

Idols and False Gods

Acts 14

Mathew 10:16-31

Romans 5:1-11

Responsive Psalms 116:1-8

Today we are going to be looking at Acts chapter 14, continuing to follow Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. As we have seen each step of the way, every city it seems that they enter it doesn't take long before they are faced with opposition, and not just the kind of debating, but having their lives threatened and having to flee from the cities. Our passage today is no different, Paul and Barnabas arrive in a new city, preach in the synagogues and many believe, both Jew and Gentile...but then arises the opposition to drive them from the city...and as we will see in our reading this morning as they have been going through each city and town ministering that opposition has grown. As we read through this chapter this morning, there will be some parallels that Luke makes from the other accounts, in each chapter it would seem that Luke has a specific focus, or theme as he is writing about the progress of the gospel from one situation to another. In the passage today, there are parallels with the ministry in Pisidian Antioch in chapter 13, we see in both of these accounts, the unbelieving Jews stirring up dissension among the people causing them to rise up against Paul and Barnabas.

In each account we see Paul and Barnabas entering into a city, going to the synagogue and preaching and many both Jews and Gentiles believing. But in each of these accounts there is a common theme, the people are at the synagogues, these are people who in one sense already have a belief in God, for Luke describes them as "those who fear God," in chapter 13. But our passage today is unique in that those to whom Paul and Barnabas minister to, are pagans who have no knowledge of the God of Israel as did the others. These were not a people who worshiped at a Jewish synagogue, these were not a people who even attained a knowledge of God, but as we will see as we read this we will see they are instead ones who believe in the pagan God's of Rome,

But there is another theme that runs throughout this passage, and that is the theme of persecution and there appears to be an escalation of it as this chapter progresses. In each of the cities that they visited, after a time it becomes apparent that they are no longer wanted there, or that it may even be dangerous to remain...but in the account today we will see that Paul is taken and stoned and left for dead outside the walls of the city. These such accounts are important, for they remind us the opposition that there truly is to this Gospel. At this time, we enjoy relative peace here within this country, no one is being put to death for their beliefs, but that very thing is happening in many other countries even today. Many are facing imprisonment and death for their beliefs, yet the thread binds all of it together, between the ministry, and the persecution is faith in God. A belief, that even in the face of death, that God is near and that even death itself will not separate us from him, in fact it is through death, through the shedding of this mortal body, that we are then truly united with him. For the believer death is not the end, but it is rather only the glorious beginning of an everlasting life in the very presence of our God and father.

So let us go ahead and read our passage this morning, so turn with me to chapter 14 in the book of acts and this morning we will be looking at the entire chapter. Just like in the previous chapters and accounts that Luke records, we see the same here, that Paul continues to focus on the priority of ministering to the Jews first, but even though that is where he starts, in chapter 14 it quickly turns to a ministry to the gentiles.

In the previous accounts we see Paul in his ministry is instructing the Jews and the God fearing Gentiles that Jesus is the fulfillment of all that the prophets foretold, and is the fulfillment of the promises given to the patriarchs, but in this account today, in dealing with these Pagans who have no previous knowledge of the God of Israel he must take a different approach. The message is no longer about God fulfilling his promises to Israel by sending a savior, but instead the good news is about the possibility of escaping from the futility of idolatry and coming to know the true and living God.

It is interesting to note in these early verses here this coalition with the Jews and the Gentiles against Paul and Barnabas., that is the unbelieving Jews inciting the unbelieving Gentiles and turning them against Paul and Barnabas. what sort of hatred must have been brewing, and what sort of desperation that they must have felt as they were witnessing multitudes turn from the temple worship, and its traditions, but not only that, they were losing control over the people who are now believing the gospel of Jesus. As we have seen in the previous accounts, jealousy was stirred up among the temple leaders as they are seeing multitudes leave and follow Christ. But this coalition of the Jews and Gentiles shows the desperation, for Jews would scarcely associate with a gentile, let along come together for one common goal. But their anger and hatred toward Jesus, and his disciples was so great that they were willing to put aside such things if it meant that they could silence those who had come to preach that Jesus, for I am sure there was an element of shame that fed their anger, for they were preaching of the one in whom they had put to death, the gospel message of the one they had crucified for blasphemy was still spreading, and even more so despite their efforts to destroy it. But we all know why, for it was the true word of God, and the one that they spoke of was the one who was the Messiah that was sent, and now the door of salvation has been opened to the Gentiles, salvation has come to the Gentiles as well as the Jews through the same common faith in Christ.

