

Acts 14:1-23

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[0:00] Friends, while we're standing, let me pray for us. Heavenly Father, would you open our hearts to hear your word this morning. In Christ's name. Amen. Please be seated, everyone. Hello, hello.

Hello, everyone. It's really nice to see you all. If you're new with us, my name is Aaron. I'm one of the ministers on staff. We're in a sermon series called Sent by Jesus.

Sent by Jesus. What's that all about? We are God's instruments in the world. We are his ambassadors. So in this series, what we've been doing is we've been looking at these snapshots and acts of what happens when people empowered by the Holy Spirit are sent by Jesus to be his ambassadors.

This series is a great reminder. We're not just a gathering people. We're not just a worshipping people. We're not just a helping each other out people. We're not just a thinking people. We're a sent people. So today in Acts 14, we're going to look at what that looks like. And just a heads up, this sermon is going to be short and punchy. So here we go.

[1:07] So I've got a friend of mine called Tim Giavanelli in Australia. He planted a church a few years back in Sydney. And he spoke to an older pastor.

And he said, what should I do? And the older guy said to him, one, preach the gospel. Two, results may vary. Which I thought was absolutely brilliant.

And those are actually the two points of my sermon today. And they're the two things I think we learn from Acts 14. Preach the gospel. Be ambassadors for Christ.

And two, the results may vary. Preach the gospel. Results may vary. Okay, so point one. Preach the gospel. Let's look at what Paul and Barnabas did.

So they arrive in this town called Iconium. And the first thing they do is they go to the synagogue and they preach. And people come to faith. It's wonderful. In verse 2, though, there's a campaign of slander against them.

[2:03] So what do Paul and Barnabas do? Well, in verse 3, it says they remain there for a long time. It's awesome, isn't it? Slander. What do they do? They remain there for a long time preaching the gospel.

Back in the old country, before I became a respectable priest, I was a sexual and mental health educator in high schools. And I worked for an organization called Attitude, and we travel around high schools developing curriculum and speaking to young adults about such things from a Christian perspective.

I was one of the very first employees. There was another organization in New Zealand doing similar stuff. They were called Family Planning, which is New Zealand's equivalent of Planned Parenthood. And when we first started going to these schools, we were immediately Planned Parenthood went after our organization.

They slandered us in the media. They're calling up all the schools, email campaigns, going, stay away from these guys. Don't use these guys. They're Christians. Like, you know, pejoratively. They're Christians.

Stay away from them. And at points you'd think, there's no way this thing we're doing is ever going to take off in such a secular place as New Zealand. We felt the Lord say, stay there.

[3:15] Keep doing it. Just keep going. Just keep doing your thing. Don't say anything bad about Planned Parenthood. Just keep doing your thing. Keep doing the thing that you feel God has asked you to do. And we did that.

And I finished working there after seven years. By that point, the attitude, the organization had grown a lot. And actually, by the time I left, we were in 99% of the schools in the whole country.

And Planned Parenthood had actually stopped doing stuff in school. God was very good to us. Back to the story. Paul and Barnabas. Maligned and slandered. So they remained there a long time. Speaking boldly for the Lord. Eventually, though, these guys get the FBI phone call that there's, you know, evidence of a credible threat to life. And so they moved to another town, Lystra.

And what do they do there? Lay low. Recoup. Furlough. No, what does it say? Verse 7. There they continued to preach the gospel.

[4 : 18] Where they saw amazing things happen. They see a guy miraculously healed. But there's a problem. The slanderers from Iconium follow them to Lystra. And they actually try to kill Paul.

So what does Paul do? He moves to the next town along, Derby. And what do they do there?

Surely at this point, Paul is questioning his vocational choices. But no, look at what verse 21 says.

It says, They preached the gospel in that city and made many disciples. They preached the gospel.

And then they go back to the first two cities after being in Derby for a while.

Why? These are the places that tried to kill them. To appoint leaders to the churches they had started. They go back to the danger zone to make sure that the group remains there. The gospel remains there.

I think it's astonishing. And why are they doing all this? Because they're servants of God, as we are.

Paul believed the best conversations you can have are Jesus' conversations.

[5 : 23] Friends, I have a really simple point. Let's have Jesus' conversations with people that don't know Jesus. And context, of course, matters.

