

The Work Fulfilled
Acts of the Apostles
Acts 14:1-28
August 6, 2017

Now at Iconium they entered together into the Jewish synagogue and spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed. ² But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. ³ So they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord, who bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands. ⁴ But the people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews and some with the apostles. ⁵ When an attempt was made by both Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to mistreat them and to stone them, ⁶ they learned of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding country, ⁷ and there they continued to preach the gospel.

⁸ 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.

24 Then they passed through Pisidia and came to Pamphylia. 25 And when they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia, 26 and from there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had fulfilled. 27 And when they arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. 28 And they remained no little time with the disciples.

Last week Tim led us through the continuing story of Paul and Barnabas' first missionary journey... the very first mission sending trip of the young Christian church. Last week, they had sailed from the island of Cyprus to the city of Perga in Pamphylia. Then, in a statement that appears to be almost an unimportant aside, Luke tells us that John left them and returned to Jerusalem. We are not told why he left, just that he left them and returned to his home. It seems unimportant, almost a throw away statement, but this morning I want you to see why it was huge and why John Mark's departure ultimately led to Barnabas and Paul splitting up and going their separate ways. That conflict won't happen now, but later, at the outset of their second missionary journey. For now, however, I want you to keep in mind that John Mark left them... because this morning's message is going to focus on persevering and completing the work that God set out for us. I want to look this morning at what happened when Paul and Barnabas persevered and did not allow adversity and trial to cause them to turn back in the way the John Mark did. This is a serious

lesson for each one of us as we consider how we are living out the command of Jesus to disciple all peoples and teach them to obey all of his commands.

Here is the simple outline for Acts Chapter 14.

v. 1-7 Iconium

v. 8-23 Lystra and Derbe

v. 24-28 Home to Antioch

So, let me start by asking you this question. Have you ever wanted to quit? Have you had those days at a job when it just didn't seem to be worth it anymore? How about at home or school? Maybe it's overwhelming yard work or mounds of laundry that just won't go away, the constant demands of family. Life becomes overwhelming and it doesn't seem to be worth the effort, then you start thinking, "Why am I doing this? What am I thinking? This just doesn't make any sense anymore." I have and I am sure that Paul and Barnabas had these thoughts as well. John Mark sure did... and he went home. But Paul and Barnabas stayed, they knew they had been set aside by the elders in Antioch and they knew that God had called them to this work. But it was incredibly difficult, too much for anyone who wasn't trusting totally in the Lord for strength and endurance. I am sure they thought about quitting, but they didn't. And this morning we are going to see what God did through them in the lives of hopelessly lost people in Southwest Turkey. People who were idolaters and who had no idea that

God loved them and had sent his son Jesus to die for them. So, we are continuing with the application from two weeks ago and adding to it. Here is the application for Acts 14:

Where God Leads – Expect Opposition

When God Calls – Don't Go Home Early

So, let's get into the passage and see what God has for us this morning.

Iconium

Remember last week, where Tim left off in the story. Paul and Barnabas were in Antioch Pisidia. They had a tremendous ministry in the city which ultimately led to the local unbelieving Jews getting their fill of the gospel and throwing them out of town. They shook the dust off their feet against them, which is a cultural way of telling them what they thought of them... and they had departed for Iconium filled with joy and the Holy Spirit.

Those things go together, by the way. Joy and the Holy Spirit. You won't ever find true joy without the Holy Spirit and you can't keep from finding it when you have Him in full!

Now, let's take a look at the map and see where they are headed. [SLIDE]

Iconium was an important city in the day. It was a military city, part of the Eastern defenses of the Roman Empire and it was on an important trade route. In fact, it is still an important and thriving city today. A city of over a million people... it is called Konya and it is Turkey's fourth largest city. It is about 100 miles from Antioch to Iconium, so it took most of a week for

Paul and Barnabas to get there. Here is a slide to show you what it would look like if you saw it today. The city is quite beautiful, surrounded by mountains. It looks a lot like Boise, Idaho. This is where our missionary team arrives and immediately they find the Jewish synagogue so they can start preaching the gospel. Verse 1 tells us that they spoke in such a way that a great number of Jews and Gentiles believed. But where God is at work, where He leads... expect opposition. And here it comes from the unbelieving Jews. But Paul and Barnabas did not let their opposition slow them down. They stayed for a long time. We don't know how long, but it was a considerable period. And, they spoke boldly. Verse 3 says it was God who bore witness... note this, its important. God bore witness to the truth of the gospel by granting these men the ability to do signs and wonders with their hands. This will get people's attention! There was no hiding or watering down the message so there would not be an offense. Always remember this, the gospel is divisive. It causes conflicts. Iconium was no exception. The people were divided. For those who believed, the gospel was the fragrance of eternal life and joy in the Holy Spirit. For those who did not believe, it was the fragrance of death, judgment and eternal destruction. Over time, the opposition grew more frustrated and finally they had seen and heard enough. A plan was hatched to kill them. But, Paul and Barnabas were warned and they left town. They headed out to Lystra and Derbe, cities in the region of Lycaonia. But don't miss verse 7. They were not running scared, they continued to preach the gospel... and

