

Acts

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. (Acts 1:8 ESV)

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42 ESV)

Signs, Sermons and Stones: A Lesson In Gospel Mission

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Acts 14:8-23

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Introduction:

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to Acts 14.

At the beginning of chapter 13, we read about the young church in Antioch and how they set apart Paul and Barnabas – two of their best and brightest leaders – to spread the gospel throughout the Mediterranean world. It was a tremendously costly sacrifice, but healthy churches understand that God's mission stretches beyond our local congregations. So, after a time of prayer and fasting they laid their hands on the leaders that they loved, and they sent them off on mission.

We've been following along with that mission trip, and we've been learning some valuable lessons along the way. In our passage this morning, Luke records the final leg of this first missionary journey. We find it in Acts 14:8-23. Please look there with me. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today.

Now at Lystra there was a man sitting who could not use his feet. He was crippled from birth and had never walked. ⁹ He listened to Paul speaking. And Paul, looking intently at him and seeing that he had faith to be made well, ¹⁰ said in a loud voice, "Stand upright on your feet." And he sprang up and began walking. ¹¹ 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!"¹² Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. ¹³ And the priest of Zeus, whose temple was at the entrance to the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds. ¹⁴ But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their garments and rushed out into the crowd, crying out, ¹⁵ "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. ¹⁶ In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. ¹⁷ 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.” ¹⁸ Even with these words they scarcely restrained the people from offering sacrifice to them.

¹⁹ But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead. ²⁰ But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city, and on the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe. ²¹ When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, ²² strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. ²³ And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed. (Acts 14:8-23 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

As has been the case all throughout this series, we won't unpack every minute detail in our passage this morning because we have already addressed a number of these recurring themes. Instead, as we make our way through the final leg of this first missionary journey, I want to focus specifically on what this passage can teach us about good gospel mission.

A Lesson In Gospel Mission

Now, when I say “mission” I am referring to a very particular type of ministry. Mark Dever defines missions this way:

While evangelism is telling the gospel, sometimes to people who don't know it, *missions* is evangelism in a place and among a whole people where it's largely unknown.¹

That's what we see in this passage. This isn't a story about Paul's faithful ministry in his hometown – this is a story about the final leg of the first intentional, cross-cultural missions trip! Here, we find a missionary breaking new ground as they make their way into communities that have never heard the gospel. That reality should frame how we study this passage. This is a story about *missions*.

¹ Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of A Healthy Church – Fourth Edition* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 253.

“But,” you might ask, “But does that mean that there is nothing in this story that applies to my ministry here at home? Should I just tune out now?” No! Of course not. First of all, much of what we will learn here about global missions is obviously applicable for local evangelism. This story can and *should* help you to think more strategically about how to reach your neighbours or your co-workers with the gospel.

But, secondly and more obviously, we want to know what good gospel mission looks like so that we can rightly assess, pray for and come alongside our missions partners. So, for example, I am making a trip this coming week to visit our missional partners, Kingsview, in the Dominican Republic. The lessons I’ve learned in this text are going to give me a healthy grid to assess and support the work that is being done.

Now, to be clear, this passage doesn’t teach us *everything* that we need to know about missions – it’s just a snapshot – but I want to pull out four lessons for our consideration this morning. First:

1. Gospel mission addresses the needs of the whole person

As Paul preached in Lystra, he looked out and saw a man who had been lame from birth. In verses 9-10 we read:

And Paul, looking intently at him and seeing that he had faith to be made well, ¹⁰ said in a loud voice, “Stand upright on your feet.” And he sprang up and began walking. (Acts 14:9b-10 ESV)

Someday, when I meet Paul in heaven, I would be curious to know just what he saw in that man’s eyes as he was preaching. Somehow, Paul recognized that this man had faith to be made well. He looked intently at him, told him to stand, and then this man who had suffered a lifetime of disability stood up and began to walk!

What a powerful demonstration of the power of the gospel that Paul was preaching! We’re not told the specifics of the sermon but, undoubtedly, he was telling these people about the God who made them and the Lord Jesus Christ who died on the cross to save them. And then – interjected into the middle of that sermon – he called upon this paralytic to stand, and God’s redemptive, restorative power was clearly and tangibly displayed!

