the hat either! For some reason, seeing me in a hat just does not seem normal – yet! (I am not giving up hope.)

As we continue into Paul’s first missionary journey, we have a marvelous example of mistaken identity when Paul reached Lystra. Paul was wearing the right hat, but his audience didn’t quite see it at first! They thought his hat belonged to someone else! Before we get to that, however, we pick up from last week and add a couple of stops along the way.

PAUL'S FIRST MISSIONARY JOURNEY

The following map gives us orientation to their journey:



We have already covered the journey through the island of Cyprus, the landing in modern Turkey, and the inland journey and missionary stop at Pisidian Antioch. Last week, we considered the synagogue service where Paul and Barnabas began teaching the people of God's work in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We left off with the people requesting Paul and Barnabas to return the next week and speak more on Jesus.

The next Sabbath, Paul and Barnabas returned and the audience was huge! Clearly over the week, the people had been talking and promoting the coming service. As the synagogue began to fill up, it was soon apparent the room was not large enough. Many, if not most, of the attendees were Greeks, not Jews! As this began to register to the "normal" Jews who usually attended the services, jealousy

set in. As Paul's awaited lesson began, certain Jews began to speak out, contradicting Paul and "reviling him" (Acts 13:45).¹

Paul and Barnabas did not back down. They spoke plainly and boldly telling the Jews,

it was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it aside and judge yourself unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles (Acts 13:46).²

The Gentiles rejoiced, but the unconverted Jews were not so pleased! Some Jews go to the power brokers in town and manage to generate enough persecution against Paul and Barnabas that they shake the dust off their feet and leave the district heading to Iconium. The converted in Antioch continued on after Paul left "filled with joy and the Holy Spirit" (Acts 13:52).

Iconium

Iconium was about a 90-mile walk for Paul and Barnabas from Antioch. It was the "last [easternmost] city in Phrygia."³ Just as in Antioch, Paul and Barnabas went into the Jewish synagogue with their message. Again, as in Antioch,

a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed (Acts 15:1).

Soon, however, the Jews mounted a persecution in Iconium dividing the city over Paul and Barnabas on the one hand and the non-believing Jews on the other. When an attempt was made...to mistreat and to stone them, they learned of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe and the surrounding countryside (Acts 14:5-6).

¹ The English Standard Version translates the Greek *blasphemountes* (βλασφημουντες) as "reviling." The New International Version translates it "talked abusively against," while the New American Standard Version gives the meaning as "blaspheming." The Greek word does indeed mean *blaspheme* but it is in the sense of speaking abusively and even cursing Paul and his message.

² C. K. Barrett commented, "The Christian message was the fulfillment of Israelite history and especially of Israelite prophecy. No other people had so clear a right to hear what God now had to say, and...no other nation would be so likely to understand and accept what was said." *The International Critical Commentary, Acts* (T&T Clark 1994) V. 1 at 656. We might modify his last statement to say, "No other nation *should* be so likely to understand and accept what was said!"

³ Xenophon *Anabasis*, i.2.19.

Lystra

Here we find Paul's audience mistaking the hat he wore! To best understand what happened, we need to be first century Lystrians! In lieu of that, we will get what knowledge we need by reading the great Roman poet Publius Ovidius Naso (c. 43BC-17AD), or "Ovid" as he is commonly known today.

In 7 A.D., just 40 years before the time we find Paul on his first missionary trip, Ovid finished his greatest work, the *Metamorphoses*. This set of books was Ovid's effort at combining and linking together all the great mythical stories of his time into a long running narrative. Among the well-known stories he put into his work was one of a poor married couple and a special encounter they had in the midst of tending to their everyday lives.

As Ovid recounted the story, Jupiter (the Roman name for Zeus) took on the "guise of a mortal"⁴ along with Hermes (who had set aside his indicia of his godhood, the winged shoes and the the "caduceus" – a winged staff with two snakes entwined). The two gods, disguised as humans, went to "a thousand homes...seeking a place to rest," but all the homes were shut and locked.

Everyone refused them entry.

THE
CADECEUS



Ultimately, the poor and humble old couple invited Zeus and Hermes in for food, shelter, and rest. Although the couple had little to offer, they gave the gods the best of what they had. Of course, the couple had no idea who the guests really were, although they thought it odd that as often as they poured the wine, it never emptied!

After eating and seeing the commitment of the couple toward hospitality, the gods revealed their true identities. "'We are gods,' they said, 'and this wicked neighborhood shall be punished as it deserves; but to you shall be given exemption from this punishment.'" The gods then

transported the elderly couple away from the punishment, destroying all the people and homes that had refused them entrance.

