

Acts

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. (Acts 1:8 ESV)

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42 ESV)

Lessons In Iconium

September 17th, 2023

Acts 14:1-7

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Introduction:

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to Acts 14. It feels good to say that again! We took an 11-week-long break over the course of this summer, so I imagine a brief reorientation might be helpful for some of us.

When most people think about the Book of Acts, they think of it as the story of the Apostles. However, while the Apostles play a major role in this book, they are not the centre of this story. The Book of Acts is actually the story of JESUS and all that HE accomplished in and *through* the Apostles! And Luke was very careful to make sure that all future readers would understand this detail as they begin the book. In the very first verse, he wrote:

In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus **began to do and teach** (Luke 1:1 ESV)

The “first book” that he alludes to here is the book of Luke. Luke’s Gospel was the story of the BEGINNING of Jesus’ ministry! Which means that he’s not done *doing* and *teaching*! When Jesus ascended to heaven, he sent his Holy Spirit to indwell the church. We read that story in chapter 2 – that’s the story of Pentecost. And from chapter 2 onward, the story of Acts is the story of the Holy-Spirit-filled church *continuing* the work that Jesus began!

That is a wildly important detail. If this was simply the story of the Apostles, then we would read it expecting to learn some fascinating information about men who lived 2,000 years ago. And that

would be interesting. But this book is *more* than interesting. This is the story of what JESUS accomplished in and through the early church – and since the same Holy Spirit who dwelt powerfully in *them* dwells powerfully in *us* – we read these stories not simply to learn what *did* happen but to learn what *can* happen! Because the work of Jesus in the world did not cease when the last Apostle died!

Jesus is still doing! Jesus is still teaching! And his work is being accomplished *through* his church!

So, by way of application, as we read the story this morning of Paul and Barnabas' ministry in Iconium, we are going to read with a sense of *purpose* and *expectation*. We want to glean from this story lessons that will shape *our* ministry here in Orillia. Amen? Amen. To that end, please look with me in your Bibles to Acts 14:1-7, as we continue to follow the Apostle Paul on his first missionary journey. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today.

Now at Iconium they entered together into the Jewish synagogue and spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed. ² But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. ³ So they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord, who bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands. ⁴ But the people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews and some with the apostles. ⁵ When an attempt was made by both Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to mistreat them and to stone them, ⁶ they learned of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding country, ⁷ and there they continued to preach the gospel. (Acts 14:1-7 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

As Paul and Barnabas ministered in the city of Iconium, they followed the same pattern that they have followed throughout their missionary journey. They made their way straight to the local synagogue where they proclaimed the gospel to a community that had never heard the good news of Jesus Christ. As they broke new gospel ground, the Lord accompanied their ministry with signs and wonders. All of this corresponds with the pattern we've been observing. And yet, even in a story that looks so familiar, there are unique lessons to be learned from this chapter in Paul's journey. So, let's look closely and learn the lessons in Iconium.

First, we learn here that:

1. There is a way to speak that invites God's blessing

We see this in verse 1:

Now at Iconium they entered together into the Jewish synagogue and **spoke in such a way** that a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed. (Acts 14:1 ESV)

In my first reading I rushed right past that sentence. But the more I reflected on this text, the more it pulled me in. We're told here that Paul and Barnabas spoke in such a way that a great number believed.

I don't know about you, but I want to speak in such a way that people believe. I want to speak in such a way that my children believe. And my brother. And my neighbors. And my friends at the gym. And every unbeliever that ever graces the doors of Redeemer. I want to speak in such a way that a great number will believe! Do you want that?

Well, that begs the question: How did these brothers speak?

We find the answer in verse 3. Look there again. Luke writes:

So they remained for a long time, **speaking boldly for the Lord**, who bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands. (Acts 14:3 ESV)

They spoke *boldly* for the Lord.

In a wishy-washy world, there is something compelling about a person of conviction. In a post-modern, who-can-really-know-anything world, there is something compelling about a person who declares their message with unapologetic certainty.

O that we would be BOLD for Jesus! O that we would have the conviction and the love and the courage to look people in the eye and to tell them the truth.

