

# GOOD NEWS OF THE LIVING GOD

Acts 14:1-28

Key Verse: 14:15

*“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.*

In today's passage, Paul and Barnabas continue their first missionary journey to visit several cities in the region of Galatia. They go deeper into the Gentile world to deliver the good news of Jesus Christ. Unlike their Jewish audience in Pisidian Antioch, the people in these cities worshiped worthless idols. Paul and Barnabas taught them about the Creator God who, in his mercy and grace, sent his Son to save the world. The journey team faced fierce persecutions. Their lives were in danger. But they never gave up on preaching the good news. May the Lord help us to learn their courage and persistence in carrying out our mission!

## I. IN ICONIUM (1-7)

Paul and Barnabas had an exciting ministry in Pisidian Antioch. Paul delivered a sermon about God who kept his promise to send a Savior from David's line. Jesus died on the cross to forgive all our sins. He was raised from the dead to give us a living hope in the kingdom of God. Paul's message moved the hearts of many Jews and God-fearing Gentiles. Almost entire population of the city came to hear him the next Sabbath. But the Jews became very jealous. They incited the God-fearing women of high standing and the leading men of the city to stir up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region. So they shook the dust off their feet as a warning to them (Mk 6:11), and went to Iconium (13:51).

Iconium was located about 85 miles east of Pisidian Antioch. (Today it is called Konya, a city of 2 million people, the fourth largest city in Turkey.) What did Paul and Barnabas do when they arrived in Iconium? Look at verse 1. *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.* As usual, Paul and Barnabas went into the Jewish synagogue there and preached the gospel of Jesus Christ. They had a shepherd's heart for the Jews, their own brothers. And their preaching was very effective. A great number of Jews and Greeks believed.

But once again, some Jews refused to believe the good news. They stirred up the other Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers (2). They were stubborn. They not only rejected the gospel but also created a hostile environment for the apostles. It must have been discouraging for Paul and Barnabas to see this. But they were not disheartened. They spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord. How did God encourage them? He confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to perform signs and wonders (3). We should remember this when we face hostility in our

life of mission. There are always some people who reject the good news and become hostile toward us. but we should not be discouraged. We should remember that the Lord is with us. Jesus promised, “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Mt 28:19-20).

Satan was busy in Iconium, planting doubt in the hearts of people there. The people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews, others with the apostles (4). There was a plot afoot among both Gentiles and Jews, together with their leaders, to mistreat them and stone them (5). The enemies made an alliance to attack and kill Paul and Barnabas. When the journey team found out about it, they fled to the Lycaonian cities of Lystra and Derbe and to the surrounding country where they continued to preach the gospel (6-7). Someone may ask, “Why did they flee to other cities instead of confronting the enemies?” Was it a wise decision to retreat? How do you know when to confront and when to retreat? I think this is a question we should ask the Lord in earnest prayer. One thing we remember is that Jesus often withdrew when he was opposed by the religious leaders. He did so, not because he was afraid of them, but because he wanted to minister to the people instead of wasting time and energy to fight the political battles. I think that Paul and Barnabas did the same here. They moved on to preach the good news of Jesus to those whose hearts were open. How about the people who accepted the gospel? Did Paul and Barnabas abandon them? No. They would return to them later to strengthen their faith (21-22).

## II. IN LYSTRA AND DERBE (8-20)

The journey team traveled about 20 miles south to the city of Lystra. This must have been a small city. There is no mention of them going into a Jewish synagogue, which was their custom (To establish a synagogue, a minimum of 10 men and 10 women was needed). Instead, Paul began to preach the gospel somewhere near the city gates. As he was speaking, he noticed a lame man sitting in the audience. This man had been crippled from birth. He had never walked. Look at verses 9-10. *He listened to Paul as he was speaking. Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed and called out, “Stand up on your feet!” At that, the man jumped up and began to walk.* This miraculous healing was somewhat similar to what Peter did at a temple gate in Jerusalem. When a lame beggar asked for money, Peter looked straight at him, said, “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk” (Ac 3:6). There are also differences between the two events. The lame man in Lystra was not a beggar. Verse 9 says that he listened to Paul as he was speaking. He opened his heart to the word of God. The Lord never ignores such person. Paul also saw that this man had faith to be healed (9). Life had dealt harshly with this man. He was born crippled. Humanly he had no hope for future. He could not get a decent job. He could not get married. But this man opened his heart to the word of God. He had faith in God. And God blessed his faith. God used his servant Paul to heal this man. When Paul called out, “Stand up on your feet!” the man jumped up and began to walk. God worked miracle to give the man a new hope and a new life! In God, we can always find hope, no matter what our situation may be.

Look at verse 11. *When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have come down to us in human form!"* The miracle in Lystra caused a comical reaction by the people in the city. Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes because he was the chief speaker. They tried to worship Paul as Hermes because of his passionate preaching of the word of God. The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought bulls and wreaths to the city gates because he and the crowd wanted to offer sacrifices to them (12-13). In the ancient Greek mythology, Zeus was the chief god; he was considered ruler of the heavens and father of other gods. The temple of Zeus at Athens was the largest in Greece. His statue at Olympia was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. In Lystra, there was a temple of Zeus near the gates of the city, and also a statue of Hermes, the messenger of the gods. The people of Lystra worshiped the Greek gods as many people in that part of the world did. Romans adopted the Greek gods and worshiped them after giving their own names (Zeus = Jupiter; Hermes = Mercury). Their perception of God was based on their culture and mythology. They did not know the Creator God. They worshiped worthless things. Today, we consider such practice superstition. Sadly, however, many people are superstitious in various ways. A Harris Poll found that 31% of Americans believe in astrology. When people don't have God in their life, they want to hold on to something or someone else. We must teach them about the Creator God who loves them! We should also remember that idol worship could happen to anyone, including us. If we put something or someone in our hearts and lives where God should be, we become idol worshipers.

