

Choosing a Side

Acts 14:1-20 on May 16, 2021

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Please read Acts 14:1-20 before going further in this transcript. Acts 14:1 begins “At Iconium Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue. There they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Greeks believed.” What does verse 1 mean by “as usual”?¹ Going to the Jews 1st, was Paul’s usual practice; but WHY?^{2 3} Back in Acts 13:46 Paul and Barnabas tell them “We had to speak the word of God to you first...” Once again though, WHY? Why did they “HAVE TO” do it this way? There are at least 2 reasons why they preached to the Jews first.

First of all,

1) Paul’s heart was burdened for his own people 1st. Paul expresses this in Romans 9:2-3, “I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race.”⁴ Many of us probably have a particular burden for a certain group of people that are closest to our own hearts. Maybe it’s for those with a shared ethnic identity, or maybe it’s some other affinity: a certain geographical region where we come from, or a particular economic background, or something else. For me it’s mobile home parks. Back when I used to drive my school bus route, it included a couple of mobile home parks. My heart would always go out to the neighborhood kids, who were out in the street playing together. I used to be one of those kids; I grew up in a similar neighborhood. By His grace, God reached down and showed me His great love for me and rescued me from my sin. I’m SO glad I choose to follow Jesus; and I want that for every kid I see outside their trailer house. God wasn’t attracted to me because I was living in some fancy house, or because of my pedigree or lineage, or because of anything great that I had done. God simply rescued me from my sin because He’s good and loving and merciful. Because He saw me, where I was, and offered me an opportunity to choose a side. By God’s grace, I chose to follow Jesus.

Last Sunday, Pastor Eric preached a great message on “The Promise of Salvation.” If you missed it, you’ll want to go on our website and check it out in our Sermon Archives.⁵ Probably the saddest part of last week’s sermon text, was that Paul’s Jewish listeners didn’t heed his warning. In Acts 13:40 Paul warned, “Take care that what the

¹ Back in Acts 13:14, they did the same thing in Pisidian Antioch: “...On the Sabbath they entered the SYNAGOGUE and sat down.”

² Later on, Acts 17:1-2 says, “When Paul and his companions had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures.”

³ Back in Acts 9:15, after Jesus had appeared to Saul/Paul on the road to Damascus, the Lord says, “...This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles...”

⁴ In Romans 10:1-3 Paul says, “Brothers and sisters, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved. For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. Since they did not know the righteousness of God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness.”

⁵ <https://efcbemidji.org/sermon/the-promise-of-salvation/>

prophets have said does NOT happen to you.” Sadly, much like many of their ancestors, some of the Jews in Pisidian Antioch did not accept God’s message of salvation. They rejected Jesus and they rejected God’s grace. Instead of choosing Jesus, they chose to grip even more tightly onto their own way of doing things. They chose to keep striving to be good enough on their own, rather than choosing to believe in Jesus and letting Him rescue them and change their lives. Paul and Barnabas wrap up their time in Pisidian Antioch with a stern warning: Acts 13:51 says, “So they shook the dust off their feet as a warning to them and went to Iconium.” “Shaking the dust off of your feet” is a cultural way of basically saying, “you had your chance. We brought you God’s message and you rejected it, so we are no longer responsible for your spiritual wellbeing.”⁶ Dear friend, if you are reading this message about Jesus today, and you have not yet chosen Jesus, then it’s not too late for you. There are two sides, following Jesus or rejecting Him. Each one of us MUST chose a side... and then live and die with the consequences of that choice.

The 2nd reason they preached to the Jews 1st is that...

2) God’s Redemptive Plan was designed for the Jews 1st. Paul goes on to explain this in Romans 9:4-5, “...the people of Israel. Theirs is the adoption to sonship; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of the Messiah, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen.” You see, the Jews were God’s covenant people, the people group to whom He had originally made the Promise of Salvation.⁷ This history informs Paul’s understanding of God’s Redemptive Plan and how it would unfold.⁸ Now, this doesn’t mean God loves the Jewish people more than other people, but just that He is operating with a particular strategy. God has designed a particular order of events which are now unfolding, just as He intended them to from the beginning of the world.⁹

In Acts 13:46, Paul summarizes, “...Since you reject it [that is, reject God’s plan of salvation] and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles.” Now, even though Paul turns AWAY from the Jews and TOWARD the Gentiles, we shouldn’t think this is A TOTAL BAN ON all Jewish evangelism. The fact is, in just about every place that Paul goes, he begins by preaching first, to any Jews who are there. In other words, even though “Paul repeatedly faced violent resistance in many [Jewish] synagogues...[he] continued to preach to Jews” 1st, then to Gentiles.¹⁰

⁶ See Luke 10:8-12 and Acts 28:23-28. “shaking the dust from their feet, a symbolic act against those who oppose them....This custom is a way of signaling that responsibility for an action is with the people or town....It portrays leaving defilement behind and moving on. In other words, no trace of their presence is left, even on their feet.” Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, top of p. 466.