But boldness for the sake of boldness is compelling but not transformational. A bold proclamation only changes lives if it is a proclamation of a life transforming message. Look again at verse 3:

So they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for **the Lord, who bore witness to the word of his grace**, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands. (Acts 14:3 ESV)

The Lord blessed and empowered the ministry of Paul and Barnabas because the message that they were proclaiming was the “word of his grace”!

They preached Christ, and him crucified. There is a God, and He is holy, and we are not, but he LOVES us! And He sent His own Son to save us! And if we confess our sin and lay hold of our Savior, we can live and not die! There is forgiveness in the name of Jesus! And there is power! Power to live a new life! Power to obey! Power to change! And it’s all grace! It’s all a gift!

Receive it today! Repent and believe! Live!

As Paul and Barnabas entered into that synagogue, they spoke in contrast to the speaking that the people were used to hearing.

Those who spoke before Paul and Barnabas, and those who would stand up to speak after they had been thrown out, did not speak the word of his grace. They spoke law. They spoke moralism. They spoke merit. They spoke behavior modification. And there was no life in it.

Can I tell you something – sometimes we’re guilty of doing the same thing. We go to a lost and dying world and instead of lifting them up with the good news of the gospel we knock them down with our legalism. Before they’ve even received the Spirit – before they’ve surrendered to Christ – we build a barricade of law around the church. “Dress this way. Behave this way. Sit quietly this way. Then you can come to Jesus.”

There are too many churches like that in this world. Let’s resolve to never be one of them. With humility, let’s say with Paul:

The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. (1 Timothy 1:15 ESV)

Paul spoke boldly because Paul had witnessed the scandal of grace firsthand. He was like a beggar who had received bread, and he wanted the starving world to know where they could find it too. That boldness – that message of grace – powerfully transformed the city.

There is a way to speak that invites God’s blessing. That’s the first lesson that we learn in Iconium. The second flows out of it:

2. There is a way to speak that invites resistance

We see this in verse 2:

But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. (Acts 14:2 ESV)

This word of grace that Paul spoke in Iconium was so scandalous – so generous – so radical – that the religious elite wanted to chase him right out of town. Grace does that to the proud. But that same message led a great many people in Iconium to surrender to Jesus. Grace does that to the humble.

Even if we speak with perfect humility and point clearly and earnestly to Jesus, there will always be resistance to the preaching of the gospel. Not everyone who heard Paul and Barnabas believed. In fact, as the gospel went forth, it was as if a wedge was driven into the heart of the city. We read in verse 4:

But the people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews and some with the apostles. (Acts 14:4 ESV)

This is an important lesson for us, and it’s a lesson that we often forget. You can share the same gospel in the same way at the same time with two people, but there is no guarantee that you will get the same results. Some will lean in with an eagerness to hear more. But others will pull back in resentment.

One way or another, the proclamation of the gospel moves people – whether that be to repentance or condemnation. The proclamation of the gospel *divides* people. Paul told us this would happen. He said:

For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, ¹⁶ to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. (2 Corinthians 2:15-16a ESV)

Charles Spurgeon famously said:

The same sun that melts the wax hardens the clay. And the same gospel which melts some persons to repentance hardens others in their sins.¹

We've all seen this, haven't we?

When you tell the truth about God, and you tell the truth about sin, and you tell the truth about the cross, people don't remain neutral. They will lean in. Or they will lean out. There is an inevitable division whenever the gospel goes forth. And sometimes that division will lead to significant hostility. There is a way to speak that invites resistance. That's the second lesson we learn in this passage.

So far, everything that we've covered is relatively familiar ground. Paul always speaks the gospel when he enters a new city, and he always faces resistance. This is not new. However, one of the incredible things about *this* story is that it provides us with an insight into how we can and should respond when resistance and persecution begins to escalate. That brings us to our third lesson this morning:

3. There is a time to stay and to endure mistreatment

This is a really important lesson, and I want to make sure that you see it with me in the text. Look again at verses 2-3:

¹ Charles Spurgeon, *The Lesson Of The Almond Tree* (A sermon delivered in the Metropolitan Tabernacle, Newington, on Thursday, April 7, 1881) accessed via <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/spurgeon/sermons46.xxiii.html> on September 5, 2023.