Paul and Barnabas became instant celebrities in Lystra. The crowd wanted to offer sacrifices to them. How did the apostles handle their sudden popularity? They tore their clothes as a visible protest to what they were doing. They shouted to the crowd, "Friends, why are you doing this? We too are only human, like you." They refused to get the credit for the miracle. More than that, they used the opportunity to preach the good news to the crowd. But the apostles realized that they had to preach a different message this time, because the crowd lacked a basic understanding of God. They did not know the Creator God. So they decided to begin from Genesis.

Look at verse 15b: *"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."* Genesis 1:1 teaches us that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. He created man and woman in his own image, loving them from the very beginning. He created a perfect environment for them to be happy. They would have lived happily forever, if they had not fallen into temptation and sinned against God. In his mercy and grace, God still loved them and sent his one and only Son Jesus to save them from sin and Satan, and to lead them to the kingdom of God for eternal life. The people in Lystra did not know this God. They did not know the amazing love of God. So they worshiped the mythological gods, the worthless idols, who could not do a thing for them, let alone love them. Paul and Barnabas told them to turn from these worthless things to the living God.

What else did they tell the crowd about God? They said, *“In the past, he let all nations go their own way. 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”* (16-17). They told them about God’s patience. God did not destroy the peoples and nations for turning their backs on him, their Creator. They ignored him and worshiped worthless things. But God did not ignore them. He left his presence with them by showing his kindness. He gave them rain from heaven and crops in their seasons. He provided them with plenty of food and filled their hearts with joy. God allowed them to go their own way, patiently waiting for them to come back to him, like the father of the prodigal son did. This message was different from the one Paul preached to the Jewish audience in Pisidian Antioch. It was a very basic but encouraging message. They preached the good news of the living God. But the people were only excited about the miracle. The apostles still had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them (18).

But then, the situation changed very quickly for Paul and Barnabas. Some Jews came all the way from Antioch and Iconium to attack the servants of God. Some of them walked more than 100 miles to hurt the work of God. They were determined. Verse 19 says that they were successful in winning the crowd over. Together they stoned Paul. They tried to kill him. One moment, they tried to worship him as god. Now they tried to kill him. These people were like the crowd in Jerusalem who shouted “Hosanna” when Jesus entered the city, and then a few days later, shouted, “Crucify him! Crucify him!” May God help each one of us to know who Jesus and have a very personal relationship with him so that we may not become fickle like the crowd in this passage!

So what happened to Paul? They dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. *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* (20). The crowd dumped Paul’s body outside the city, thinking he was dead. He probably had a concussion. When he regained consciousness, Paul got up and went back into the city. Wow! He was a man of great faith and courage. He was not afraid of death. He did not give up on preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ even after his near-death experience. He and Barnabas moved on to Derbe the next day. I think Paul had big scars on his body. This is a conjecture, but perhaps this is what Paul meant when he said, “From now on, let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus” (Gal 6:17).

### III. WE MUST GO THROUGH MANY HARSHIPS (21-28)

Derbe was the last city Paul and Barnabas visited in their first missionary journey. It was a city in the ethnic region of Lycaonia. They preached the gospel there and won a large number of disciples (21). Paul would visit the city two more times during his second and third missionary journeys. A disciple named Gaius was raised from Derbe (20:4). One notable thing about this city was that the journey team did not suffer any persecution there. God gave them a break after experiencing life-threatening persecutions in the precious cities. Several years later, Paul recalled this suffering while he was in prison in Rome, awaiting his martyrdom. He said to 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. In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, ..." (2Ti 3:10-12).

Look at verses 21-22. *Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," they said.* Paul's hometown Tarsus was to the east of Derbe. It was on the way to Syrian Antioch where their home church was. But they decided to go westward, in the opposite direction. Why? They wanted to return to Lystra, Iconium and (Pisidian) Antioch, the cities that gave so much trouble to them. By revisiting them, they encouraged the disciples to remain true to the faith. They told them: "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God." They taught them the way of the cross. I think their actions spoke louder than their words. The disciples in those cities were encouraged by the fact that Paul and Barnabas came back to them, despite what had happened earlier. Sometimes we are reluctant to teach our Bible students the way of the cross, because no one likes suffering. But the way of the cross is the way of our Lord Jesus. To make them strong in Christ, we must teach them the way of the cross. Above all, our actions should show that we are not afraid of suffering for the Lord.

Verse 23 says that Paul and Barnabas did something very important in their return visits to the cities. They appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust. To help them to be a thriving community in the midst of persecutions, they needed spiritual leaders who could guide them. With prayer and fasting, Paul and Barnabas committed them to the Lord.

After going through Pisidia, they came into Pamphylia, and when they had preached the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia (24-25). From Attalia they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed (26). Then they held a world mission report meeting. Look at verse 27. *On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.* The title of their meeting was "God opened a door of faith to the Gentiles." It was not, "How much we suffered during this mission trip," or "I almost died in Lystra." They reported all that God had done through them. *And they stayed there a long time with the disciples in Antioch* (28).

From today's passage, we learn that we must turn away from the worthless things of this world and worship the Creator God only. He is the living God who wants all people to be saved from their sins. We also learn that we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God. Hardships are not a requirement for salvation, but all believers must expect to suffer because of our faith in Jesus, as we travel toward our final destination, the kingdom of God. It is the way that our Lord Jesus went through ahead of us. May the Lord help us to follow the way of the cross!