⁷ In Romans 1:16 Paul says, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.”

⁸ See footnote on Acts 13:14 on p. 1852 of *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011.

⁹ See Ephesians 1:3-14.

¹⁰ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, bottom of p. 463.

Many of the Jews in Pisidian Antioch chose the wrong side. This pattern continues with many of the Jews in Iconium. Acts 14:2 says, “But the Jews who refused to believe stirred up the other Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers.” Again we find opposition to the gospel, but this opposition doesn’t deter them, in fact, it doesn’t even slow them down! Acts 14:3 goes on “So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to perform signs and wonders.” In other words, in verse 1 a great number believed, in verse 2 some who refused to believe, stirred up opposition. So, in verse 3, they respond by redoubling their efforts, pouring it on by spending considerable time there.¹¹ Acts 14:4 says, “The people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews, others with the apostles.”^{12 13 14 15 16}

All along the way, the Gentiles will be the beneficiaries of these Jewish refusals. All along the way, Gentiles are hearing the Good News about Jesus. Each of them will also choose a side. By no means do ALL of the Gentiles choose to accept Jesus. In fact, in Iconium, the Gentiles who rejected Jesus, joined with the Jews who rejected Jesus, and TOGETHER they decided to stone Paul. We’ve seen stoning happen before in Acts, so we know that there is a very real possibility of this happening. Paul and Barnabas respond to this threat, in a familiar way, a way that we’ve seen before in Acts, they run away. Acts 14:6-7 tell us, “But they found out about it and fled to the Lycaonian cities of Lystra and Derbe and to the surrounding country, where they continued to preach the gospel.” Once again, persecution causes the believers to scatter, and once again that scattering leads to the gospel scattering to other places. To be fair, back in verse 3, they held course for considerable time and continued to speak boldly. By no means did they just run away at the first sign of trouble.

¹¹ Though they didn’t succeed in winning everyone to the gospel, they did succeed in giving everyone the opportunity to choose.

¹² To be clear, the apostles were Jewish; both Paul and Barnabas were Jews who had decided to follow Jesus. So the real division here was over Jesus, Jews who accepted God’s Messiah, and Jews who rejected Him. The sad reality is, that this division among the Jews, between the minority who would fully devote their lives to Jesus, and the majority who would reject Him, recurs over and over again all throughout Acts. In fact, right up through the very last chapter. **Some 15 years later!** (See timeline of Paul’s Life on p. 2243 of *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015.) **Acts 28:23-24, 28 tell us**, “...[Paul] witnessed to them from morning till evening, explaining about the kingdom of God, and from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets he tried to persuade them about Jesus. 24 Some were convinced by what he said, but others would NOT believe... [Saul then concludes in verse 28] Therefore I want you to know that God’s salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and THEY will listen!”

¹³ To be clear, neither Barnabas nor Paul was 1 of the 12 Apostles. Apostles (ἀπόστολοις) refers to “a group of highly honored believers with a special function as God’s envoys.” (Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed., p. 122). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.)

¹⁴ Apostle (ἀπόστολος) = “one who is sent with a message.” (Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains* (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 409). New York: United Bible Societies.)

¹⁵ The description “apostle” here is being used more broadly to refer to specially commissioned “sent ones.” Barnabas and Paul had been specially set apart and sent out by the Holy Spirit back at the beginning of Acts 13. See *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015 p. 2217 footnote on Acts 1:21-22.

¹⁶ The New Testament doesn’t actually use the word “missionary,” but we could technically translate “apostle” as “missionary.” “The term is used here not of the twelve but in the broader sense to refer to persons sent on a mission, i.e. missionaries.” *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011 p. 1854 footnote on Acts 13:4. See footnote on Mark 6:30, p. 1666.

