

## BIBLE SERIES: "EXPLORING OUR AWESOME BIBLE"

by Mario Seiglie

NT-54 9-20-2014



### ACTS 14-15 END OF MISSIONARY TRIP; THE JERUSALEM CONFERENCE

In this study, we continue with Paul's first journey through the land of what is now modern day southeastern Turkey, starting at Iconium.

Luke writes, "Now it happened in Iconium that they went together to the synagogue of the Jews, and so spoke that a great multitude both of the Jews and of the Greeks believed. But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brethren. Therefore they stayed there a long time, speaking boldly in the Lord, who was bearing witness to the word of His grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands. But the multitude of the city was divided: part sided with the Jews, and part with the apostles. And when a violent attempt was made by both the Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to abuse and stone them, they became aware of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding region. And they were preaching the gospel there" (Acts 14:1-7).

It is interesting to note since they were learned Jews, the logical place to begin to preach was the synagogue. In practically every city in the Roman Empire there was at least one synagogue. All that was required was to have ten Jewish men set one up. The interior layout of it was patterned after the Temple, with three sections--an outer one for the women, which represented the Temple's courtyard of the women; then the men's section, nearer the middle, and then a prominent front area that was elevated and which housed the O.T. scrolls in an ark-like case. Rabbis taught that Jews who did not attend the synagogue for prayer were considered sinners and it brought scorn upon the family. Male children started religious classes at six and by ten, their only text was the Bible. From ten to fifteen, they learned the oral law from the Talmud, and later, they took basic theology classes.

So when Paul and Barnabas came to the synagogue, they had Jews and Greek believers who knew quite a lot about the Scriptures. Notice how Paul's preaching of the Bible was called something else than what the Rabbis taught--it was called, "word of His grace." Indeed, true forgiveness and justification apart from the "works of the law" (rituals and sacrifices) was now being made available through Christ's sacrifice.

Although for believing Jews, those rituals and sacrifices would still be kept, but knowing these did not truly forgive spiritual sins. They had recently learned only Christ's sacrifice could do this.

So what got the attendee's attention was the stunning claim that the long sought after and promised Messiah had *already* come! They didn't know that, for the Rabbis did not teach it, and on the contrary, most vehemently denied it. As a result, the Jewish local authorities "poisoned" the minds of Jews and Greek God-fearers to reject the message and instigated a persecution against them. Being warned, Paul and his group managed to flee in time.

Next they went to Lystra, some twenty miles away. Luke writes, "And in Lystra a certain man without strength in his feet was sitting, a cripple from his mother's womb, who had never walked. This man heard Paul speaking. Paul, observing him intently and seeing that he had faith to be healed, said with a loud voice, 'Stand up straight on your feet!' And he leaped and walked. Now when the people saw what Paul had done, they raised their voices, saying in the Lycaonian language, 'The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!' And Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. Then the priest of Zeus, whose temple was in front of their city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates, intending to sacrifice with the multitudes. But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard this, they tore their clothes and ran in among the multitude, crying out and saying, 'Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men with the same nature as you, and preach to you that you should turn from these useless things to the living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and all things that are in them, who in bygone generations allowed all nations to walk in their own ways. Nevertheless He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good, gave us rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness.' And with these sayings they could scarcely restrain the multitudes from sacrificing to them. Then Jews from Antioch and Iconium came there; and having persuaded the multitudes, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead. However, when the disciples gathered around him, he rose up and went into the city" (14:8-20).

Here, Paul is guided by God's spirit to discern that the cripple had the faith to be healed and performs a miracle similar to the one Peter did at the beginning of the Church--healing a cripple from birth. The reaction of the Gentile crowd was overwhelming--believing some of the principal Greek gods had come down to visit them. They joyfully and dutifully prepared a great welcome for them, including many sacrifices. It is interesting to note this description fits well with the historical background of this city in the region of Phrygia.

*The IVP Commentary* explains, "Local Phrygian legend told of an ancient visitation by Zeus and Hermes to Phrygia. In the story only one couple, Baucis and Philemon, received them graciously; the rest of the population was destroyed in a flood. Knowing some form of the story in their own language, the Lycaonians are not about to make the same mistake ancient Phrygia had made; they want to honor Paul and Barnabas, whom they mistake for gods. People sometimes considered miracle workers as gods."

When Paul and his party realized they were about to be worshipped as pagan gods, they rent their clothes in dismay and tried to dissuade them. But hostile Jews came from the previous towns they had visited and turned the crowd against them. So from being honored, now, they stoned Paul. Thinking he was dead, they took his body outside the city gates and left it there.