Now, there's much that we could say here about signs and wonders, but we dedicated a whole sermon to that earlier in this series. I fear that if we wade into the discussion this morning of how many signs and wonders we should expect to see in our present day, we might wind up missing the significance of this passage. Which – interestingly enough – is exactly what happened in this story. The miracle became a massive distraction, and the city wound up missing the point entirely. The miracle was a *sign*! It was a visible display of the restorative power of the gospel!

And, while we may or may not be blessed to witness signs and miracles in our ministry, there is a lesson in this story that we must not miss. We learn in this story that good gospel mission must address the needs of the *whole person*. The Apostle James wrote:

If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food,¹⁶ and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? (James 2:15-16 ESV)

Jesus understood better than *any of us* that the most important needs of his listeners were their spiritual needs. AND YET, as we consider his ministry as it is recorded in the gospels, it is striking that he NEVER ignored the physical needs of the people he ministered to.

I've shared this quote with you twice before, but I'm going to read it again because it's just that good. A missionary by the name of Amy Carmichael once wrote a letter to address a complaint that had been made about her mission. The complaint argued that she should stop concerning herself with the physical needs of the community and simply stick to the gospel. She responded:

One cannot save and then pitchfork souls into heaven... Souls are more or less securely fastened to bodies... and as you cannot get the souls out and deal with them separately, you have to take them both together.²

Amen. That's what we see in the New Testament model. In fact, when Paul conferred with the other Apostles to inform them of his missionary plans, they only made one stipulation for him. Do you remember what it was? In Galatians 2:10, Paul recounts it for us:

² Amy Carmichael as quoted by Ruth Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983), 241.

Only, they asked us to **remember the poor**, the very thing I was eager to do. (Galatians 2:10 ESV)

“Go for it, Paul!” the Apostles said. “But if you’re going to claim to be an ambassador for Jesus then don’t you dare neglect the poor.” Faith without works is dead. Passionate preaching of the gospel should be accompanied by compassionate ministry to the poor and disenfranchised.

That being said, as I head out this week to witness the work that Kingsview is doing in the Dominican Republic, we’re not just going to visit the pastors and the church plants, but we’re going to visit with the orphanage and the school as well. Because good gospel mission addresses the needs of the whole person. That’s the first lesson we learn in this story. Second:

2. Gospel mission deflects all glory to God

When that miracle was performed the crowd was naturally excited! Unfortunately, their awe was not directed at God who had gifted the miracle, but at Paul who had simply been the messenger. That happens sometimes. In fact, I suspect it’s part of the reason why God doesn’t give miraculous gifts like this as often as we might like. Miracles are a gift, and they are amazing! But they *can* become a distraction. And that’s what happened here. In verse 11 we read:

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!” (Acts 14:11 ESV)

Mistaking Paul and Barnabas for Hermes and Zeus, the crowd quickly made arrangements to offer sacrifices to glorify the “gods” who were in their midst. In my study this week, I learned some historical background that sheds light on this strange response. One commentator helpfully explained:

Approximately half a century before Paul's first missionary journey, Ovid... retold an ancient legend that may have been well known in southern Galatia and may in good part explain the wildly emotional response of the people to Paul and Barnabas. According to the legend, Zeus and Hermes once came to “the Phrygian hill country” disguised as mortals seeking lodging. Though they asked at a thousand homes, none took them in. Finally, at a humble cottage of straw and reeds, an elderly couple, Philemon and Baucis, freely welcomed them with a banquet that strained their poor resources. In appreciation, the gods transformed the cottage into a temple with a golden roof and marble columns. Philemon and Baucis they appointed priest and priestess of the temple, who, instead of

dying, became an oak and a linden tree. As for the inhospitable people, the gods destroyed their houses.³

That myth was well known in Lystra, and it helps to explain the over-the-top response of the people of Lystra.

But – while the response of the city grabs our attention – it is the response of Paul and Barnabas that most deserves our attention. How they handled this outpouring of praise is remarkable!

