

V. Their Work at Iconium. Acts 14:1-6.

Chapter 13 closed with Paul and his company being cast out of the city of Antioch in Pisidia through the manipulations of the unbelieving Jews. Thence they fled to Iconium. Iconium was on the border of Lycaonia. It was already a rival of Antioch in population and importance. It was soon to become the chief and most influential city of all this section.

Paul and Barnabas sought out the synagogue to preach the gospel there. Jews and Greeks were present to listen to their testimony. They spoke with clearness, force, and unction. The message was wonderfully owned and blessed of God. Their preaching was effective because it was uncompromising and backed up with a "thus saith the Lord." They spoke so that not only a few, but a great multitude of Jews and Greeks believed.

A careful study of their message and the manner in which they delivered it should be helpful to us. They spoke with clearness. They clothed their thought in simple language so that all could understand. They also spoke with conviction. Their message had the authority of God and the persuasiveness of the Cross in it. They had such conviction about the truth they so spoke that all who heard them were moved thereby. They also spoke with a divine unction. From the first they convinced their hearers that they were men of God, that they had been sent on a divine mission, and that they were bound to their task with the ties of life and death. Furthermore, they spoke with persuasiveness. No gospel sermon could be true to the ideals of Christ that was lacking in this characteristic. Christ hated sin, but He loved the sinner. He despised guilt, but He had compassion on the guilty.

As to the nature of their converts some were Jews and others were Greeks. The gospel of Christ is compared to a fisherman's net that is cast into the sea. It offers help and hope to all alike. It is an universal message. No race or people can get a monopoly on it. The strongest indictment against the Jews is that they tried to keep for themselves what had been committed to them to be passed on to others. In other words, they tried to monopolize the blessings of God.

Among the converts in this meeting were not only people of different races, but also of different social standing, different financial standing, different official standing, and different moral standing. There were the so-called good and the bad, the high and the low, the rich and the poor, and the cultured and the uncultured. Nothing so breaks down the differences that separate people as a genuine Christian experience.

But, wherever God helps, Satan always hinders. Iconium was no exception to this rule. Satan would not permit such a powerful and successful testimony to go on unhindered. The unbelieving Jews put on a whispering campaign to prejudice the people against the gospel of Christ. The devil has always resented the interference of the Holy Spirit with his plans and work. The disobedient Jews, who rejected the gospel of Christ, aroused and embittered the Gentiles against the Apostles. As a result the people of the city were sharply divided in their allegiance between the Jews and the Apostles. Paul "stirred up" the people with the gospel of love, whereas, the unbelieving Jews stirred them up with the message of hate. The purpose of Satan was to destroy all the good that the Lord had wrought through His faithful servants.

In order to counteract this opposition, and to nullify its effect, these missionaries of the cross remained true to their tasks in spite of the sorest trials and most cruel afflictions. Their faith was sorely tried. Their loyalty was severely tested. Their sincerity was made to pass through the fire.

Because of their success and of the opposition, they prolonged their stay in Iconium "a long time," which is an indefinite way of saying a few months. The Lord manifested

His presence and gave them support. He mightily vindicated His messengers by granting them the ability to perform many miracles in the sight of all. This was something which their enemies could not duplicate. It proved that they were the servants of the true God. Their dependence upon the Lord Jesus gave them boldness. They gave testimony to "the Word of His Grace." What a delightful name for the Bible! "The Word of His Grace" signifies its origin--the grace of God, a gift--a pure act of God's grace, and a message--the unmerited favor of God.

When the Spirit of God gets hold of the hearts of men and women and they begin to turn away from the devil there is always a disturbance. The embittered feelings took tangible shape and organized form. The populace throughout the city took sides. The situation grew very tense. A movement was made to abuse and stone Paul and Barnabas, but they held on until death was in sight. After the plot was known to them, the Apostles fled. Their flight showed, not cowardice, but prudence, and was in obedience to the command of the Lord, "When they persecute you in one city, flee into another." They were not afraid to die, but there was so much for them to do. Christians should show caution and care as well as courage.

VI. Their Work At Lystra. 14:7-20a.

Lystra had little commerce, consequently she had no Jewish community or synagogue. There were not enough Jews in Lystra to form a synagogue. However, we know that a pious Jewess had her residence in Lystra. Her name was Eunice. She had been married to a Greek, who had died. Their son was Timothy, and she and the boy lived with her mother, Lois. Both women were believers in Christ and Eunice taught her son the scriptures. There is a probability that the Apostles lodged in this home. They addressed themselves forthwith to the heathen populace.