⁴ All the quotations from Ovid are from book 8, the translation of F. J. Miller as revised by G. P. Goold in the Loeb Classical Library Edition.

By the end of the story, the couple became priests to Zeus and Hermes and their humble home became a marble temple. The couple was granted the wish of their choice. The final wish of the couple was to die together at the same time, and so the two eventually pass away by becoming trees that are entwined together. These trees, the locals say, could be seen and recognized “even to this day.”

Where did this supposedly occur? Where were the trees? Ovid tells us it was in “the Phrygian hill-country.” Phrygia was the very area where Paul and Barnabas were finishing up their first missionary journey. So, what does this have to do Paul and Barnabas in Lystra? For that answer, we pick back up the narrative Luke has given us.

Paul and Barnabas left Iconium for the countryside, including the village of Lystra, some 18 miles south/southwest of Iconium. Paul and Barnabas preached in Lystra, and we know that among those listening was an unnamed man crippled from birth. The crippled man listened to Paul with faith, and Paul, discerning the faith, proclaimed loudly,

Stand upright on your feet!

The man, for the first time in his life, “sprang up and began walking” (Acts 14:10).

This was not done in solitude in some dark alleyway, but was done before the eyes and ears of others. The people saw what was done and were amazed. These were people weaned on the story with which we began this discussion. These were people of Phrygia.⁵ They mistook Paul for someone wearing another hat! After all, hadn’t Zeus and Hermes had come to their area before dressed as mortals?

Their reaction to Paul and Barnabas, the miracle workers, now makes sense. Luke recorded it in Acts 14:11-12:

And when the crowds saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in Lycaonian, ‘The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!’ Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker.

These people were serious! Even the local priest of Zeus (who no doubt traced the ancestry of his job to the supposed encounter of the very first couple who became priests to Zeus),

⁵ When Paul returns to this area in his second missionary journey, Luke writes of the area as “the region of Phrygia and Galatia” (Acts 16:6).

brought oxen and garlands to the gates and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds” (Acts 14:13).

We better understand this by reading Ovid. Ovid notes in his account that as of his day, people were still laying garlands at the trees in honor of Zeus and the couple that first granted hospitality to Zeus and Hermes.

Paul and Barnabas were horrified. They tore their garments and showed themselves fully human, crying,

Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, 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 past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness (Acts 14:15-17).

Paul tried to put aside any ideas of divinity, pointed the people back to his message. Paul was not speaking of a god who needed human hospitality. Paul Spoke of God “who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them.” Despite these actions, Paul was scarcely able to restrain the people from sacrificing to them (Acts 14:18).

Luke then recorded that the Jews from up the road at Iconium and as far as Pisidian Antioch came into Lystra and “persuaded the crowds” against Paul. We are not told what was said, but we know the result. Paul was stoned and left for dead.

