

God's Unstoppable Mission Part 2: Iconium, Lystra, Antioch

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[0 : 00] we are continuing to think about God's unstoppable mission. We find here our stopping points are Iconium and Lystra and Antioch. So last week we began in Syria. Paul then moved to Cyprus.

He finished his journey in chapter 13 in coastal Turkey. This time we'll see his movements hundreds of miles around inland Turkey before returning to Antioch in Syria. As you read the chapter we heard opposition. We saw him being stoned. We saw him performing miracles. There was encounters with people worshipping other gods. There was preaching. There was plots. There was church planting. It's a reminder that Paul's was quite a life. Last week we said his was an adventure of faith and and that's absolutely what we see and so sometimes his experience can seem so distant to ours. It's like well what could we possibly learn from what's going on here? In our ordinary mission, in our ordinary calling as the church of God, what can we learn from Paul, Barnabas and their missionary journey? This week we're going to think about three C's. We're going to think about Paul and Barnabas and the importance of courage in God's mission. We'll see that in Iconium. In Lystra and Derbe we'll think about the importance of communicating the glory of God and the joy of God to the people around us. And then in the return to Antioch we'll see the importance of the church to the mission of God. So let's begin in Iconium. First seven verses where we discover that God's mission requires gospel courage. In high school for at least a couple of years whenever it was time in English to go to the library, I don't know why I love stories but as a really lazy reader in school

I would always go for the books the choose your own adventure stories. It's a really quick way to get through a book but central to that idea is you come to a point of drama and you're invited to decide what you would like to happen next. Do you want to go through the trap door? Do you want to go into the dark forest? That kind of thing. Now keep that in mind as we read what's happening in Iconium.

First couple of verses we discover Paul and Barnabas and their typical missionary strategy. Where do they go first? They go to the synagogue. They go where the Jews and the Gentiles who are following Judaism. They go to speak the word of God to them there to announce Jesus is their promised Messiah.

And as we see often in Paul's missionary journeys his preaching brings success from God. There are many people who believe but that brings to jealousy and opposition mainly on the part of other religious leaders. The Jewish majority are not happy that people are believing in Jesus as Lord. And so what we see in verse 2 is slander. We see the Jews poisoning the minds of the people against Paul and Barnabas.

[3 : 27] Here's a smear campaign. Here's anti-Paul propaganda. And here's where our choose your own adventure thing comes in. So if we were reading this so we've got some Jews and they're refusing to believe and they're stirring up the Gentiles. The minds are being poisoned. What would we expect to happen next?

Perhaps they'll leave quietly. Perhaps. But what we see is that Paul and Barnabas, verse 3, spent considerable time there. Deliberate use of language. There was opposition. There was minds being poisoned. So they spent considerable time there. Because of the hostility they resolved to stay. Because there are false views of Christianity around and their message they resolved to stay in order to correct that false view in order to continue preaching the message of God's grace. You see that in verse 3? The message is all about God's grace. Reminds us of that conflict. The religious leaders that emphasized works that you earn your place in God's family. And Paul and Barnabas say, no, we're saved by grace through faith in Jesus alone. It's not about what we do.

It's what Jesus has already done. And that creates hostility. So they stay. They spend time.

Speaking boldly. And their message is confirmed by miracles. Which again is one of the themes that we see in Jesus' life. And it's also a theme in the life of the apostles as they are on mission. That miracles serve to back up the authority of their message. How do we know that these new men coming into our town are speaking the word of God because they're doing miracles? John Calvin said, the true use of miracle is the establishing of the gospel in its full and genuine authority.

So these new believers are continuing to listen to the message of Jesus because they're seeing miracles. And what happens in Iconium verses 4 to 7? We sense there is a city divided.

[5 : 45] Some are in favor of this new message. Some are really not. And at the end, there's this plot to kill Paul. And now it's their time to run. It's time to leave. But in this short section, we're reminded of one of the features of the book of Acts, one of the features of the apostles in particular, but also of the church in general. It's the courage that we see among God's people.

The courage of Christians. Now it's important for us to recognize that this isn't a natural courage, that God doesn't just select for his kingdom those who are instinctively brave, those who will instinctively face up to any fight or any challenge, that that's not the kind of people that God is calling. We only have to look at the disciples as an example of that. As you trace their experience of living with Jesus, when times get tough, when Jesus is arrested, they run away and they're hiding. They are in fear until after Pentecost. I was reading this morning Acts chapter 4.

