

So far, on this first missionary journey, we have clearly seen a pattern to Paul and Barnabas' efforts to share the gospel with new people groups. In each city, they went to the Jewish Synagogue first. In each instance, there were some Jews and some Gentiles who believed the disciple's message, and surrendered their lives in faith to the Lord Jesus Christ.

The missionaries' success filled the Jewish leader's hearts with jealousy, so that they began to oppose the gospel message, and eventually ran Paul and Barnabas out of town. The disciples then went to the next town and repeated their efforts. In tonight's passage, their circumstances change, and we will observe a different approach to presenting the gospel message. Let's read the passage together and observe some principles that might help us in our efforts to share the gospel today. Read Acts 14:8-18.

In our passage last time we read that the Jews, many Gentiles, along with the local politicians, banded together in an attempt to persecute the disciples, with the intent to stone them to death. The bible says that Paul and Barnabas fled to Lystra, Derbe, and the surrounding countryside. At this point we see a departure in the disciples' plans in how to reach the most people on their journey. Up to this point, they have focused on major cities, along the Roman trade routes. As they fled Iconium, they traveled to less populated areas, where they would not be safe from their pursuers.

Lystra was more of a small outpost, colonized by the Romans, because of its strategic military location, and raised elevation. It was about twenty miles south of Iconium, out in the boonies, on a much less traveled path. I could find no reference to a Jewish presence in Lystra, so this is one of the few places the missionaries went where there was no Synagogue. That is why Paul and Barnabas use a different approach in sharing the gospel with the inhabitants of Lystra.

We saw last time that God granted the Apostles the ability to perform signs and wonders in order to demonstrate God's grace, and thus affirm the truthfulness of the gospel message. In Lystra, we see this ability demonstrated again in the healing of a man who had been lame from birth. Notice once again, Paul is presented as the leader, as he is the one speaking, sharing the gospel to a group made up of primarily gentiles, with no scriptural background, or depth of understanding of the Jewish faith.

The bible says that the crippled man listened to Paul preach the gospel, and Paul could see that he had faith to be healed. Here was a man in a hopeless situation. As a cripple in that culture, he had little opportunity to provide for himself, or his family. But, when he heard the gospel, a glimmer of hope came into his heart. Paul could see it. Through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, Paul discerned what God was going to do, and he commanded that the man demonstrate his faith, by standing up on his feet, and so God healed him, as a testimony to the truth of the gospel message.

We have to be careful when considering the principles behind the healing, so that we do not paint God into a box. We cannot assume that when we face similar circumstances today, that God has to bring about healing when a person has faith. This is a cruel supposition sometimes imposed by so called "faith healers." Those who claim to have a healing ministry often accuse a person who is in dire circumstances of not having enough faith, in order to be healed. It is the other guy's fault, not the fault of the faith healer.

On the other hand, faith is essential for a person to have the power of God demonstrated in his or her life. The bible says that without faith it is impossible to please God. I will take it a step further by saying that without faith it is impossible to even know God.

I am one of your pastors, but God has not granted that I can perform signs and wonders in the way He used these things, in the ministries of the Apostles, in the early church. On the other hand, if you are a mature Christian, you can testify to the power of God in your life, and circumstances, as you faced life's challenges in faith. If you have consistently prayed in faith, you have seen, first hand, how God works in answer to prayer.

In this healing event, notice the similarity to what we read in chapter 3, where Peter and John had the exact same experience. Outside the temple, there was a man crippled from birth calling out to the Apostles. Context suggests that he made his living as a beggar. Peter and John told him that they didn't have any money, but they could give him something worth far more. In the name of Jesus they commanded that he get up and walk, and God granted a miracle in this man's life.

In John chapter 9 we read that Jesus healed a man born blind. The disciples asked him, "Who sinned, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?" "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," Jesus answered. "This came about so that God's works might be displayed in him."

In all of these instances we have people in hopeless situations, who were about as low as they could go. Each one of these recipients of God's grace had to demonstrate their faith, and in each miracle God demonstrated His power as a testimony to help people to come to Jesus Christ in faith.

It is important for us to remember these things when we ask God for a miracle. Often people have to hit rock bottom before they call out to God in faith. When God answers our prayers, and delivers a miracle in our lives, or in the life of someone we pray for, His purpose is not just to bless the individual, but that we use the testimony of that event to lead people to faith in Jesus Christ. Perhaps, if we would be bolder in our witness to God's grace, we would see more of God's grace at work in answer to our prayers.

