

The Good News comes to Pagans

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[0 : 00] Um, we're continuing our series, um, of good news. And today the building the kingdom! of God, today the good news comes to pagans. Um, and it's an interesting story this if i can get my app to open up.

That's it. Um, last week, Johan took us through chapter 13, the previous chapter to this, with Paul and Barnabas at Pisidian Antioch, which is in Turkey, uh, eastern part of Turkey, the Asian part of Turkey. And we saw how this was furthering the goal of the key verse that's in Acts, the beginning, of spreading the good news from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria and then to the ends of the earth. And at the end of the previous chapter, despite success, despite seeing people coming to know God, despite people turning from Judaism to Christianity, they faced opposition. People stirred up the crowds and there was a plot, but they heard about it and they escaped and they moved on. And yet they would even in this difficulty, even in all these things happening to them, they were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit. And today we now come to the next part of the story, where there's a slight change in emphasis, where there's a slight move on from what pattern has been previously. So the first, the first 10 verses talk about the good news baton being passed on. They come to Iconium. They're still in Turkey. It's still in Asia Minor.

Today, Iconium is called Konya, which is the fourth largest city in Turkey. In our downstairs toilet, there's a big map on the wall. And as I was drying my hands, I was staring at this map and I happened to look at Turkey yesterday and Konya is on that map.

On a modern map, what we know as Iconium, which is in the Bible, is on modern day maps. It's there. It's a city that still exists today. And it's described as a city in verse 4.

[2 : 27] They say that the people of the city were there. It is cosmopolitan. There are Jews and there's Gentiles in the city. It's a mixed city. And more importantly, verse 1 tells us it had a synagogue.

Now, for a synagogue to exist in a place, there had to be 10 adult male Jews in that city. Therefore, there were 10 adult male Jews in that city and they had a synagogue there.

So Paul and Barnabas did their usual custom. They went to the synagogue. They spoke there. And their preaching was effective. It says in verse 1, a great number. It was effectively a great number of Jews and Greeks believed.

And it then says in verse 3, they spent a considerable time there. So they didn't just preach and disappear off like a traveling preacher. They preached. They saw conversions. They saw people turning to Jesus. And they stayed there some considerable time.

We're not told how long, but some considerable time. But as time passes, the pattern we saw in the previous chapter repeats itself. Opposition grows.

[3 : 40] Verse 4 says the city was divided. There was dispute. There was disagreement. And in verse 5, a plot was hatched again. To hear about what was going to...

They wanted to get rid of the plot of fruit among the Gentiles to mistreat them and stone them. And then they found out about it and they left and they escaped without any violence being ensued.

So far, so much the same as Pisidian Antioch. The same thing had happened. But verse 6 tells us they moved to Lystra and Derby. Or Derby. I'm not quite sure how the pronunciation is.

But they moved to Lystra and Derby. And the surrounding countryside, we're told. And they continued preaching the gospel. The good news. But things are different here from Iconia.

This area is much more rural. There's no mention of a synagogue. And in actual fact, in verse 13, we learn there's a temple outside the city to Greek deities.

[4 : 45] So it's fundamentally pagan and not Jewish. And although called the city, it's not cosmopolitan as Iconia was. There weren't 10 adult male Jews in that city to allow a synagogue to

be created.

So they can't do their usual practice of going to the synagogue. So they preach in the streets. And their preaching attracts a crowd. And Paul, while he's speaking, spots one particular person in the crowd.

He was noticeable. Because he was sitting. And not standing like everyone else was. And he was listening intently to Paul. Luke, with his medical background, tells us that this man was lame from birth.

And had never walked. An interesting fact that he puts in there to attract our attention. And as he was speaking, Paul was given supernatural insight.

To say that this man had faith to be healed. And then we see how the first public miracle performed by Paul. We know from verse 3, earlier on, in Iconium, they had performed signs of wonders and may have performed a healing before.

[6 : 04] But Luke outlines the circumstances of the event to this particular healing in Lystra quite deliberately. I wonder why that is. Let's lead together verses 8 to 10.

So we lead to 10. Does that sound familiar?

Does that bring back some echoes of something else we may have read? If you turn back in Acts 3, or if you look on the screen, in Acts chapter 3, Peter, in verses 2, 4 to 6, says this, Look at the panels in that.

And if you want to help, I've highlighted in red words that are identical. He was lame from birth. He jumped up.

