

Acts 14:1-23

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[0:00] Amen. Let's pray, friends. Lord, I pray that you would speak this morning and that we would hear you. In your name I pray. Amen. You can be seated.

! It would hit the marker and it would take the color and spread it into all the different colors of the rainbow as it got absorbed up.

And it was supposed to teach you about absorption and pigments and the color black and all these science-y things. But it's the image that I have in my mind when we look at our passage today. Because today we're seeing how the gospel, as it's spreading throughout the Roman Empire, it's like that color spreading through the coffee filter. And as the gospel hits different cultures, as it hits the different markers, so to speak, we see the different colors of it come out in all its beauty as it's spreading throughout the Empire.

If you remember at the beginning of Acts 1.8, this is Jesus' commission to his disciples and it sets the stage for everything that's going to come in this book. And he says, you're going to receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you.

[1:21] And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. And today we get to see the beginning of that last part.

The gospel spreading to the ends of the earth. It's leaving the cradle of Judaism. It is spreading throughout the Roman Empire. And in the chapter before this one, Acts 13, it says that Paul and Barnabas are sent out expressly for this purpose by the Holy Spirit with the blessing of the disciples in Jerusalem to go beyond Israel and bring the gospel to the Gentiles.

And so today we're going to see the gospel in several cities in modern-day Turkey. And what we're going to see is that when the gospel spreads to new audiences, there is always opposition.

But the gospel is always more powerful. So there's always resistance when the gospel spreads to new places. But the gospel is more powerful than any opposition.

So we'll see this in two different cities. Let's start out with Iconium. This is the first part of our passage, verses 1 to 7. So Paul and Barnabas go to Iconium. This is modern-day Turkey. But they go first to the synagogue there.

[2:28] There are Jews living in these Gentile cities. They've been exiled from foreign powers. And they maybe have lived there for generations. But they still treasure their Jewish faith as a minority group in this Gentile area.

And so Paul and Barnabas, they go. They speak to their fellow Jews. They're telling them about Jesus, how he's the fulfillment of these Old Testament prophecies. And some of the Jews are intrigued. They want to hear more.

And others, it says in verse 2, refused to believe. This is an active, willful resistance. And there are several parts of the gospel that are going to bring up this resistance in the Jewish people.

One of them, we've seen this before as we've been going through the book of Acts and even of John before that, is the idea of the incarnation. Right? The Jewish faith is built on this idea that there's one God.

Deuteronomy 6, Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God. The Lord is one. And so this idea that Jesus is God, to them, feels like you're adding another God in.

[3:31] It feels blasphemous to them. And that brings about resistance. Another thing that brings about resistance for the Jewish people is this emphatic inclusion of the Gentiles in God's plan of salvation.

And this actually isn't new to the Jewish faith. It's been there all along. But if you think about it from their perspective, they have been oppressed by foreign nations for thousands of years. And now they're being told, these ancient enemies of yours, these people who've oppressed you, they get to

be part of the club.

Welcome them in. And that's a hard pill to swallow. And it makes them angry. And we see in Iconium, it makes them so angry that they conspire with other Gentile leaders to try to stone Paul and Barnabas.

And so this is the first example of the opposition of the gospel spreading to new audiences. And it's not new. We've seen Jewish resistance to the gospel before. But Luke includes it here to remind us that the gospel puts pressure on all cultures and beliefs.

Both ones that feel familiar and ones that feel really foreign. But the threat to the lives of Paul and Barnabas and Iconium, it doesn't stop them. They leave the city, but it says in verse 7 that they keep preaching the gospel in surrounding cities.

[4 : 47] And this is our first reminder that the gospel cannot be stopped. Even with threats of violence, its voice is too loud. The news is too good. So Paul and Barnabas have to keep preaching.

And that's what brings us to our second city, to Lystra. So Paul and Barnabas go here after Iconium. And here we see what happens when you're in a totally non-Jewish audience, when the gospel is spreading into this kind of place.

So in Iconium, Paul and Barnabas went to the synagogue first. In Lystra, the first thing that Luke tells us is that they're interacting with a Gentile crowd. And that Paul heals a lame man.

And if you feel like you've heard this before, you have. This is the third healing of a lame man that Luke writes about. There's the one in Luke where Jesus heals the paralyzed man who gets lowered down through the roof.

And then in Acts 3, we saw Peter heal the lame beggar by the temple. And now we get Paul doing it. This is a really different audience than either of those, though. This is a totally Gentile audience.

[5 : 49] The people of Lystra, they don't have any concept of the Jewish god or of monotheism at all. They worship the Greek pantheon of gods where you have a god for different seasons and different parts of nature and different roles.

So when they see this miraculous healing, they get really excited. And they think, oh, Paul is Hermes and Barnabas is Zeus. And if you need a refresher of your Greek mythology, Zeus is the king of the gods.

Hermes is his messenger. And there's a lot of stories of them actually, like, disguising themselves as humans and coming down into the world of mortals. And there's one story in particular that the Lystraans are probably thinking of where Zeus and Hermes come down.

And they're going. They look like humans. They're going from town to town looking for a place to stay. And no one lets them in until this one old couple finally does. And when they do, Zeus and Hermes reveal themselves to be gods.

And they curse all the houses in the towns that didn't let them in. And then they bless this old couple and make a beautiful temple there. And it's wonderful. So the Lystraans are thinking of this, right? And they don't want to offend the gods.