This persecution leads them to the city of Lystra. While in Lystra Paul heals a man who was lame from birth. This miracle causes some confusion, and the locals assume that Paul and Barnabas must be the Greek gods, Zeus and Hermes.^{17 18 19} (Have YOU ever been mistaken for a Greek god? Me either!) Paul and Barnabas are quick to correct them by tearing their clothes to get their attention. In Jewish culture, “the tearing of garments indicated that a blasphemy had been uttered against God.”²⁰ In Acts 14:15 Paul asks them, “Friends, why are you doing this? We too are only human, like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them.”²¹ A Bible scholar named Darrell Bock notes an interesting little theological nugget right here: The fact “That the early church worshipped Jesus, in light of such feelings about the worship of humans, is significant, ...it shows that Jesus clearly was seen as much more than a mere mortal.”²² In other words, Jesus was indeed fully human, but He was certainly NOT a “mere” mortal.”²³ Jesus was also fully God!

Paul goes on in Acts 14:16-17, “In the past, [the living God] let all nations go their own way.”²⁴ Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.” Paul crafts his message to these pagan Zeus worshippers, much differently than his message to Jewish worshippers. Instead of beginning with God’s Promise of Salvation to Israel, Paul begins with God’s role as Creator and Provider for all mankind.²⁵ In other words, Jehovah God, NOT Zeus, provides humankind with food.^{26 27} The natural world around us gives testimony to

¹⁷ “Paul and Barnabas spoke Greek, not the local Lycaonian language, so they did not at first understand what was happening.” *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015 p. 2249 footnote on Acts 14:11.

¹⁸ Paul’s direct look in verse 9 and his loud voice in verse 10 can be connected to the story telling in Greco-Roman history of gods coming to visit mortals. See discussion by Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 475 and footnote on bottom of that page.

¹⁹ Apparently, the people of Lystra wanted to pay these visiting gods proper homage and not risk offending them. See footnote on Acts 14:12, p. 2249 of the *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015 to learn about an interesting legend in that region.

²⁰ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 477.

²¹ If you were here a few weeks ago when we talked about “Herod’s Clutches,” we learned how Herod’s pride and arrogance led him to steal God’s glory which led to his demise. In stark contrast, Paul and Barnabas are QUICK to correct this misappropriation of praise and worship. Paul runs into a similar situation near the end of Acts. See Acts 28:5-6.

²² Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 478.

²³ Speaking of mere mortals, at this point in church history, we find a rather famous description of Paul. We’re not really sure how accurate it is, and, just to be clear, this is not coming from Scripture. Paul is described by one historical source as: “a man small in size, bald-headed, bandy-legged [we say bow-legged today], well-built, with eyebrows meeting, rather long-nosed, full of grace. For sometimes he seemed like a man, and sometimes he had the countenance of an angel.” (Darrell L. Bock citing *Acts of Paul* 3.3, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, bottom of p. 470.) Regardless of whether this is actually an accurate description, at the very least, it’s a helpful reminder that these incredible heroes of the faith, were just plain old human men and women who were filled with God’s Spirit, faithfully telling others about Jesus.

²⁴ See Acts 17:29-31, especially verse 30.

²⁵ See Paul’s similar message in Athens in Acts 17:16-34, especially verses 24-30. Compare Acts 17:30 with Acts 14:16.

²⁶ See discussion by Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, pp. 478-479.

²⁷ Verse 13 informs us that Zeus’s temple was located right outside of Lystra.

God's kindness and goodness.²⁸ This testimony is what theologians call God's "General Revelation." Romans 1:20 comes to mind, "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse."²⁹

However, even though God's invisible qualities are "clearly seen" through His role as Creator, He is now making Himself even more clearly seen through the proclamation of the gospel on every street corner!³⁰ ³¹ In other words, just looking around at the awesome beauty and power of God's creation, should be enough to make it clear to all mankind, that an invisible God exists. There's no excuse for missing God.³² Even so, God didn't limit His testimony only to "General Revelation." Declaring the Good News about the gospel, is what theologians call God's "Special Revelation." In other words, now that Jesus has come to earth, died for sin, and been raised from the dead, God is sending out His messengers, to make His existence even more explicit, and to make His Promise of Salvation, even more ABUNDANTLY clear.

At the end of today's passage, we experience a bit of whiplash!³³ Acts 14:19-20 concludes, "Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium [to Lystra] and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead.³⁴ But after the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city. The next day he and Barnabas left for Derbe." Now, if it were me, I think that I would have left town the same day! I'm not sure that I would have hung around until the next day! Let's note the contrast here between Paul and Barnabas, and these Jews who swept into Lystra. Even when Paul and Barnabas were being treated like gods, they do NOT take advantage of the Lycaonian's gullibility. However, the Jews who had come into town, do exactly that.³⁵ The crowd goes from worshipping them to stoning them! Crowds can be fickle!!! Every one of us needs to be aware this; that sometimes there are other people who are trying to take advantage of us, and coerce us and manipulate our behavior. Let's be careful with this danger in our own lives. When the crowd is telling us stories on social media or whatever it might be, let's carefully consider what we're hearing. Let's fact check those sources.³⁶ Let's take some time, to

²⁸ See Romans 2:4.