Peter and John have been put in prison for preaching the good news of Jesus. And they're brought before the religious leaders and it says the religious leaders are amazed by the courage of Peter and John. And they took note of the fact that these were men who had been with Jesus. This isn't just ordinary courage. This is gospel courage. This comes from an absolute conviction that Jesus is Lord and Savior, that he has given the Spirit to give them strength for mission. This is, in this case, men, but it's when men and women have the courage of gospel convictions. That's the kind of courage that's required in Christian mission. Paul would speak about it in the letter to the Philippians when he was a prisoner in Philippi. He could say, for me to live is Christ, to die is gain. That's not foolhardy. That's gospel courage that understands Christ is my highest treasure. So what can man do to me? I read this week an article by an evangelist by the name of Randy Newman. And he was asking the question, is evangelism harder than it used to be? You get a lot of debate and discussion about that. And he argues in that article, no, it's not that while in our context that the temperature may be getting hotter, we may meet with more apathy and we may well meet with more hostility.

But when we look at what's happening in Acts, we see that that's nothing new. And he was inviting us to remember that the situation, when we think about evangelism, the situation has always been serious.

The Bible makes plain that without faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, people are dead in their sins. And there is the devil who is blinding the minds of unbelievers so they can't see the glory of Jesus and turning people against the good news of Jesus. So that's always going to be a feature of our efforts to share the good news. But God's word remains powerful. This word that turned the city of Iconium upside down is still the powerful word of God. We still have a God who desires to build his kingdom, who is still pursuing his own glory. And the reality of his saving grace, it remains.

[9 : 40] That remains our message. So it's difficult. In fact, without the Holy Spirit, without God's help, evangelism is impossible. But with word and spirit, there is still power. But we need this kind of courage as a church. We need it as individual Christians.

Perhaps in Acts chapter 4, we discover how we get this courage. That just as Peter and John were those who had been with Jesus, that it's as we spend time with Jesus, as we come to treasure the gospel, to appreciate that he has taken us from spiritual death and he's given us eternal life. When we consider that we were isolated and far from God and Jesus has brought us into God's family. When we understand that now there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God because we are in Christ Jesus. That's where courage comes from. So we need to be men and women who are in the word of God, treasuring that good news. We need to be those who value eternity more than life now as Paul and Barnabas did.

Because God's mission requires gospel courage. And then we move on to Lystra and Derby, but the focus is almost entirely on what happens in Lystra.

And there we see that God's mission requires us to communicate both God's glory and God's joy. In verses 8 to 10, we discover a miracle very like a miracle that took place in Acts chapter 3.

That time it was Peter who raised a crippled man to his feet. This time it's Paul. He recognizes, verse 9, that this man who's listening intently has faith to be healed.

[11 : 40] And so with the authority of Jesus, calls him to stand on his feet. But the reaction of the crowd to this miracle is entirely different to what we read in Acts chapter 3.

I don't know who here has read a lot of Latin poetry. I certainly haven't. But I am told that some 50 years before this event happened, Ovid, a Latin poet, tells the story of Zeus and Hermes visiting a town in the sky.

They visited a town called Phrygia, so the story goes. And when these gods arrived in Phrygia, as he tells the story, nobody welcomed them.

Everybody said, no, just leave. Apart from a poor elderly couple. So as Ovid tells the story, Zeus and Hermes are not very pleased with the city because of the lack of welcome.

And so while this elderly couple are rewarded by these gods, the rest of the town was wiped out. Now that was a popular story in Greco-Roman culture.

[12 : 53] So when you come to what happens here with Paul and Barnabas, you wonder whether that is in the back or even in the front of their minds. So when they see the miracle, what do they say in verse 11?

The gods have come down to us in human form. Barnabas is Zeus and Paul is Hermes, so they think. There is celebration.

The town is going crazy because of what's happened. And they're presuming that the gods have come to visit. Now, think about Paul and Barnabas' experience today.

They've moved around Cyprus and Greece and Syria and Turkey. And at each point, they've met with opposition.

They've met with people who would like to have them killed. Here is something very different. Here they are being welcomed as heroes.