I'm not saying we go out there and just be shouty and thoughtless in our conversations. When Paul was in Lystra, it was a Gentile place. They don't know anything about the Bible. They don't know the Old Testament.

So he doesn't quote Old Testament scriptures to them like he might do in a Jewish city. He starts with stuff they can relate to. In verse 15, he talks about, look, there's one God and he's responsible for all of creation.

Look how good he's been to you. Look at the seasons and the rain, etc. He's revealed himself to you through these things. These other gods you're serving, they're doing nothing for you. But look what the one true God does for you.

So he translates the truth without compromising it. So my first point, what do we learn from this story? We are sent people. We are sent people.

[6 : 27] My mother died last year. This is my first, as Jordan said, you know, this is my first Mother's Day. This is a bit funky for me today. But I want to tell you a story about visiting her in a care home.

She had moved to Australia. And I got to visit her before she died. And I remember going to a room one day. And there was a carer there who I knew wasn't assigned to her.

Wasn't her carer. A Korean woman was leaning really close over to my mum. And she looked up when I walked in the room. And, you know, you can just tell when people are Christian sometimes.

And I said, are you praying?

My mother wasn't a Christian. I said, are you praying? She was a bit embarrassed. She goes, yes, I was praying. I said, it's okay. I'm a Christian. You can pray. And you can pray in Korean if you like. You know, so she prays.

And then we start chatting. And she says to me, you know, this is not a Christian care home. But she says to me, when I know people are close to the end.

[7 : 32] And when the family's gone, I'll go up to these folks. And I'll tell them about Jesus. And I'll pray for them. And a lot of them don't know the words.

And so I'll give them the words to say. You know, to lead them through a prayer. And she was this quite remarkable woman. She goes, I'm not a very good Christian. And my English isn't very good. And it wasn't very good. But she just thought, I'm sent by Jesus to do this. And there was a language barrier. A lot of the people that she was talking to weren't super with it.

You know, but she was on a mission. This was her context that she had, that God had given her.

And she said, I'm an ambassador here. And this is what I'm going to do. And the last time I walked out of the place, I saw her just, you know, whispering in the ear of this woman who was just slack-jawed and eyes closed, whispering in her ear.

And the last thing I saw in that place was her telling another person about Jesus. And I thought, oh, this is just remarkable, you know. Anyway. Happy Mother's Day, folks.

[8 : 40] Sorry. All right. Let's tell people about Jesus, even when it's hard. And that brings me to the second point. Results may vary. The results may vary.

Okay. So I think this is one of the really big ideas in chapter 14. When we speak about Jesus, we don't know the kind of response we'll get. It's very unpredictable. And I know unpredictable because I live in a house that's a hot mix of puberty and perimenopause.

And... I've taken up gardening recently.

I'm in the garden by myself a lot. And I'm just weeding. I asked my wife if I could say this, but I'm just like... In the garden weeding and I'm planting.

And I'm just like, I don't know why people are yelling at me. Like, I don't know. What have I done wrong? I haven't done anything wrong. I don't understand what's happening right now. It's very unpredictable.

[9 : 44] Yeah. So back to the passage. How do people... How do people respond? Happy Mother's Day. Again, happy Mother's Day, everybody. Mother's out there. Appreciate you.

Appreciate you. How do people respond to the claims of Jesus? What does the passage tell us? First, it says some people will believe, which is wonderful.

Verse 1 says a great number will believe. Verse 21, it says they made many disciples in Derbe. This is a great encouragement. Keep having these Jesus conversations because some people will believe and their lives will be changed forever.

And not just their lives either. There's always a spill on effect. Okay, I'm going to tell you about two people now, really quick. So there's... When I buy commentaries, they're the books of the Bible written by scholars that explain the Bible to you, right?

So I have to make a decision on which commentaries to buy. And they're in mixed bags. So I go to a website run by a guy called Tim Challies, who's a pastor out in Ontario. He writes a really thoughtful blog on good and bad commentary.

[10 : 47] So I go there and I look them up. Okay, hold that person for a moment. Just hold that idea. Don Lewis was a member of our congregation. And a Regent College professor. He died five years ago.

2021, I believe. He died five years ago. Fantastic, fantastic man. So about not long after he died, I'm on the Tim Challies website.

And I see that he's written a blog site about Don Lewis. And I never knew these folks knew each other. But here's the story. Tim Challies wrote a blog site. It was called I Owe Everything to Don Lewis.