One day Paul was preaching, perhaps in the market-place or in some thoroughfare of the city, and he observed one eager listener among the listless throng. He was a man who had never walked. From his birth he had never been able to use his feet. He had been a cripple all his life. He had never had a real chance in life. He had been a pitiful object of charity from his birth.

Why had life dealt him such a hard blow? Through the centuries there have been some who have said that affliction was the penalty for some sin, but Christ swept that theory aside when He was on earth. A blind man was brought to Him and the disciples asked Him whose sin was responsible for the blindness, and He told them that neither the sin of the blind man nor the sins of his parents were responsible for it, but that the glory of the Lord might be made manifest.

It may seem a little unusual that this crippled man should be in such a throng of people. He was probably there by choice. At first, he may not have been interested in the message of Paul, but he was curious about the stir that was being produced. He was there by the good graces of his friends. His family or friends had carried him to some public spot all his life that he might beg alms. They had no thought that they were carrying him to a place of such blessings as came to him that day. There have been many instances where some have carried friends to church or placed them within the path of the gospel, not realizing what blessings would come to them.

This man was there that day by divine appointment. He may have asked to be carried there, and his friends may have been the agents in having him there, but the primary force behind it all was the will of God. It was not an accident that he was carried there. God needed him there that day that He might use him. He did not know that he was responding to a divine impulse when he was being carried there.

There was nothing attractive about this man. After he had heard Paul preach, he was deeply touched. So was Paul. The preacher knew he had in that audience at least one sympathetic listener. Desiring to win the confidence of the people, as well as to assist this poor man, Paul steadfastly looked on him in pity. Seeing that he had the faith to be healed, Paul shouted to him "Stand upon thy feet upright." The man "jumped up and began walking." Although his case was regarded incurable and hopeless, that is, entirely beyond human aid, his cure was instantaneous and complete.

The rude Lycaonians at once perceived in the miracle the manifestation of supernatural power. When they saw the result of the miracle performed on the impotent man, the people said to each other that gods had come to them in the form of men, Barnabas the more impressive physically being styled Zeus, the Greek name answering to Jupiter, who was regarded as the highest and most powerful among the heathen gods, and Paul was called Hermes, the name in Greek answering to Mercury, the god of eloquence and prudence, and an attendant of Jupiter in his expeditions, since he was the chief speaker. The report thus started, without the knowledge of Paul and Barnabas, spread through the city and gained such credence and momentum that soon the local priest of Jupiter, with a great following of people, came with bullocks, the most costly victims, and garlands, or crowns especially for the victims, in order to offer sacrifices to them. When they were about ready to offer the sacrifice, Paul and Barnabas heard of what the multitude was proposing to do. The preparations for this act of worship seemed to be complete before the missionaries were aware of it. Horrified, they rent their clothes from the neck in front downward toward the girdle. This was a common Oriental method of expressing grief and horror, or indignation and abhorrence of impiety or blasphemy. Then, they ran in among the people and restrained them from the sacrifices they were about to make. They simply put a stop to the impious service. They were not gods at all. They assured the priests and the deluded crowd that their errand was nothing else than to rescue them from the vanity of idolatry and turn their hearts to the living God. And they implored them to desist from their wild purpose and to return home.

Their remonstrance succeeded. There was no sacrifice, and the crowd dispersed crest-fallen. The incident, however, had an untoward result. Enthusiasm gave place to resentment. And now occurred one of those remarkable changes of opinion which show the fickleness of human nature. Stirred to animosity by certain Jews who followed the missionaries from Antioch and Iconium in order to cripple their influence, and possibly to incite their assassination, the Lystrians turned against them. Paul was stoned, struck down and lay senseless. To all appearances he was dead. As the stones fell upon him, he doubtless remembered Stephen. And, thinking he had died, they dragged him out of the city. This was not for burial, but for exposure. As for burial, his friends and disciples could attend to that. When, however, his disciples gathered around his prostrate, bleeding and apparently dead body, he revived, arose and returned into the city with them, whence he and Barnabas departed on the next day.

Thus we see that no good work goes unchallenged. Evil men are always active, and religious appreciation may easily turn to religious persecution. Pity the person who trusts the crowd. If it is Hosanna today, it may be Crucify tomorrow. One day they wanted to worship Paul as a god, but the next day they stoned him and left him for dead.

VII. Their Work At Derbe. Acts 14:20b-21a.

Their sojourn there was uneventful, but neither unpleasant nor unprofitable. Apparently without any interference, they labored quietly and with considerable success in preaching the gospel and teaching the people. Parts of two sentences summarized the story of their work in Derbe. "They evangelized that city" with the result that "they made disciples of a considerable number." The preaching of the gospel should always have for its aim and end the making of disciples.