[13 : 55] Here there is a temptation to receive some of this adulation for themselves. After all the bad press they've just been getting to take some of the credit for what's going on for themselves.

But what do they do? What do Paul and Barnabas do? Verse 14. When the apostles hear the crowd's reaction, they tore their clothes. There's grief because of this significant misunderstanding.

And they look to correct it. Men, why are you doing this? We too are only men. And their focus is on the fact that this town is guilty of worshipping the wrong thing.

Guilty of worshipping Paul and Barnabas. Guilty of worshipping Zeus and Hermes who are, verse 15, worthless. Gods that cannot save because they are no gods at all.

And we are bringing you good news. Telling you to turn from these worthless things. To the living God who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them.

[15 : 06] So he brings good news. Good news of the ultimate creator. The one who is greater than their false gods. The one who gives evidence of his glory in creation.

And in providing for them and for their needs. And so they're communicating loud and clear. God is great. We are not.

It's all about God. It's all about Jesus. It's not about me. And so we need to be wary. Beware of any ministry that would look to elevate a preacher or a leader.

We need to be wary of people who would say, I say to you, rather than those who say, thus says the Lord.

And I think practically as well, when it comes to sharing our own faith. When it comes to telling our story of God's work in our lives. The goal is always to point to the glory and the kindness and the saving grace of God through Jesus.

[16 : 19] Not pointing ultimately to ourselves. And so Paul and Barnabas very careful to give God glory. And also in verse 17, they communicate to Lystra the joy of God.

Again, in a separate article I was reading from Randy Newman, he talks about an apologetic of joy. And he actually used this verse to help make his point.

So let's see what Paul does here in verse 17. How does he talk to these people who had never heard of the true God, but who were worshipping false gods?

He says he's not left himself. The true God has not left himself without testimony. He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their season.

He provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy. So he goes to the doctrine of common grace. He points out the fact that God is a kind and a generous God who loves to give good gifts.

[17 : 30] And he's wanting, Paul is wanting the people to understand that it's God who gives every good gift. That God is ultimately the source of their joy. That Paul is trying to encourage the people to think, These good things that I have, where do they come from?

Who is behind all these good things that fill our lives with joy? So he's looking to help them reason from the gift that they have to think about the giver.

And it's a way, Randy Newman says, it's a way of building common ground with people. And we're so used to recognising the fact that as Christians a lot of our values and beliefs are very different.

But here is one way in which we can share common ground. Because whoever you are, we have certain things that we enjoy, whether that's sharing good food, good music, whether it's the enjoyment of stories or scenery.

We can talk about how we appreciate God for giving us those everyday gifts that we have in our lives.

[18 : 42] That these common grace goodnesses of God provide a platform to then talk about, to think about, the God who gives joy, the God who is kind, and the God who, when we know him, allows us to have full joy.

That knowing the eternal God helps us to enjoy things now more. So Randy Newman suggests that this kind of verse and this kind of logic can be helpful for those who feel that they're happy without God.

Because it takes us to where people are at. I'm happy. Where does happiness come from? Trying to help people to think about the happiness that comes from the God who is generous and joyful.

So in Lystra we see a reminder that our goal as Christians is to enjoy God and to give God glory in our lives and in our mission.

And then as they return towards Antioch, verses 21 to the end of the chapter, we are reminded in a variety of ways that God's mission needs God's church.

[19 : 56] There was an important missionary writer in the 19th century, I think, by the name of Roland Allen. And he makes the point that in the book of Acts what we see is that Paul establishes churches, not missions.

There's a strong emphasis in the book of Acts on church planting, church leadership, and Paul and Barnabas looking to strengthen and establish churches.

So we see that God works by his spirit. He calls and saves people to faith in the Lord Jesus by his spirit. And then those people are organized into local churches so that they, in their locality, might continue the mission of God.

Because Paul and Barnabas, they knew that they were commissioned by the church in Antioch. They knew that God chose to work through the church. So let's see the value that they place on the church.

And first of all, in verses 21 and 22, we see them returning to various locations they've been to in order to strengthen believers. They preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples.

[21 : 10] Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. They said, we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God, they said.

And do you notice that they went back to the dangerous places? They went back to places where some of their opponents would wish them to be dead. But they did that because they knew that the people of God there, these young Christians, needed to be taught.