And let me read a couple of paragraphs to you. Tim starts by talking about his own father. He says, In the final year of Dad's undergraduate studies, he and Don Lewis became fast friends.

They were soon spending hours together discussing life, faith, God, and everything in between. As they talked, Don found opportunities to explain the gospel of grace and call Dad to it.

[11 : 43] And eventually, Dad realized he had finally found ideas that were big enough to fill his mind and great enough to satisfy his heart. Meanwhile, Mom had also become a student and bishops.

And though she succeeded academically, found herself doing poorly otherwise. She had determined that life was meaningless. And that she could never find hope or joy. And that there was no solution to the guilt she felt or to the knowledge of the evil that dwelt within her.

Sitting alone on campus one day, Dad came bounding up to her. They had met a couple of times and even gone on a date. And she knew him well enough to know that something about him was different. In his zeal, Dad began to tell her all about his newfound faith.

He begged her to go out to dinner with him so he could tell her more about it. She went, though almost against her will. On that very evening, she too came to faith after Dad led her to some Christians Don had introduced him to.

Mom and Dad were married a few months later. Mom and Dad had five children. All of us know the Lord. So Tim Challies is one of the five kids. We have 16 children between us. They all know the Lord.

[12 : 50] But there's more. Dad told Mom about Jesus and she believed. He told his older sister too and she believed. Mom told her sister and she believed. And those family too now boast three generations of believers.

And if we trace the Christian faith of all the people, perhaps 40 or 50 of us now, they all eventually converge on Don Lewis. They all converge on a young man who simply and faithfully shared the gospel.

Tim continues. Last short paragraph here. Jesus told a parable about a farmer who went into his fields to sow seed. He scattered it far and wide.

Some fell along the path where it was quickly gobbled up by birds. Some fell on rocky soil where it sprang up, but because of its roots had no depth and was scorched by the sun.

Some fell among the weeds where it was choked out by thorns, but some fell on good soil. It put down deep roots, grew well, and produced a crop of 30, 60, or 100 times more plentiful than itself.

[13:53] And this is exactly how the Lord does his work. Through ordinary people like Don, when they share the extraordinary news of the gospel. Don told Dad.

Dad told Mum. They told me. I told Aileen. We told our children. They will tell theirs. And so it will go on until the full harvest is gathered in.

Until the Lord returns. Until we are all reunited before him. People come to faith as they hear the gospel.

It changes their life. The overflow can be astonishing. Folks, this is why we keep speaking, even when it's difficult, even when it's awkward. And friends, I want you to know, this kind of thing happens in our church.

It happens more than you know. We just don't, you know, advertise it. But it happens all the time.

Okay, so that's one result. I said the results may vary. One result is belief.

[14:57] We speak about Jesus and people grab a hold of it. And it's what we hope for. But it's not the only response we might get. Some people reject the message of Jesus. It can happen pretty quickly if we look at the passage, which is really clearly, clearly and cleverly written.

In our passage, if you look at the first few lines, how long before persecution breaks out? It's one verse. One verse. One verse. The very first line, it says they went and they preached.

Verse 2. But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. God is showing stunning kindness to these Gentiles.

People preach at them. God confirms it with this incredible miracle. And for some people, it's like life-giving oxygen. And for some people, it feels like a poison.

And it's not that they just disagree with it. They actively oppose it. It's not that they are like, oh, live and let live. They reject Jesus and they reject the mission.

[15:59] They don't even want other people to hear about it. They're not offering up any alternative faith. They just want to shut it down. And I know some of you have been slandered for your faith.

Oh, it's terrible. But it doesn't just stop at slander. They step it up. They plot to hurt the apostles. So Paul has to leave to go to Lystra. And I said, they follow him to Lystra.

And there they do stone him. And I'm just going to read that passage again because there's a detail in here that's quite interesting. Verse 19. But the Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul, dragged him out of the city, supposing he was dead.

It's a wild story, isn't it? Just right at the end there, supposing he was dead. The only reason they stopped throwing stones at him is because they think they've killed him.

I think we mistakenly think, oh, Paul, he's so hardcore. He probably just brushes it off. I don't think so. Also, in 2 Timothy 3, Paul talks about the suffering he experienced in Lystra.