[6 : 56] If Paul and Barnabas are gods in disguise, they don't want to accidentally offend them and get destroyed. So they roll out the red carpet for them. And initially, this doesn't seem like opposition, right?

They're excited about Paul and Barnabas. This is great. But they're excited about the wrong thing. If you look at verse 11, this is what they say about Paul and Barnabas. The gods have come down to us in human form.

And they actually get something that the Jews struggle with. The Jews struggle with this idea of a god coming down as a human, of the incarnation. That's less of a problem for the Greeks.

What they don't quite get is this idea that it's one god in one person, Jesus Christ. And Jesus isn't just this sort of shapeshifter like the Greek gods. He's not going to just revert back to his divine self and disappear.

He's fully God and fully man forever. And that's when Paul and Barnabas try to clarify this point, that the resistance comes.

[7 : 58] So when they realize that the crowds are worshipping in, they rush back in, which is a pretty bold act because crowds are very volatile. They can be very violent. But Paul and Barnabas go back in because they want there to be no misunderstanding about who they are and who God is.

They know what the first commandment is. You shall have no other gods before me. And this is where we get Paul's mini-sermon. These are the first words that we get that are recorded that are for Gentiles only.

He says in verse 15, And you'll notice this sermon is very unusual because he doesn't say anything explicitly about Jesus.

He focuses on God creating the world, sustaining the world, on how God reveals himself by the gifts that he gives through joy, through food, through taking care of them physically.

And he does this, remember, because he's speaking to polytheists, right? People who believe in multiple gods. They don't have a category for just one all-powerful God.

[9 : 10] And so before you can get to God becoming incarnate through Jesus, you have to get God right. That's what Paul is doing. But this attempt at building common ground, it doesn't work.

It doesn't calm down the crowds. You notice they have a complete 180. They go from wanting to worship Paul and Barnabas to wanting to kill them. But the reason is the same. Because, remember, the Listerians are afraid of offending their gods.

And Paul has just said that these are worthless things. And he's telling them about a different god, a god who is the living god. And the Listerians are afraid that the gods are going to be offended by this. And so they're like, you know what we need to do?

We need to get rid of these people. And this time they do succeed in stoning Paul. In fact, they hurt him so badly that they leave him outside the city for dead. Okay, so pause here.

We've seen resistance to the gospel from Jews and from Gentiles. But that's not where our story ends. Because the living god is far more powerful than any forces of death.

[10 : 14] Miraculously, after being left for dead, Paul gets back up. And the next day, he goes on to a new city with Barnabas where it says they won a large number of disciples. And this is the crazy part.

Then they come back. They come back to Iconium. They come back to Lystra. These places where people tried to kill them. And what they find is that there are actually Christians there who did receive their teaching.

And who have started worshiping Jesus. And so our passage this morning ends with Paul and Barnabas appointing elders in these churches. And committing these new communities of Christians to God.

It ends with the gospel taking root. So we've seen opposition on all sides. And we've seen the power of the gospel against this in both Iconium and in Lystra.

And in this last minute, I want to talk about one more city. And that's Vancouver. Because the advance of the gospel is for us too. If we had to compare it to one of these cities, it would be more like Lystra.

[11 : 17] We all know the statistics. You know, by all metrics of religious participation, Vancouver is the least religious urban hub in North America. We know the stats. And like Paul and Barnabas in Lystra, we can't assume that our neighbors have the same basic assumptions about the world.

The same categories. The same beliefs that we do anymore. We're going to meet resistance and opposition. We have. But that shouldn't surprise us.

And it shouldn't discourage us. Look at verse 22. Paul and Barnabas encourage the Christians in these cities saying, We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.

And this is exactly what Jesus told his disciples this whole winter that we've been looking at the upper room. The last message he gives them before he leaves. This has been his refrain. In John 16, he says, In the world you will have tribulation.

But take heart. I have overcome the world. The resistance we're going to meet from different audiences in Vancouver should galvanize us to preach the gospel more boldly.

[12 : 29] And it should also encourage us to follow Paul and Barnabas in being careful and creative in how we do so. Paul contextualized the gospel to the culture he was in.

He doesn't demand that the Listerians understand Jewish prophecies or references or Jewish lingo. He just finds common ground and he uses examples that the Listerians will understand.

And in our lives that might look like checking our Christianese language. Words that feel really simple and obvious to us like sin or grace. Or certainly the word I've been using all this time, gospel. They're not part of the cultural vocabulary anymore. And so preaching the gospel in Vancouver is going to require us to describe it in fresh ways.

But we're going to get to see more of the color of it in a new way that we wouldn't have to otherwise. And that's a beautiful thing. Some people are still going to refuse it.

[13 : 26] But some people will listen. Because the gospel is advancing here in Vancouver. Because we trust in the same God that Paul and Barnabas did.

The last words of our passage, verse 23, look there. When they return to the cities and find believers there, after all the opposition, it says Paul and Barnabas commit them to the Lord in whom they had put their trust.

And Paul may not mention Jesus specifically in this sermon, but it is Jesus and his power that runs through this whole passage. The spread of the gospel always meets with resistance.

But our hope, just like Paul and Barnabas' is in the living God. And he is always stronger than any opposition. Amen.