But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. ³ **So they remained for a long time**, speaking boldly for the Lord, who bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands. (Acts 14:2-3 ESV)

The words that connect verses 2-3 deserve our attention. In verse 2, we are told about a growing hostility against Paul and Barnabas in Iconium. Some of those who were hardened by the preaching of the gospel went on to pursue a public smear campaign. They gossiped, and they slandered, and they turned the public against Paul and Barnabas. But look again at verse 3. Does the text say, “**And yet**, they remained”? Does it say, “**In spite of this hostility**, they remained”? No. Look closely at what it says:

So they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord, who bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands. (Acts 14:3 ESV)

“So” is a PURPOSE word. There was conflict. There was persecution. There was slander. AND SO – because of this – Paul and Barnabas put down roots and stuck it out! That’s fascinating! G. Campbell Morgan is helpful here. He notes:

The reason of the long tarrying was not the success of the work, but its difficulties. The reason why they stayed was that persecution was abroad against those first gathered disciples.²

Some of us are instinctive runners. We assume that the slightest pang of adversity is a surefire indicator that we are in the wrong place. But this story reminds us that sometimes the right response to mistreatment is to stay and persevere. Matthew Henry reminds us:

Thus also God is served, not only by working for him when he calls us to work, but by sitting still quietly while he calls us to suffer.³

For some of you, you’re wrestling through this in your workplace. Some of you have already been called into the office for refusing to tow the company line. You’ve been asked to celebrate things that you know you can’t celebrate. You’ve been asked to say things that you know a follower of

² G. Campbell Morgan, *The Acts Of The Apostles* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1924), 341.

³ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary On The Whole Bible* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 1781.

Jesus can't say. And, as you've chosen to draw the line, you sense a growing hostility in your workplace.

For some of you, the question of whether or not to switch careers is looming large in your mind. Is there a future for Christian teachers in the Ontario public school system? Is there a future for Christians in the corporate world? Is there a future for Christian doctors in the medical field? These aren't hypothetical questions, are they?

Some of you have already felt the sting of mistreatment.

That's hard. That hurts. And, in the same way that our instinct is to pull our hand away from the thing that burns us, so too do we instinctively want to remove ourselves from the pain of adversity.

And yet.

Our passage this morning reminds that leaving is not always the right answer.

There were a number of factors that led Paul and Barnabas to stay and endure in Iconium. For starters, it appears that they were concerned for the new converts in the city. They had just led these men and women to Christ, and they didn't want to leave these new believers to face this adversity on their own. You should add that to your decision-making criteria. Are there other young believers in your workplace? How will they fare if you're gone tomorrow? Would there be wisdom in weathering this storm for a little longer for their sake?

Another factor at play was the severity of the persecution. Here in verse 3, Paul and Barnabas are being harassed, but there doesn't appear to be any physical danger. This wasn't a question of leaving or dying. It was a question of leaving or facing harassment. They seem to have factored that in with the first concern and decided that they could endure the slander for the sake of building up the church. Similarly, I would encourage you to honestly assess your situation. What are you being put through right now? Name calling? Misrepresentation? None of that is pleasant, but could you endure it for the sake of finishing well in your workplace?

We learn from this episode in Iconium that there is a time to stay and endure mistreatment.

However, we also learn that:

4. There is a time to move on to the next assignment

Look again at verses 5-6:

When an attempt was made by both Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to mistreat them and to stone them,⁶ they learned of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding country (Acts 14:5-6 ESV)

Lest we *overhear* the previous point, here we are reminded that there IS a time to move on. While the early days were marked by the discomfort of slander, the latter days contained threats of *stoning*. When Paul and Barnabas caught wind of the plan, they decided that it was time to advance to the next city.

There's an important lesson for us here. Listen: It is not necessarily an act of cowardice to count the cost and move on. In this instance, Paul and Barnabas seem to have come to the conclusion that they could better serve the Lord by continuing their missionary journey than by staying and dying as martyrs in Iconium.