*The IVP Commentary* adds, "A mob could change its views quickly, especially in a case like this one: when Paul and Barnabas deny the gods, they would be considered impious and hence would appear to fit a different category of ancient paganism: they were not gods after all, but dangerous magicians. (Whereas gods were popularly regarded as generally beneficent, sorcerers were viewed as secretive and usually harmful.)...Stoning was also the most common form of urban mob violence in the Gentile world. Stones, tiles and cobbles were readily available in ancient streets. When Jewish crowds stoned a transgressor, they sought the transgressor's death; Paul's survival undoubtedly points to divine protection. Normally such executions were performed outside the city, and they may have dragged him out of the city for purity reasons; that he not only survived but could walk afterward must be understood as miraculous."

Luke continues, "And the next day he departed with Barnabas to Derbe. And when they had preached the gospel to that city and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, 'We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.' So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. And after they had passed through Pisidia, they came to Pamphylia. Now when they had preached the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia. From there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work which they had completed. Now when they had come and gathered the church together, they reported all that God had done with them, and that He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. So they stayed there a long time with the disciples" (Acts 14:21-28).

What courage Paul showed by getting up after the stoning and entering the city again! It was a miraculous healing that took place--if not a resurrection to physical life! The language is not clear in this regard and Luke is careful to say the mob dragged him out "*supposing* him to be dead." From there they left the next day to another town, Derbe, situated in the southeastern part of the Lycaonian region of Galatia, and about sixty miles southeast of Lystra, and they made many disciples.

The group then backtracked through the previous cities and, after fasting, appointed elders in these areas, for they needed local pastoring. Notice also the congregations did not do the electing of the elders, although Paul, as was his custom and following the collegial spirit of the apostles, would have first sought advice from the leaders there, based on the biblical principle, "In the multitude of counselors there is safety" (Pr. 11:14).

Afterwards, they sailed back to Antioch, their headquarters and reported "all that God had done with them." Notice they didn't take the credit and considered it was God who was responsible.

*The New International NT Commentary* mentions, "The missionary tour had occupied the best part of a year, and now Paul and Barnabas spent another year or thereby in Antioch. But their activity in Cyprus and Asia Minor was a matter of

interest not only in Syrian Antioch but in other places as well; in particular, Jerusalem was concerned about the implications of a forward movement which so decisively altered the balance of Jews and Gentiles in the Church" (p. 297).

We now finally reach the all-important Jerusalem Conference in chapter 15, the first conference among the ministry known to us, and many members gave their input as well.

*Expositor's Commentary* notes, "The convening of the council of apostles and Christian leaders at Jerusalem in approximately A.D. 49 was an event of greatest importance for the early church. That Gentiles were to share in the promises to Israel is a recurring theme of the Old Testament. It was the underlying presupposition for Jewish proselytizing and was implicit in the sermons of Peter at Pentecost and in the house of Cornelius."

We read, "And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.' Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question" (15:1).

We must carefully go through this vital section step by step. Notice this took place after Paul and Barnabas had returned to Antioch from this very successful missionary trip with many believing Gentiles being baptized and without requiring them to be circumcised. But some now opposed Paul.

1). "And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved' (Acts 15:1). Who were these "certain men" from Judea who went to Antioch and considered they had the authority to teach the brethren the need to be circumcised for their spiritual salvation?

Later in this chapter, James mentions them specifically in a letter sent to the Galatians, among others. He said, "The apostles, the elders, and the brethren, to the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia: Greetings. Since we have heard that some *who went out from us* have troubled you with words, *unsettling your souls*, saying, 'You must be circumcised and keep the law'—to whom *we gave no such commandment*" (Acts 15:23-24). So those who had come from

Jerusalem did not really have the authority to teach such things, nor had the backing of the apostles.

2). What happened when these men taught these things at Antioch? It says that "Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them" (Acts 15:2). So Paul and Barnabas strongly opposed them. Nothing was resolved at that time so they decided this matter was of utmost urgency at the highest level of the Church—to be taken to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem.

Now, in Paul's Epistle to the Galatians, which deals with this same issue, place, and people, it clearly does not mention the Jerusalem Decree, which would have conveniently settled the matter once and for all. So the Epistle of Galatians must have been written *before* the Jerusalem Council.

This is what Paul says in this regard, "Now when Peter had come to *Antioch*, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; for before *certain men came from James*, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, *fearing those who were of the circumcision*. And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter before them all, 'If you, being a Jew, live in the manner of Gentiles and not as the Jews, *why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews?* We who are Jews by nature, and not sinners of the Gentiles, knowing that a man is not justified by the *works of the law* but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be *justified* by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified.' But if, while we seek to be justified by Christ, we ourselves also are found sinners, is Christ therefore a minister of sin? Certainly not! For if I build again *those things which I destroyed*, I make myself a transgressor" (Gal. 2:11-18).

Yes, for a time, Peter, and even Barnabas, had weakened and yielded to their Jewish extremist brethren about this issue. But Paul showed them where they were wrong and they returned to their former position, which is later shown when they convened at the Jerusalem Conference and backed Paul's point of view on the matter.