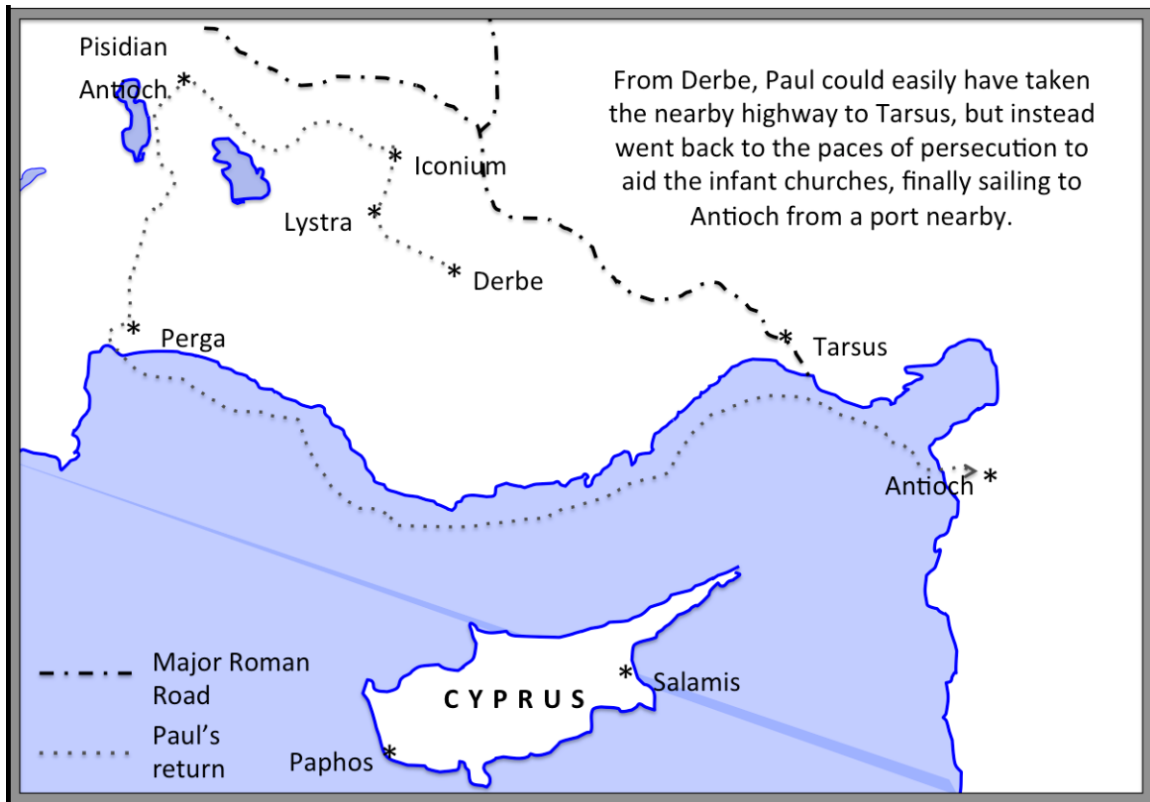
Derbe

As the disciples gathered around Paul, he got up and left the next day for Derbe, about a 55-mile walk. Paul and Barnabas continued to preach in Derbe. Scholars are uncertain which of several ruins represent the town of Derbe, and Luke provided very few details. But, we are told that Paul and Barnabas,

preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples (Acts 14:21).

After Derbe, Paul had several options for the return home. One was the overland route that would have taken Paul back through his hometown of Tarsus. He would have had a chance to see family, get some rest, and recover from the vicious wounds left from the stoning. That was not the choice Paul made, however. Instead, Paul and Barnabas opted to return through the very towns where they had met persecution and stoning. They went to Lystra, Iconium, and Pisidian Antioch.

Adding Tarsus to the map, we can see how easy it would have been for Paul and Barnabas to chose that route.



Why did they instead go back to the dangerous areas of their persecution? Luke explained it was to encourage the believers “to continue in the faith” in spite of persecution (Acts 14:22). Paul and Barnabas took the opportunity to appoint elders in each of the churches and “committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed” (Acts 14:23).

We should not leave that passage without a moment of reflection. We see in it strong elements of Paul’s trust in God. On one hand, Paul saw it important to go through the towns he had earlier evangelized, in spite of risk to his personal safety. Paul did so to invigorate and encourage the believers. At the same time Paul was working toward their growth and good, he was also content to leave them knowing they were in the hands of God.

This understanding of Paul went hand in hand with a verse behind the evangelization of the believers at Pisidian Antioch. Luke wrote in Acts 13:48 that,

as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.

Scholars debate whether this verse “is as unqualified a statement of absolute predestination...as is found anywhere” in the New Testament⁶ or not. Regardless of the position one takes on that issue, it clearly reflects Paul’s approach to things: Work as called by God; do all one can by God’s grace; and then trust God with the results and consequences.

The passage also provides a typically Pauline willingness to accept both divine appointment and personal responsibility. Rather than reading the passage in isolation, consider it in context. Just two verses earlier, Luke had recorded the failure of the Jews to receive Paul’s message as one of them “judging themselves unworthy of eternal life” (Acts 13:46). Luke shows us *both* human responsibility and divine sovereignty in this. Those who are finally saved must give God all the credit, while those who are finally lost must take all the blame.

Post-Mission Trip

Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch by boat.⁷ Once there, they gathered the church together to give a report. Paul and Barnabas did NOT give a report of what they had done on the mission trip. Luke carefully writes that,

they declared all that ***God had done*** with them (Acts 14:27).

The home church was also told of how God had

opened a door of faith to the Gentiles (Acts 14:27).

Luke does not give us a time frame for Paul and Barnabas in Antioch, but Acts 14 ends with Luke telling us they “remained no little time with the disciples.”

During this time the peace in the Antioch church was upset when some unnamed men came to Antioch from Judea. These men were teaching that one must be circumcised under the Law of Moses to be saved. This was tantamount to declaring that one must convert to Judaism in order to be a Christian.

Paul and Barnabas “had no small dissension and debate with them” (Acts 15:2) then ultimately headed to Jerusalem to speak with the elders and apostles there about the subject. Their arrival in Jerusalem was marked first by a hearty welcome by the whole church, including the apostles and elders. Paul and Barnabas had a chance to recount “all that God had done with them” (Acts 15:4).