He told him to stand up. And he jumped up and began to walk. There are huge similarities. And Luke is very deliberately pointing out the similarities here. See, Luke is very deliberately pointing out the parallels between Peter and Paul.

[7 : 59] That they're both messengers of the gospel. Peter to the Jews, and now Paul to the Gentiles. Just as Jesus had worked through Peter, Jesus was now working through Paul.

And Paul is now an apostle, equal standing with Peter. In actual fact, in verse 14 and 4, 4 and 14 of Acts chapter 14, it's the first time that Paul is referred to as an apostle.

A witness of the resurrection of Jesus, who saw Jesus face to face, on the road to Damascus. And now has the same standing as Peter. And Luke is pointing out that the baton is being passed. The promise of the beginning of the book, to go from Judea, Samaria, to the ends of the earth, is now being fulfilled. And Luke is very much pointing out that the person who's going to do that, is Paul.

Paul is the apostle to the Gentiles. The good news is currently in Asia Minor. In a few weeks' time, in a few chapters' time, it will move to Europe.

[9 : 05] And by the end of Acts, it'll have got to the centre of the then known world, Rome, the centre of the Roman Empire. And it's because of that journey, the gospel eventually reached us here in the UK.

It spread from Judea to Samaria, to the ends of the earth. Because God, we are sitting here today, because God chose Paul to be his messenger to the Gentiles.

And the baton was passed from the Jewish leaders who kept on going in their area, as Paul then took the gospel further afield. So the baton is being passed, and the gospel is spreading, and moving out.

But if the baton is being passed, and the good news baton is being passed, then the next step is that the good news comes to pagans. And if the baton is being passed, then the method of reaching people was also changing.

The message was the same, but the method was having to adapt. So this is healing that's just happened in Acts 14. How do the people react to that?

[10 : 21] Well, in verse 11, it said, They tried to claim that Paul and Barnabas were deities, that the gods had come down to them, and to worship them, and offer sacrifices to them.

Why was that? Why would they do that? Well, I mentioned earlier that there was a temple of Zeus, as we mentioned here, that was mentioned here, just outside the city. And John Stott, in his commentary on this, has a very good historical background to this.

See if I can find the right page here. So I'm going to read from what John Stott says here. The crowd's superstitious and even fanatical behaviour is hard to comprehend, but some local background shows light on it.

About 50 years previously, the Latin poet Ovid had narrated in his *Metamorphoses* an ancient local legend. The supreme god Jupiter, Zeus to the Greeks, and his son Mercury, Hermes to the Greeks, once visited the hill country of Phrygia, disguised as mortal men.

In their incognito, they sought hospitality, but were rebuffed a thousand times. At last, however, they were offered lodging in a tiny cottage that should store and reach from the marsh. Here lived an elderly peasant couple called Philemon and Bocchus, who entertained them out of their poverty.

[11:50] Later, the gods rewarded them, but destroyed by flood the homes which would not take them in. It is reasonable to suppose that both the Listerine people knew the story about their neighbourhood, and that if the gods were to revisit their district, they were anxious not to suffer the same fate as the inhospitable Phrygians.

So that explains why they reacted that way. They wanted to appease the gods. They wanted to say the gods had come down from this legend that was there.

They had the temple outside. But what's interesting is Paul and Barnabas initially didn't realise what was going on, because it says they were speaking in the local Lycanian language, and they didn't understand what was going on.

But when they did, they were horrified. Their reaction says they tore their clothes and rushed down into the crowd to a Jew, the sign of two of their clothes, the sign of blasphemy, that they were claiming to be gods, claiming them to be gods, and Paul and Barnabas both said to them, no, look, we're only human.

We're men just like you. We're human. We've got bodies. We're not gods. And then they preached to them. But the preaching here is totally different from what's happened in the past.

[13:07] Paul takes a totally different approach and method to reaching these people. Tim Keller, in commenting on this passage, says, it could show that no one size fits all gospel witness, that we have to adapt how we tell the story of the gospel to the crowds, to the people that they are.

In Antioch, in the previous chapter, Paul and Barnabas were speaking to Jews and Jewish people and Jewish converts. He started by speaking of history. He talked about the law.

He talked about Moses. He talked about the great heirs of the Jewish nation. He talked about David. He talked about everything that he would know about. But here, he can't do that. They're not Jewish.