by implication, they continued to make disciples and they also continued to make enemies. But, they never said, “enough is enough, this is too hard. Let's just be nice to them for a long time and win their favor before we hit them with the gospel. Let's hand out free food or have a circus or build them tents, then we can preach the good news, once they like us” Have you ever done that? I have. When ministry gets hard it is so tempting to pull in the horns and try to make people like me, rather than speaking the truth in love. But here is the secret to persevering in ministry... Paul and Barnabas know why they were called and they know who called them. If God wants them to preach they will preach, not build tents or give out food, or anything else that would take them away from proclaiming the gospel. Not that there is anything wrong with any of those things... unless they become a substitute for doing the hard thing, telling people they are desperately in need of the Savior. When God calls, expect opposition... and they had it. But they also saw amazing results. And you know, that is just what happens when the gospel is proclaimed, whether it is in Turkey or Salem. When it is God who has called us, when it is God who is leading... we must continue, we must go on, we must trust Him for the outcome. Paul and Barnabas knew this. John Mark had lost track of that truth.

Lystra and Derbe

Now the team is headed for Lystra. It is only about 20 or 30 miles to the south. But it is a very different kind of city. It is very poor, small and unimportant. It is a backwater town and the people are relatively

uneducated. Many still speak the local Lycaonian dialect. But God has gone ahead and prepared a perfect plan, he has put a man who was crippled from birth directly in their path. Look at verses 8-9. Luke wants to make a point, so he tells us three times in one verse that the man was unable to walk and had never taken a single step in his life. God had prepared this man, from birth, for what was about to happen... yet, he had no clue. I am sure he considered his disability to be a huge disadvantage, and it was in his everyday life. But we are about to see that everyday life is not ultimately what determines our happiness. Paul proclaimed the gospel and God worked in this man's heart to show him the truth of the message. The man believed and he looked up at Paul... and Luke tells us that Paul looked back, intently. As Paul looked he saw faith in the man's eyes, he saw the working of the Holy Spirit and he said to the man, "Stand up! Stand upright on your feet!" And the man stood up and walked... healed both physically and spiritually. It rocked the city.

As I read this story, I was reminded of another time when the disciples were with Jesus and they came to a blind man who was begging. It is found in John 9:2-3, ² *And his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"* ³ *Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.* This man in Lystra had been prepared from birth by the sovereign God of the universe for a purpose. It was God who knit him together in his mother's womb... just exactly like he wanted him, no mistake. This man

struggled in life. But his struggle was for a reason... so that the works of God might be displayed in him. That man, from Southern Turkey, is your brother in Christ and someone you will meet and know in heaven. Do you think he will complain about being crippled all of his life? Or do you think he will give all glory and honor to the one who created him for eternal joy? That is something to think about every single day of your life. Why do you exist? Why do you suffer difficulty? Who called you? Who sustains you? Who wants to demonstrate and display his mighty works through your life? Who?

Well, once the man jumped to his feet the people went nuts! Neither Paul nor Barnabas spoke Lycaonian so they had no idea what the people were saying... but there were about to find out because word got out and the local priest at the temple of Zeus thought his god was visiting town. And he went out and dressed up some oxen for a huge sacrifice to the gods Zeus and Hermes! If you studied Greek mythology in school, like I did, you likely know absolutely nothing about Greek mythology because you didn't pay one bit of attention... just like me. So, here's the deal. In the Greek pantheon, Zeus was the king of the Gods... he was the big cheese, and Hermes was his son and also served as the spokesman for the pantheon of Gods. Now, there was another reason the people went into hysteria. Just 50 years prior to the time Paul and Barnabas showed up in Lystra, the Latin poet Ovid had published his magnum opus, a narrative poem titled *Metamorphoses*. In this poem, which comprises 15 books and 250

mythological stories. In this poem, he included a story about the God's Zeus and Hermes who had visited incognito in the very region of Galatia where Paul and Barnabas are preaching. In the story, these gods were rejected and turned away a thousand times before one poor, elderly couple brought them into their home and entertained them. Later, Zeus and Hermes richly rewarded the couple but destroyed all the others with a devastating flood. Now, the residents of Lystra were determined not to suffer the fate of the latter, but wanted to make sure they received the reward of riches from these men they presumed to be their gods.¹ But, Paul and Barnabas couldn't understand the language, so they were clueless to all this until the oxen showed up.