We forget things very quickly, so let remind you briefly of what happened in the episode right before this one. Paul and Barnabas have just endured a long, malicious smear campaign in the city of Iconium. They barely got out of the city before being executed! And now, having been *chased* from Iconium, they walk into Lystra, and the crowd is *loving* them! What a contrast! Days ago, they were hated! But here they are receiving respect, and admiration, and even *glory*. Can you imagine how *satisfying* this could have felt?

We read this story and our minds focus on the dangers of being persecuted and stoned. But I think G. Campbell Morgan is right when he notes:

The greatest peril threatening these men was that which came to them in the hour when men suggested that they should worship them. That is the supreme peril to the Christian worker. It would have been so easy to gain power and notoriety; to take this worship, and abandon the pathway of persecution and of stones.⁴

Hear that: There was more danger in this episode in Lystra than there EVER was in Iconium! Paul and Barnabas could have traded the cross for a temporary crown. They could have traded the stones and the mocking for gifts and applause. The opportunity was RIGHT THERE for the taking!

We all crave glory a little more than we'd like to admit. Don't we? On the small scale, it can look like the young person who goes on the mission trip and comes home with a new profile picture posing with an orphan child in their arms. On the larger scale, it can look like the organization that

³ Richard N. Longenecker, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary (John - Acts)*, ed. Frank A. Gaebelein, vol. 9, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 435.

⁴ G. Campbell Morgan, *The Acts Of The Apostles* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1924), 345.

slowly distances itself from the gospel in order to maintain favour with the world. The YMCA was once a missions organization. It doesn't take long to drift from the mission once you fall in love with the world's applause. You see, the world doesn't applaud the gospel sermon, but from time to time it *will* applaud our acts of charity. And that applause can become addicting.

But Paul and Barnabas refused to fall for that trap. In verse 15 they turn to the crowd and ask:

“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. (Acts 14:15 ESV)

That response teaches us a lesson that we must not miss! Gospel mission deflects all glory to God. That's the second lesson that we learn from this story. Third:

3. Gospel mission teaches honestly about the cost of discipleship

We see this as we follow the tragic developments of this story. In verses 19-20, we read that the same crowd that tried to worship Paul later stoned him to death. Or at least they *thought* they stoned him to death. They left his mangled body outside the city where the disciples were shocked to find that he was still breathing. This next scene absolutely gripped my heart as I studied this past week. Look with me at verses 21-22:

on the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe. ²¹ When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, ²² strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. (Acts 14:20b-22 ESV)

Just try to imagine this scene for a moment. They threw jagged rocks at Paul until the whole crowd assumed that he was dead. What do you think a person looks like after an ordeal like that? I'm no doctor, but I suspect that Paul would have been unrecognizable. He would have been swollen, and bruised, and bleeding. He would've looked worse than a UFC fighter after the bloodiest loss in UFC history.

Yet, after Barnabas and those accompanying Paul scraped him off the ground, rather than asking them to carry him home, he told them to proceed to the *next city*! They made their way into Derbe and this brother preached the same gospel that had nearly gotten him killed just days prior!

And, by God's grace, through Paul's ministry, even more men and women came from death to life and became disciples of Jesus Christ.

Who lives like that!? Who lays down their life like that!? More shocking still is that, after preaching in Derbe, Paul went BACK to the place where they had tried to kill him! Did you notice that? Look again at verse 21:

When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they **returned to Lystra** and to Iconium and to Antioch (Acts 14:21 ESV)

Can you even imagine the courage and compassion that this would require? He walked right past the place where they left him for dead and entered again into the city of Lystra. Then he proceeded to Iconium – the city where he was slandered and smeared and where they had also been planning to stone him. Then he proceeded to Antioch in Pisidia where he and Barnabas had been forcibly driven out. He returned. Why? Verse 22 tells us that he was:

strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, **and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.** (Acts 14:22 ESV)

Good gospel mission teaches honestly about the cost of discipleship. Paul told them the truth about what it meant to follow Jesus. And then he walked the walk. Through many tribulations.