They don't understand that. They don't have that background. He starts at a different point. He starts at a point where they are, not at where he wants to get them to. And he starts talking to them about God, the God who made everything.

In verse 15, friends, why are you doing this? We too are human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to serve from these worthless things, the living God, who made the heavens and the earth, the sea and everything in them.

[14:19] In the past, he let all nations go their own way, yet he's not left himself without testimony. He's shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their season. He provides you with plenty of food and fills your heart with joy.

He tells them about God. He tells them about this God as one God. There is not a pantheon of gods. We're told here about Zeus and Hermes, but in the region around there, what the people did, they had a pantheon of gods.

They prayed to the God that they wanted to. If you were a farmer, you prayed to the God of the soil and the wind and the rain. If you were a jeweler, you prayed to the gods of silver and gold and jewels.

If you were a fisherman, you prayed to the God of the sea and of fish and things like that in the sea. Everyone had their own God. Everyone prayed to their own God because that's what they wanted to help.

They wanted help in that. But Paul points out here there's not a pantheon of gods. He is one God. And he's the creator God. He's the God that created everything and made everything.

[15:24] And he's a living God. He's not dead. He's not a stone statue or a piece of wood or some altar in your house. He's a living person. He's a living God. And he's patient.

It's well known that the gods of the Greek and Roman gods were fickle. They were capricious. We even read about how Zeus and Hermes, how they destroyed the people that didn't accept them. They were capricious. But here we're told God is a patient God. And he's a kind and a loving God. And he gives good things to everyone. As Johan pointed at the beginning of the service, to those

who don't know him or acknowledge him, he gives food.

He gives rain. He gives joy in hearts to everyone. Christians aren't the only people that experience joy. Christians aren't the only people that feel rain falling on them.

Everyone gets that. Theologians call that common grace. God's common grace to everybody, the good things that we enjoy. And they're there for a place like this. Well, people wouldn't call themselves pagan.

[16 : 30] They don't have idols in their houses. They don't have all these things around. But fundamentally, at heart, our society is pagan. Because they worship everything and anything apart from God.

How many people do you know? How many people have we in the past worshipped fame?

Worshipped social media likes? Worshipped power?

Political or economic power? Worshipped relationships and looking for the right person to satisfy us. Worshipped sex? Worshipped family?

Worshipped children? Money? Intellect? Job? Career? You can carry on and name all the lists. But we are as pagan as these people are in our society.

If we're not relying on the living God, the one true God who made everything, we're as pagan as the people that Paul and Barnabas spoke to 2,000 years ago. What idols do we have in our lives?

[17 : 41] What is it that takes us away from God? What is it that we focus on that should be, that takes the place that we should be focusing on God? What idols are stopping us coming to the true and living God?

what is it that we should be doing? What is it that is stopping us truly knowing God? one final thing. Have you noticed what's missing from this sermon? There's no mention of Jesus in this sermon. That doesn't mean to say he doesn't mention him eventually, at some point, as we'll come on to find out in a moment.

But in this particular one, he starts where they're at. He doesn't actually mention Jesus. Maybe because he got interrupted and because they were, it says at the end, in all these words, he had difficulty stopping the current sacrificing to them.

Maybe he wasn't allowed to get there. But he doesn't. He starts where they're at and he doesn't mention Jesus. But there's a huge irony as well. Because it says, they cry out when they saw what Paul had done, the gods have come down to us in human form.

[18 : 48] And which god came down in human form? Jesus. There's a huge irony that they were looking for that, but they actually missed the one who actually did come down in human form.

They were looking at the people in front of them rather than looking at what God had actually done through Jesus. So the good news is that the baton has been passed on to Paul to reach out to the Gentiles.

The good news has come to pagans and we live in a pagan society as much as they did. But the really good news at the end of this is the good news kingdom just keeps growing.

Let's read the end of the last few verses, 19 and 20. Then some Jews came from Antioch and Niconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and 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 Derby. Was the preaching of Paul effective?

[19 : 49] Yes it was. It might not look it when you read this very initially but it was effective. How do we know that? Well firstly, there was opposition. If it wasn't effective people wouldn't have come to disrupt it.

Most commentators also believe there was a time gap between verse 18 and verse 19. We're not sure how long but there's a gap of time between when they initially spoke to these people and when this opposition arrived from Antioch and Niconium.