They needed to be trained. They needed to be encouraged to persevere. And notice the way Paul spoke to them to show that wherever we are from, when our faith is in Christ, we are one.

There is a unity there. We are on mission together. So he said to them, we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.

This spiritual battle that I have lived through, that's also going to be your experience. We're in this together. But he looks to strengthen believers in these young churches.

[22 : 20] He knows the importance of the truth and the gospel to them surviving as a church. And then we also see in verse 23 that they very quickly established elders in local churches.

Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and with prayer and fasting committed them to the Lord in whom they had put their trust.

So Paul understands these young Christians, they have a need for teaching. There will be a need for pastoral care.

There will be a need for leadership. So Paul established, he appoints these elders and he committed them to the Lord.

He has confidence in God. As a church planter, he was always on the move. He would stay for a few months, sometimes very occasionally, stay for a number of years.

[23 : 24] But his only contact with them would be through letters. So he has to trust that what God starts, God will finish. That as God has built the church, God will sustain the church and he will equip the church.

And he will equip the elders for the task of ministry. So he committed them to the Lord, trusting that God would help these men to guide God's church in their particular mission field.

And so the book of Acts reminds us that the local church and local church leadership in the form of elders and deacons is God's good plan for his church.

And so when we realize that, it's important then that together we are praying for our elders and for our deacons.

But we seek to encourage our church leaders by walking in the light that you'd be pleased to gladly submit to the leadership of this church as they seek to follow, as we seek to follow the Lord Jesus.

[24 : 42] And the next thing that we see is that they, Paul and Barnabas, return back to their sending church. Verse 26, from Italia, they sailed back to Antioch where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed.

And so when they arrive, they gather the church. They report the work that God had been doing, all that God had done through them. There they are again, not bringing glory to themselves. God has done this through us, to God be the glory.

And they shared the joy with the church of what God is doing, especially as the church is expanding into the Gentile world, into the non-Jewish world.

And what we see between Paul, Barnabas and Antioch is a partnership between the missionaries and the sending church. The people in Antioch, they were praying that they would be those who would send resources.

And when Paul and Barnabas came back, they provided fellowship for them. Verse 28, they stayed there a long time with the disciples. As we close, as we're in the book of Acts, we turn our eyes to next week.

[26 : 03] Now we think about Mission Sunday. One important goal that we have for Mission Sunday is that as individuals and as a church, we would strengthen our connection with our overseas missionary partners.

We have the privilege of welcoming lots of different people, some for a long time, some for a shorter time, to Edinburgh who get trained and then go back to various fields of mission and ministry, as well as maybe we know people ourselves who are out on the mission field.

And one of the things practically that this story reminds us of is that we are to be actively involved in mission alongside our mission partner.

So they send a prayer letter back to us. That's not to be a monologue. It's intended to be a part of a dialogue. That those on the field love to hear from us at home.

To know how we are praying for them. To know how they can pray for us. To show that we have a genuine interest in what they are doing, how life is, how family life is.

[27 : 19] And so one of the things that we hope to do for Mission Sunday is to make it really easy for us then to find the avenues for gathering information that can lead us to pray, that can lead us to partner with those overseas.

That we would have, like Antioch, this global perspective that we can share the joy of knowing what God is doing in Africa and Asia and South and Central America.

But as we close, one last thing to say is that we see in the way that Luke writes this chapter that God's kingdom is growing and it's growing by the grace of God.

So in verse 3, we're told that the message that Paul and Barnabas bring is the message of God's grace. And then in verse 26, we discover that the grace of God is also the power for Paul and Barnabas, the messenger.

So at every point in God's mission, grace is the foundation. That we need to be receiving daily the good news of God's love towards us.

[28 : 38] In the sending of Jesus, to die on the cross, to take away our sins, to bring us back to God. And that's also then the message that we look to share with those around about.

There is a Christian parenting book, which I've never read, but I love the title. Because the title is Dazzle Your Kids With Grace. And I think that's what we are called to do on mission.

But in order to dazzle others with the grace of God in Jesus, we need first of all to delight in ourselves, to treasure it above all.

God's mission needs gospel courage. God's mission needs God's church. And God's mission needs for us to see and delight in the glory of God.

And to really experience for ourselves the joy of God that comes through knowing Jesus as Lord and Savior. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.