The bible says that when the people saw the miracle, they began to proclaim in the Lycaonian language, that the God's had come down in the form of men. It seems pretty clear from the sequence of events that Paul and Barnabas did not understand the Lycaonian language, and had no idea, at first, what the people were saying. When God granted that they performed miracles among the Jews, or among people who spoke Greek, they were used to hearing the people praising God for the miracle. But the Lycaonians had no biblical context to put into perspective what had happened. They had no concept of the One True God who is creator of all. Their only context came from the polytheism of the Greek culture.

This reminds us that we have to be sensitive to the background of the people with whom we share the gospel today. We have to speak differently to the lost person who grew up in a Southern Baptist Church, than we do to a person who has never been to a Christian church in his or her life. If we hammer on the scriptures to a person who has no biblical foundation, it will be difficult for them to understand the gospel in context, and to receive the gospel message so that they can be saved. A person who comes from a false religion already has a belief system as their foundation, and it will be hard to convince them of salvation in Jesus name, unless we have some sensitivity of where their head and heart lies.

The idea is to engage people in conversation so that we can get a sense of what is going on in his or her life, and perhaps get an understanding of their core belief system. The gospel

message does not change, but we craft our presentation of the gospel to make it relevant to people right where they are.

The bible says that they called Barnabas Zues, who was the chief god among the Greeks. Paul, they called Hermes, who was the chief speaker among the gods. This again affirms Paul's leadership in the missionary efforts. The missionaries didn't know what was going on until the priest of Zeus began to sacrifice animals to honor them.

When Paul and Barnabas realized what was happening, they tore their cloths and cried out that they were men, just like them, with the same nature. They were bringing good news, which is the gospel, a message that would lead them to turn away from worthless religion to true living God who created the heavens, and earth, and everything in them.

They did not try to prove that Jesus was the Messiah, because the people would have asked, "What's a Messiah?" They did not quote the scriptures, because they had never read the scriptures. Their point of reference was the common ground of God's creation. The natural world was something observable. They understood the balance of nature, the changing seasons, the rains from heaven that refreshed the earth, and the warming of the sun that caused everything to grow. They told them that there is a creator God in heaven who has sent good news, which is the gospel message, to bless their lives. From this common foundation they could explain God's sacrifice of His Son for the forgiveness of sins, His resurrection from the grave, and call them to faith in Jesus Christ.

This is in keeping with what Paul writes, in Romans chapter 1, about God's wrath being poured out because of sin, and that people are without excuse, because they can know that there is a creator God by observing His creation. The problem then, and the problem now, is that people worship the creation, rather than the creator. The doctrines of evolution try to explain away the need for a creator God. The advocates of global warming trust in man's ability to change the weather, rather than trusting and worshipping the God who created our environment. It is our God-given responsibility to care for our environment, but when we place more emphasis on the environment, and unproven theories, than we do God, that is idolatry. When turtle eggs are of more value than a human life, we have turned every principle of God's word upside down, and destine ourselves to the penalty we deserve, which is God's wrath.

The missionary's message was to turn from such things, and turn towards the living God. This is what the bible calls repentance. To those of us who believe, we understand what repentance means, but to someone without a biblical foundation, the word might have little significance, and it needs to be explained in a way that he or she can understand.

We are all sinners by nature and by choice. Our sin is against God, who created all things. We call condemnation down upon ourselves when we sin. We are all guilty, and deserving of God's wrath. But God demonstrates His love for us in this, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. This is the good news that Paul and Barnabas shared everywhere they went on their missionary journey. This is the message they bore to everyone who would listen, and they shared it in such a way as to be relevant to whatever audience they could gather.

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have everlasting life. At just the right time, God took on flesh. The creator entered His creation, in fulfillment of the promises of Scripture, in order to offer Himself, that is His physical life, as a sacrifice for my sin and yours. On the cross, Jesus assumed the cost of the penalty of our sin. He bore the pain, sorrow and suffering, so that we might escape what we deserve, and live in the blessings of God's grace. Because Jesus experienced life the way we do, with all its joy, sorrow and pain, and because He lived a sinless life, His sacrifice is the only

acceptable means of receiving God's forgiveness. Because Jesus demonstrated the power of God, and the truthfulness of His promise through the resurrection from the grave, we know that we are forgiven of our sins, and have eternal life through faith in Him. If there is anyone here tonight who would like to have these truths explained in greater detail, I would love to meet with you.