[17:06] And he wrote 2 Timothy 3 20 years after Acts 14 was written. He obviously never forgot it. It was brutal. So sometimes people respond by rejecting the gospel.

And sometimes it's a violent rejection. The last response is misinterpretation. So some people accept it.

Some people reject it. And some people just misinterpret it. This is what this bonkers story in verses 18 to 14 all is about. When Paul and Barnabas are mistaken for Zeus and Hermes.

And my witness, I have never been mistaken for a god. And I find that disappointing, to be honest. So it's a random story in here.

It feels like a very random story, doesn't it? But there's a back story to the story. Let me explain it to you real quick. So there was this legend in Lystra that a long time ago, Zeus and Hermes, these gods, came down from wherever they lived to Lystra.

[18:14] And they took the form of just dudes, just like normal dudes. And they're walking around. And they're knocking on people's door. And they're saying, can I come and stay with you? And

every household says no, except for an old couple who say, of course you can come in and stay the night.

And then the gods eventually reveal who they are. We are not Larry and Bob. We are actually Zeus and Hermes or something. I don't know how it goes. And then they reward the old couple with treasures.

And then they kill everybody else. So this is the legend that Lystra had bought into. And the legend says that they're going to come back at some point. So the crowd is very keen to get on the right side of Paul and Barnabas.

Because they're thinking, maybe this legend come true. And it's another test. So that's why they're so keen to impress the gods here. What's the point though? People can be spiritually sincere, but fundamentally wrong.

And how does this happen? It happens because, you know, when you're talking to people, they must interpret what you're saying through their own version of reality. People want to put things into categories that they already have, which is why we need the Holy Spirit to break through this stuff.

[19 : 23] So I remember doing a funeral a while back, and I thought I was so clear on the gospel during that sermon. And then at the reception afterwards, I had a conversation with a lovely woman who started talking about her shaman, her shaman, like a witch doctor.

Started talking about a witch doctor. It's just like a Caucasian kind of Western woman. Started talking about this shaman that she'd got. And very sincerely, she said to me something along the lines of, it's just like you said, Aaron, there are many ways to God.

And I remember thinking, I said the opposite. I literally said the exact opposite in my sermon. But people will interpret the gospel through their own existing worldview.

I'm just saying it's going to happen. And don't be discouraged. You do your best to set them right. Like before, Paul and Barnabas trying to contextualize the gospel to the Gentiles there.

Okay, let me wrap up here. To be a Christian means to be on mission. To have Jesus conversations. To preach the gospel. But remember, the results may vary.

[20 : 36] Some people will accept it. Fantastic. Some people will reject it, and it might be a bit ugly. And some people might just misinterpret it. And you have to do some work there. And I think stories like Acts 14 are here to remind us to not be surprised by the response you might get.

And not to fall into the trap of thinking, oh, I'm doing it wrong. I'm doing it wrong. I think because some of us, I think, opposition is always going to follow the gospel. Okay?

It will always follow the gospel. I think some of us think, oh, if only I could just get the right words out. Or if only I had a really good illustration for substitutionary atonement. Or if only I had a slightly more interesting testimony.

If I just did that, man, my witnessing, I'd be killing it. I'd be killing it. Oh, I get tongue-tied. You know, I'm not very theological. This chapter is fantastic for us.

It's fantastic for us. Because these apostles were amazing communicators. And they healed a guy. Miracles followed them.

[21 : 43] And how were they treated? Just the same as Jesus. You know? They cheered for Jesus on Palm Sunday. And they yelled, crucify him on Friday.

I think this is the big point. Don't be discouraged if your Jesus conversations go nowhere or go badly. It will happen. And don't let the devil tell you the lie that, oh, you're not very good at this, so why bother?

It's just the gospel is going to be inherently divisive sometimes. And just if I can just add a little spicy line here. It's a little bit spicy line. If you are doing this and everyone likes the message you're preaching and they're not Christians, and everyone likes what you're saying to them, you might not be preaching the full gospel.

Because it is, I think, just polarizing. Because it confronts pride and it calls repentance, you know? So let's keep going, folks. Let's embrace the unpredictability of it. Let's entrust these conversations to God.

You know, we will encounter humble people. And they will be changed forever. And that can go on for generations.

[22 : 59] So, folks, let's just see what the Holy Spirit can do in the lives of ordinary Christians like us, who step out in faith and speak. Amen. Amen.

Amen.