And that allowed new converts to come. That allowed new converts to believe. But also the news of what was happening spread as well. And a group of Jews came from Antioch.

And it's quite a distance. It's somewhere they estimate around about 80 or 90 miles from Antioch to where they were. And if it wasn't effective why would they come all their way? Why would they bother coming all that way if it wasn't effective to disrupt it?

And they have success. In Antioch they didn't have success in stirring up the crowd and Paul and Barnabas were able to leave. But in this moment they had success in stirring up the crowd.

[20 : 56] Just a side. Look at the amazing fickleness of people. A few verses before they were faking these as gods. Now they want to stone them. How fickle people are when they get turned and their heads are turned.

And then they do actually stone Paul and drag him out of the city and they thought he was dead. And that was the end of this new teaching at last. He's gone. Paul actually refers to this instance himself.

In 2 Corinthians chapter 11 he says this. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received the Jews with 40 lashes, minus one.

Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was pelted with stones. Three times I was shipwrecked. I spent a night and a day in the open scene. I have constantly been on the move and I have been in danger.

So Paul refers to this in his letter. This one time when he was stoned. And they thought he was dead. And there's a lot of debate in the commentaries was he actually dead or wasn't he dead?

[22 : 04] I believe he wasn't dead. Because I think if he was dead it would have been mentioned. I think it would have been a proper resurrection. I think it would have been mentioned. But they thought he was dead. And the words that Luke uses here are particular as well.

It says the thinking he was dead. But he survived. He recovered miraculously.

And he goes back on to doing the job he's been commissioned to do. And where does he go? He runs away? No, he goes back into the city.

The very place that stoned him. He heads back into the city. Because he wants to take this gospel to the people. He goes back to the people who've turned on him.

And he's not afraid. And the next day he continues his mission onto Derby which is about 60 miles away after he's been stoned the day before. That's quite amazing.

[23 : 07] He was resilient. He was empowered by God to do what he was commissioned to do.

And he was steadfast in doing that job. And we know the gospel is effective not just because of the opposition he's had.

But there's a particular word that's used in verse 20 and also in verse 22 further down beyond the passage we read. That's the word disciples. After he'd been stoned the disciples gathered around him.

So people had been converted. The work was effective. And again in verse 22 he strengthened the disciples and encouraged them to remain true to the faith. Through this whole period of time Paul's message was effective.

The gospel was growing. The good news was growing. And there's also one very famous convert from this time. It's not mentioned here specifically in this passage but in a couple of chapters time Paul comes back.

He goes off and he comes back. Paul came back. So in chapter 16 verse 1 it says Paul came to Derbe and then to Lystra when a disciple named Timothy lived. He took Timothy's journeys and he wrote two letters of the Bible to Timothy.

[24 : 18] So a famous convert was called Timothy lived in this place. So the gospel message was effective. The good news kingdom was growing despite everything going on allowing him.

we'll shortly be singing our closing song which is facing a task unfinished. And in there it says there's a couple interesting verses.

It talks about driving us to our knees. Like Paul we may face opposition. We may not be stoned but we may face rejection ridicule by family by friends people we thought we knew and loved and trusted us might ridicule us for our faith.

It also says in that song unnumbered souls are dying. Remember last week Johan put a number up 3.6 billion the number of people estimated that are not haven't heard the good news of Jesus.

The good news kingdom is growing but it needs to keep growing and we need to go out further and to take the message out because the task is unfinished. The task that Paul started here the task that God commissioned Paul to do and from Jerusalem Judea Samaria and the ends of the earth to the ends of the earth hasn't been completed yet.

[25 : 54] it's still ongoing and the kingdom is still growing but we can finish we can sing the new chorus to that song with joy in our hearts and with faith in our hearts we go to all the world with kingdom hope unfurled no other name has power to save than Jesus Christ the Lord.

The gospel message is growing and will keep growing. It will be effective. Souls will be saved. That's God's job.

Our job is to go and tell them the good news. Let's pray. Father we thank you for your word. We thank you for the encouragement it gives us to know that your kingdom is growing and your kingdom will never be stopped. Help us we pray to take the message of the good news to our world. To our world that's so lost and is so pagan. Is so looking after running after things that cannot satisfy. Running after things that rob rather than reward.

[27 : 14] Running after things that take away rather than give us joy. Help us we pray to take your word to this world and may it be effective.

May you take what we do Lord and save souls we pray. In Jesus name. Amen. Amen.