What a contrast there is between *this* missional ministry and the so-called missional ministry that we see celebrated on the miracle network. Rich prosperity gospel preachers fly in their private jets to Africa telling the masses that they too can be happy, healthy and wealthy! But that is NOT the gospel that Jesus preached! Jesus said:

If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.²⁴ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. (Luke 9:23-24 ESV)

Paul didn't sugar-coat the gospel. He was clear about the cost. As he limped back into these cities with the scars of persecution all over his body, he reminded the new believers that the road to glory is a road that must first pass through the cross. That doesn't mean that we will all suffer the same afflictions that Paul suffered here. But it *does* mean that the call to follow Jesus is a call to lay down *everything else* and to pick up a cross. It is a call to DIE to who you used to be, so that you can receive RESURRECTION LIFE through Christ!

Paul taught that. Paul modelled that. Gospel mission teaches honestly about the cost of discipleship. That's the third lesson we learn here. Fourth and finally, we learn that:

4. Gospel mission is committed to the health of the local church

As Paul returned through the cities that he had ministered to – as he encouraged them and equipped them for the challenges that lay in store for them – we read in verse 23:

And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed. (Acts 14:23 ESV)

We catch a glimpse into the primary responsibility of these men in Titus 1 where Paul explains that an elder:

must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it. (Titus 1:9 ESV)

You see, Paul wasn't going to be around for the long term. Yet, these new believers were going to need *ongoing* teaching and discipleship. Paul understood that – if these new believers were going to endure – they were going to need faithful local leaders who could oversee healthy local churches. This is a significant and, in my estimation, an often-overlooked aspect of Paul's ministry. As one commentator notes:

We gain a false picture of Paul's strategy if we think of him as rushing rapidly on missionary *journeys* from one place to the next, leaving small groups of half-taught converts behind him; it was his general policy to remain in one place until he had

established the firm foundation of a Christian community, or until he was forced to move by circumstances beyond his control.⁵

Almost every month I receive an e-mail, or a Facebook message, or a letter from a missionary inviting our church to invest in their ministry. The very first thing that I look for is how connected they are with the local church – both here and abroad. Is there a church sending this person? Or are they self-appointed? Does this person plan to partner with churches in and around the area where they will be ministering? Or are they a lone wolf? If the local church plays no part in the plan – if the entire emphasis is placed upon the personality of the missionary or some slick parachurch organization – then I don't even bother reading. Because you can't separate biblical gospel mission from the church!

Listen: I know that it's trendy in our day and age to disparage the church. We like to talk about all her flaws and complain about all her inefficiencies. But any plan to reach the world with the gospel that does not result in the establishment of healthy local churches is a plan with no biblical foundation! Paul went on mission and established *churches!* I know that the church is flawed – because it's full of people like you and me – but the church is the body of Christ! She's the bride! She's the city on a hill. Jesus saw more flaws in the church than we *ever* will, but he didn't walk away from her shaking his head. He gave his life for her to make her into who she was made to be!

Paul understood this. So he went on mission and he established churches, and then he put leaders in place who would strive to love and serve and teach the church the way that Jesus did. And – can I tell you something? – those little churches prevailed against the gates of hell! 2,000 years later, on the other side of the planet, here we are proclaiming and delighting in the same gospel message that turned Lystra and Derbe upside down.

When we step back from our fancy, convoluted plans and look honestly at the New Testament model, missions is wonderfully simple. Go to the nations. Minister to the whole person just like Jesus did. Deflect all glory to him. Meet people where they're at. Preach the gospel – and preach it honestly until a healthy church is established. Then, repeat.

⁵ I. Howard Marshall, *Acts* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1980), 214.

We have some missional partners who are doing just that. Praise God for Mile 1 Mission in Newfoundland and Labrador. Praise God for Uttermost International in Southeast Asia. And praise God for Kingsview in the Dominican Republic. As I head over there this week, please pray that God would use me to be an encouragement to those pastors and churches, and please pray that God would continue to grow their ministry. To that end, let's pray together.