Now, I want to make sure that you don't misunderstand and overapply the point here. I'm not suggesting that as soon as we are faced with physical danger, we should *necessarily* flee. That's not the principle here. In fact, towards the end of Paul's ministry he will run *towards* the danger! In Acts 21, we read:

While we were staying for many days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. ¹¹ And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'" ¹² When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem. ¹³ Then Paul answered, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? **For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.**" (Acts 21:10-13 ESV)

In *today's* passage, Paul and Barnabas see the threat against their lives as a sign to move on. Yet, in Acts 21, Paul sees a threat against his life but stays the course. The principle, therefore, is NOT that we should flee whenever we are threatened with physical danger.

The principle is that there ARE appropriate reasons to move on, and we should exercise discernment in making those decisions.

When I was in a Bible College, I met a man who had just returned to the country after serving with his wife as a missionary in a dangerous part of the world for many years. At great risk to themselves, they lived and shared the gospel in a part of the Middle East where Christianity is openly oppressed.

But then, they had a child who became very sick. And they were not living in a place where they could receive appropriate healthcare for their child. So, they made the difficult decision to return to Canada.

Does that make them cowards? Did they choose their child over the mission? No! They prayed, they counted the cost, and they knew that it was time to move on to their next assignment. He's now pastoring a church in Ontario, and undoubtedly God is using that couple to do amazing things. If you don't have a theological category to reconcile a decision like that then you're not thinking biblically. In these 7 verses, Luke records a story that helps us to understand that these are complicated decisions.

There is a time to stay. And there is a time to go. And thankfully, God will help us as we discern which is which.

But that brings us to our final lesson from this passage:

5. Whether we stay or go, compromise is not an option

Look again with me to verses 5-7:

When an attempt was made by both Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to mistreat them and to stone them,⁶ they learned of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding country,⁷ and **there they continued to preach the gospel.** (Acts 14:5-7 ESV)

Whether we are called to stay or go is a complicated question, but this detail is clear as day. Paul and Barnabas could move on, or they could stay and suffer the consequences. But what they could NOT do was they could not silence their message and live quietly in Iconium. When Paul wrote to the Corinthians, he explained:

Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! (1 Corinthians 9:16b ESV)

Silence and compromise was not an option for Paul. Neither should it be an option for any of us.

As we apply these principles to our own lives, let's make sure that we understand this lesson. Because I would suspect that we are all going to face the temptation to compromise.

The narrative will be something like this: "Would it really be so bad if I just towed the company line on this one issue? If I don't compromise and I'm forced to leave then there will be *no* Christians here, and surely that would be worse! Yes, for the sake of my Christian witness, I will plug my nose and do it. I will celebrate that sin. I will perform that procedure. I will stop sharing the hope that I have. I will simply try to preach the gospel with my actions instead."

Brothers and sisters, the days of comfortably fitting in with the world are quickly coming to an end here in Canada. In the same way that Barnabas and Paul's presence in Iconium led to division, so too is your presence in your workplace or your school or your neighbourhood likely going to eventually lead to some discomfort. And, when that day comes, you will be forced into some difficult decisions. Will you stay and endure the mistreatment? Will you go and move on to your next assignment? Or will you compromise and make peace with the world? That third option will grant you a temporary reprieve, but it is a peace that won't last because Jesus said:

everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven,³³ but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 10:32-33 ESV)

Whether we stay or go, compromise is simply not an option.

As we come to a conclusion this morning, I want to remind you of how this story started:

Now at Iconium they entered together into the Jewish synagogue and spoke in such a way that **a great number** of both Jews and Greeks believed. (Acts 14:1 ESV)

Is this a story of persecution and discomfort? Yes, it is. Is it a story of difficult decisions and painful goodbyes? Yes, it is. But thanks be to God, at the heart of this passage is a story about hundreds – perhaps even thousands – of men, women, boys and girls who were led out of darkness and into the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ! Is that worth being chased out of the city? Is that worth losing a career? Is that worth suffering slander and misrepresentation? Paul and Barnabas would certainly answer with a resounding “YES!”

So, let’s be wise and discerning as we decide whether to stay or to go. But let’s spend less time fixating on what we stand to lose and spend more time fixating on what we stand to gain. As the late missionary Jim Elliot famously wrote:

He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose.⁴

Amen. Let’s pray together.

⁴ Jim Elliot, *Journal entry from October 28, 1949*, as found on <https://www.kevinhalloran.net/jim-elliott-quote-he-is-no-fool/>. Accessed on March 5, 2023.