There is an interesting tie together between verse 2 and 3, in verse 2 that the unbelieving Jews stirred up the unbelieving Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brethren, and the Luke writes, “therefore they stayed there a long time.” It would seem for this reason, of the rising opposition that Paul and Barnabas decided to stay here for an extended amount of time. Likely with the turmoil that was arising, with the city being divided, some siding with the unbelieving Jews, and others with the apostles, they stayed to give much needed support to the new believers who would likely undergo some sort of persecution. But the bigger and more important reason that they stayed, was because the Lord was blessing their ministry there, the last half of verse 3, “speaking boldly in the Lord, who was bearing witness to the signs and wonders to be done by their hands.” God was blessing their ministry, he encouraged them to be bold, and to stay by testifying to the message of his grace by enabling them to do miraculous signs and wonders. The gospel message given is one of forgiveness, and is one of grace, that it is God who is merciful and sent his Son so that we, both Jews and Gentiles maybe reconciled to him...and it is this grace that is apart from the law, apart from the temple worship and its traditions, for it is only found in Christ. And God used the signs and miracles to testify to this truth, that the word spoken, that this gospel message was indeed from God, and came in power.

Just as in Christ's ministry, as is recorded by Luke when he healed the paralyzed man who was lowered into the room by his friends, Christ told him, his sins are forgiven, and those who were there the scribes and pharisee's said he was speaking blasphemy, for only God can forgive. So Christ, knowing their thoughts said, “Which is easier to say, your sins are forgiven you, or to say Rise up and walk? But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins, he said to the man who was paralyzed, I say to you, arise, take up your bed and walk. Much in the same way God was enabling his apostles to likewise show sign's and wonders to show that the power of God was with them, for which is easier to believe...that the Lord has come to bring salvation to his people, to all those who would believe, or that there were men who were performing signs and miracles. 2

But despite all that, despite the preaching of the apostles and the signs and miracles, showing how the law and the prophets all pointed to Christ, and the confirmation by God of that message through the working of signs and miracles the people of the city were divided...yet just as we saw in Acts 13, in the face of unbelief and opposition all that were appointed for eternal life believed.

While there was definitely a multitude of those who were seeking to do harm to Paul and Baranabas, as it says in verse 5, they were seeking to stone them, to kill them. Verse 4 also says that there was a multitude who sided with the Apostles, so, while Luke doesn't apply the same message here as he has in so many other chapters, that there were many who were added daily, we see from the text that there were indeed many who believed, and it was because of these that Paul and Barnabas stayed as long as they did, until it became apparent that it was no longer safe for them to remain, so they fled to Lystra and Derbe. And as we see in our text this morning, while in Lystra while Paul was preaching it says that the this man heard him speaking, and Paul observed him intently seeing that he had faith to be healed. And God, using Paul healed this crippled man by a command, "Stand up straight on your feet." and this man stood up, and he leaped, and walked. If you are a believer today, this is exactly what God did for you through the preaching of the word and the witness's that he has brought on your path. For upon hearing the command to repent and believe, came the miraculous ability to do so...and in that moment of salvation...our proverbial lameness, and inability to walk in the ways of the Lord was healed.

I find in a lot of these recordings of miracles, a sort of parallel with the new birth, while the miracles were a healing of the physical, it also serves as a picture of the dire state of our spiritual nature, the sickness of sinful desires and lusts, the inability to believe, being dead in our trespasses and sins...yet God, through his word, brought to us by the mouths of his appointed brings about a healing of the heart and soul that springs forth in us repentance and belief. It is no less miraculous than all of the healings of the blind, the lame, or the afflicted...it is no less miraculous than the raising of people from the dead, for it is all in essence what has happened to each and every one of us who believe. God has raised us from the dead, we have become a new creature, now having the leprosy of sin that is rotting in our hearts and working in us death, to be removed and cleansed so that we may believe, and not only believe, but also to have fellowship with him. We are not saved to then be left on our own, but God truly works in us, and through us to will and to do all that of his good pleasure. We are now priests, and ministers of the very message which brought ourselves to life. Think about that for a minute....through your ministry, and witness, through reflecting the work of God in your life and the preaching of the gospel to all those around us...God may be pleased to work this same miracle of the new birth in others. This miraculous, gracious, merciful miracle of drawing his children to himself through the ministry of the saints.

Paul spoke, and a man was healed....It was not by any power of Paul, it was not by any power of his words, he did not speak some magical phrase to guarantee this outcome, he did not cry out in wailing and chanting, repeating himself over and over again...he merely stated, with authority.."Rise up, stand up straight and walk." and it was God who healed that man,. So to it is with us as we minister to those around us, we speak the words of this gospel message, with authority..and it is God who gives them power, it is only God who can work the miracle of salvation in the hearts of the listeners...we are merely to speak, just as the parable of the sower, tossing the seed upon the ground, with little worry of where it landed, and it is God who has prepared the soil to accept it.