⁶ Barrett at 658.

⁷ As they retraced their steps, they did take time to preach in Perga where they had first passed through on their way to Pisidian Antioch.

No doubt as they walked through the mission trip, the Jewish excitement and the Jewish rejection, the great number of Gentile conversions, and the persecutions in conjunction with church growth, the Gentile aspect of the experience provoked a response among some of the church. Luke said,

...some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, “It is necessary to circumcise them and order them to keep the law of Moses.” (Acts 15:5).

The issue in Jerusalem, like at Antioch, provoked a good deal of debate and discussion. Peter brought the debate to a close when he stood and reminded the people that God had saved Gentiles without the law, giving them the Holy Spirit and cleansing their “hearts by faith” (Acts 15:9). Peter then asked whether the church would not be putting God to the test by putting on the Gentiles a burden that even the Jews could not keep! Peter, of course, is referencing the failure of all people to truly keep God’s law. Peter knew, and the church agreed, that the Gentiles “will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus” just as the Jews (Acts. 15:11).

At this, the crowd silenced. It was then that Barnabas and Paul stood and detailed the “signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles” (Acts 15:12). This left the church with a perplexing problem. No doubt Peter was right; God was saving Jew and Gentile through his grace. Jesus was the salvation with no added works of law. Salvation was through Christ alone, not Christ plus anything. Still, there were some concerns of a number of believers that was putting a serious strain on the fellowship of the church.

The apostles and elders decide that the solution was to write a letter that was sent through Barnabas and Paul to lay the necessary instructions for behavior to keep the harmony and fellowship of the church. These requirements included abstaining from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from strangled animals and from sexual immorality.⁸

Barnabas and Paul took this letter back to Antioch where it was met with joy. Paul and Barnabas then stayed in Antioch teaching until Paul had an idea! Paul said to Barnabas,

“Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are” (Acts 15:36).

⁸ Paul would later write the Corinthians about some of these issues. Paul explained that meat sacrificed to idols was not in itself sinful, but that it was an issue for many in the fellowship. In an effort to love and serve the greater number, Paul would not only avoid meat sacrificed to idols, but would willingly give up eating meat at all! (1 Cor. 8)

It is here we pick up our study of the church's spreading through the life of Paul as recorded by Luke in the Book of Acts.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *"Since you thrust it aside and judge yourself unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles"* (Acts 13:46).

There is a level of bite to what Paul says here. It is similar to the bite in Jesus' admonition, "Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you." (Mt. 7:6). Paul was speaking to Jews who decided not to listen to the gospel message, instead waging war against Paul's ability to teach others. Paul did not back down. Nor did he butt his head against a wall. He saw that he had fulfilled his obligation to the Jews and began reaching out specifically to the Gentiles. In the process, Paul noted that the Jews were not simply thrusting aside the Lord, but in an ironic way, they had judged themselves unworthy of eternal life.

This speaks to me in two ways. First, I am impressed that the kingdom of God waits for no man. God's kingdom moves forward, and blessed is the man that is used by God toward that end. The Jews that refused the gospel were robbed of the chance to evangelize their Gentile neighbors. That blessing fell to Paul and Barnabas instead. Second, the ironic bite is a warning to me. As I refuse God in my life, I am bringing upon myself the judgments that naturally follow. Clearly that was the case with eternity for these folks. But I believe it to be the case in smaller things as well. When God sets before me right choices, and I refuse to walk in them, I am choosing the judgment that comes with the poor choice. This is not a works salvation, this is what Paul told the Galatians in his letter written a couple of years later: "Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap" (Gal. 6:7). Lord, give me wisdom and strength to walk in your ways and calling.

2. *"Stand upright on your feet!"* (Acts 14:10).

An amazing set of events concerning the lame man at Lystra. He was listening to Paul with faith. Paul saw it, and called the man out with a proclamation of healing. This is not a man who asked for healing. It was not a "miracle service." It was Paul moved by God to do what the man needed and what the kingdom needed. The man "sprang up and began walking" and the townspeople came to faith. It should not be stunning, but it is. God has a mission and compassion, and he folded both into one event in Lystra. In the process, he left a message for all his people to listen to. He is a God who meets needs! Like the man listening to

God's message in Paul, I want to listen intently, ready for God to supply my needs and use me in his kingdom!

3. *“they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith”* (Acts 14:21-22).

No one can accuse Paul of taking the easy way out! Paul held laser-beam focus on his mission. He knew his days were limited and he wanted everyone to count for God. His life was not “his,” it was the Father's. He lived in service to the king – 24/7; 365 days a year. I want that focus!