Now, Paul gets a great opportunity to once again preach the gospel, using a pagan worldview as his starting point. Watch how he does this. It is very instructive as we deal with different people who come from different backgrounds. Paul tailors the message, but he never tailors the gospel. Pick up the narrative in verse 15. Men, what are you doing these things? We are also men, just like you! We have your nature. The only difference between us is that we are the bearers of good news that you haven't had an opportunity to hear. Then Paul turns to a line of reasoning he would never use in the synagogue because they already believed this... it was God who made the world, sacrifices to the Greek gods are vain... the living God, not some mythical god in a poem. He is the one true God who made the heaven, the earth, the sea and all that is in them. This living God allowed

us to wander off in sin, to walk our own ways, but he didn't leave us without a witness. He gave us rain and fruitful crops and great amounts of food to satisfy our hunger and make us glad. All these things testify to the truth of the existence of a good and merciful creator. Paul uses nature and God's provision of all things to show them that one true living actually God exists and has revealed himself to them. Even with all that, the people could scarcely contain themselves from offering them sacrifices.

Then, the opposition from Iconium and even from as far as Antioch Pisidia shows up. It is entirely possible that the unbelievers in Lystra were highly offended by Paul and Barnabas' rejection of their offering. While many believed, many found the gospel to be an offense. So, when the Jews came to town, it wasn't hard to find people to listen. That is human nature. We always like to hear what fits our own purposes. These folks in Galatia were prone to listen to those who wanted to stir up trouble. Years later, Paul would write to the churches in Galatia and would tell them that he was dismayed that they had already walked away from what he had taught them. Astounded that they would once again listen to the Jewish false prophets who taught works, not faith. In Galatians 1:6 he says, *I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel... not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ.* It was the Jews again, teaching the gospel of salvation by works of the law, not faith in Christ. Paul asks the Galatians, *who has*

bewitched you? You fools! Then he goes on to say in Galatians 4:8-11, *Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. ⁹ But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? ¹⁰ You observe days and months and seasons and years! ¹¹ I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.*

Here is the main application point of our passage this morning. It is found in the example of John Mark. It is found in the later failings of the believers in Lystra and Derbe and Iconium. It is also found in the lives of the people who call oneTreasure their home church. Paul asks us, “How can you turn back to your former ways? How can you find the joy of the Holy Spirit, the freedom of new life in Christ, the hope of eternity in heaven in the presence of God... how can you find all these things and return to the filth of the world to try and find your happiness?” Paul expresses his fears and frustration in Galatians 4:11 when he tells the church in Lystra, *I am afraid I have labored over you in vain.*

Paul’s labor over that church had included his death by stoning and a miraculous resurrection. That is what I see in verse 19. They stoned him to death and dragged him out of the city. Luke isn’t sure, likely Paul isn’t sure either, if he died or was simply close to death. But it doesn’t matter, what matters is that he got up, was raised up, and walked right back into the city, then on to Derbe which we know nothing about and then retraced his

route back through the cities and churches. In each one he appointed elders and committed them to the Lord, giving God the glory through his faithfulness. Paul never returned to his former life. He stayed the course, he finished his task and he trusted his Lord through unthinkably hard times.

Home to Antioch

In the final act of this mission trip, Paul and Barnabas sailed home to Antioch in Syria. The home church of their mission. It was here that verse 26 tells us that they were commended to the grace of God for the work that they had fulfilled. They had done it. They had fulfilled the work for which they had been set apart. Now they were back to give a report of all that God had done with them. To encourage the church and ignite a passion for reaching the world. They proclaimed how it was God who had used them to open the door of faith into the intensely pagan gentile world. They testified to how God had done the impossible through two broken, imperfect but obedient men who refused to go home early when the going got tough. God lead, they faced fierce opposition. Life was very difficult in this foreign land. But God had increased his church, brought many to faith, healed some, showed his power through a crippled man and had demonstrated his faithfulness by bringing them home to Antioch.

Application

Here is the point. When God is the one directing us, we don't have the option to go home early. That is the point Luke wants to make when he includes the fact that John Mark left them. Three were commissioned, two stayed. We too have been given a mandate, a commission. It is the Great Mandate of Matthew 28 – Make disciples of all nations, all peoples.

Baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey all that Jesus has commanded. For those who profess faith in Jesus Christ, this is our life mission. We don't have the option of going home early. We don't have the option of following another gospel. We can't listen to alternate voices that tell us what we want to hear. We don't retire, hang up our saddle, let the next generation be responsible... we either obey or we tell God we are unwilling to do what he wants us to do. Paul grieved over the churches in Galatia as they fell prey to the doctrine of works taught by the Judiazers. We are no different. Our lives, for the most part, are not characterized by a radical obedience to the commandments of Jesus. *How can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.*

This is serious. We are about to enter into a time of communion. A time to remember the death of Christ on our behalf. Let's use this time to reflect on our lives.

Endnotes:

¹ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts: The Spirit, the Church & the World*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 230–231.