²⁹ See also Isaiah 40:12-31.

³⁰ "There was no special revelation for the nations as Paul is giving now, although there were general revelation and care [through the common grace we find in nature], as Paul notes in verse 17." (Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 478.) Verse 17 mentions "rain from heaven and crops in their seasons." God provides plenty of food and fills our hearts with joy. See Psalm 4:7 and Acts 2:28.

³¹ In Acts 13:52, it says "the disciples were filled with JOY and with the Holy Spirit." In Acts 14:17, it says "he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with JOY." We are blessed to have a God who gives us so many reasons for joy! (These two verses use two different Greek words for joy. Acts 13:52 uses χαρά and Acts 14:17 uses εὐφροσύνη (which Acts 2:28 also uses).

³² See Psalm 53:1.

³³ Now to be fair, we're not sure how much time may have passed between verses 18 and 19, but clearly Luke records it this way to give us readers a sense of how quickly the tide changed!

³⁴ Perhaps they rushed to the conclusion that Paul was dead, due to their fear of onlookers who didn't want this happening on their city streets?

³⁵ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 476.

³⁶ I preached on this last summer: <https://efcbemidji.org/sermon/sources/>

give everything prayerful consideration, asking God for wisdom and discernment, BEFORE we take action and jump in with the crowd.

Paul's quick recovery from this brutal stoning, may be an indication that he was miraculously healed.³⁷ As the believers gathered around him, their hearts would have naturally been inclined to pray for this brother in the Lord who had been beaten and battered. Here's another interesting thought: It's very possible that one of the disciples who gathered around Paul in verse 20, was a young man named Timothy. Let me explain why this is at least plausible: Paul's stoning happened in Lystra and Lystra was Timothy's hometown. Now Timothy hasn't officially come on the scene yet, but he's about to. Just around the corner, 2 chapters away in Acts 16, Paul will decide to bring Timothy along with him for his 2nd Missionary Journey. This is recorded for us in Acts 16:1-2, "Paul came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was Jewish and a believer but whose father was a Greek. The believers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him." Paul will also write to Timothy later on, in 2 Tim. 3:10-11 Paul tells Timothy, "You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings—what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them."³⁸ So Timothy may very well have personally witnessed Paul being stoned in the streets of Lystra, but even if he didn't see it with his own eyes, he'd certainly heard about it with his own ears. At the very least, he heard firsthand accounts, from close friends and relatives, about how God had rescued Paul from such fierce persecution. Even so, just 2 chapters later, we'll find Timothy choosing a side; he chooses to follow Jesus along with Paul.

Next week, the sermon is going to go focus on "Strengthening Disciples." This is based on Acts 14:22 where Paul and Barnabas are "strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith... [*and then they warn these same disciples*] ...'We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.'" For Paul and Barnabas, there was no turning back. They were well aware that there were more tough times just around the corner. But they had chosen a side; they had decided to follow Jesus! Despite the opposition, despite the incredible difficulties they faced, Paul and Barnabas pressed on. And they encouraged the other disciples to keep becoming more fully devoted followers of Jesus; to remain true to the faith! Brother or Sister in Christ, as we continue to follow Jesus in the year 2021, we've also chosen a side. We've chosen to follow Jesus. Regardless of whatever struggle we may be facing, let's NOT turn back, let's remain true to the faith!

³⁷ Normally, people would stone someone outside of the city. (*NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1854 footnote on Acts 14:19.) For example, that's what they did to Stephen back in Acts 7:58. So, it may be worth noting here, that this record of them dragging Paul outside the city after they thought he was dead, indicates that Paul and Barnabas were witnessing about Jesus, right in the streets of Lystra. One scholar notes: "That the scene takes place in the open points to the lack of a synagogue here and also reflects the Greek practice of public oratory." (Darrell L. Bock citing Le Cornu and Shulam in Acts, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, pp. 466-467.) In other words, it was common in that day to stand in the streets and give public witness to one's beliefs.

³⁸ See also Paul's "resume" of sufferings in 2 Corinthians 11:23-29. (*NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015 p. 2249 footnote on Acts 14:19.)