But look at the reaction that Luke records here of these pagan gentiles upon the hearing of the gospel, and the witnessing of miraculous healing of this crippled man. They did not see it in the same light as the Jews, who reacted as them being false teachers, false prophets and blasphemers who must be put to death...no in their misunderstanding that believed Paul and Barnabas to themselves be Gods.verse 11" Now when the people saw what Paul had done, they raised up their voices, saying in the Lycaonian language,

The Gods have come down to us in the likeness of men! And Barnabas they called Zues, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. In essence these Gentiles were making the same error of the unbelieving Jews, just in a different way. Where the Jews could not see and understand that Christ was the fulfillment of the law, he was the one of whom the prophets had spoken..but they instead worshiped the shadow instead of the substance. They turned against the one who was the substance of all of these things in favor of worshiping the laws and traditions, they worshiped the messenger, all the things which told them of God and the Messiah, the law was a tutor, a messenger given pointing to their need of another, yet they rejected that message, and instead worshiped the messenger itself, they looked to the law, the messenger for salvation instead of the one in whom it pointed. They set for themselves an idol, they sought to build for themselves righteousness through the keeping of the law, and traditions. likewise, these gentiles in Lystra, did not see the substance of the message that was preached,...but instead they worshiped the messengers, they saw the messengers as those to be worshiped, not the one of whom the message told. So in some ways though acting out differently, committing the same error.

We even see an element of this type of thinking today, a moving away from the message of scripture and replacing it with traditions, or moral and self help style teachings. This past week Casey sent me this results to a poll that was recently taken which stated, 36 percent of pastor's polled in the United States believed that it is by our good works that we may find salvation. Again, making this same error, looking toward anything other then Christ as a means of salvation. Good works is nothing more then the outcome of one who has been saved, for it is God working through us to will and to do... yet these 36 percent make it a point of worship, an act that one can do to bring about justification for oneself. They have switched the following of one law for another, And in doing so again miss the entire point of the gospel, that it is by grace you are saved, not of works..but it is a gift of God. Paul and Barnabas tore their clothes and ran into the crowd proclaiming the gospel in an attempt to prove that it was not they who were God's who should be worshiped, but rather they were merely men bringing the message of the one true God.

It would seem that there are many among us Christians who have built for themselves new idols, buy looking and focusing on anything other then Christ himself, many have unintentionally fallen trap to idolizing things around the Christian faith. Putting so much importance on minor things, that in the end make little difference, and forgetting to focus on that which really matters, which is Christ himself. Instead of looking to Christ for all things, some build up for themselves new sets of rules to follow, or new traditions that must be followed, we see this in even some of our Reformed brethren, who put such a focus on this idea that we must treat Sunday as a sabbath day, and in some weird twist attempt to keep a sabbath, yet none can agree on exactly what that looks like..just that it must be done. Or there are even some who are concerned about eating kosher foods, the reality is that all of these things are nothing more then a distraction from the message, a diversion from the truth which is Christ who is center and the fulfillment of it all, it is Christ who is our sabbath...it is in him who we rest, setting aside our labor, and our works.. no longer seeking to be justified by them...but instead we simply sit down at the feet of Jesus, and rest within the grace and mercy he has given...

.and we no longer labor, nor do good works to seek justification for ourselves..but instead we do them because of Christ himself, whom we love tells us to do so, such works are not something that is done to gain merit or favor, but are nothing more then the outward signs of the inward truth that it is Christ who is dwelling within us.

We to, like the apostles should also metaphorically tear our clothes and run out among the people preaching the word of God. By this I mean, set aside those things which distract, which take away from the true message of salvation. We have all seen it, there always seems to arise within the faith these sort of celebrity pastors, in which it becomes more about their personality or the person, then the message... again, a distraction from the truth...and there are many who embrace this status.. instead of doing all within their power to stop the people from setting them up as idols, they embrace it and encourage it. But even we ourselves if we are not careful can be guilty of the same, and instead of having mercy and compassion, if we are not careful we can become judgmental and harsh in our dealings with the lost, or even with our dealings with other believers in whom we may have differences. We must always remember that we are no different, and that we are not any better then the next person, we all have our struggles, we all have our shortcomings, we all can at times be abrasive, or disappointing...yet none of that matters if we remember that we are first and foremost all sinners justified by God. And if God has forgiven us, then we to should be ready and able to forgive one another. And it is this attitude that should rule with in us, that we not elevate anyone nor look down upon another but instead embrace one another for what we are...sinners saved by grace.

We should have compassion and love in all of our dealings, whether it be interpersonal, or even in theological debates, If Christ is central in our lives, then his love flowing though us is what will dictate our actions, a mutual love for Christ is how we can forgive one another, it is how we can have debates on things of the faith and yet walk away still brothers and sisters, we must never build for ourselves idols from our faith, never elevating anything or anyone above Christ himself..and if we find that we have, or that we do...we should repent of it. We should not allow it to happen, and we must guard ourselves from it for we still live within this sinful flesh, and we battle with pride, which can play into the feeling of the need to be right, pushing out grace and understanding. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, 1 Corinthians 16:13, “Stand fast in the faith, be brave, be strong, let all that a you do be done in love.”

In closing this morning, looking at the last half of this chapter, we see again that a group of Jews came from a neighboring city to stir up trouble, we see this sorta theme many times in the new testament, we saw it in the book of Galatians as well...there is an ongoing threat, and purposeful seeking out opposition of this faith. Verse 19 “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.” Think of the deception that was at play here, the turned a people who were worshiping these 2 men as Gods against them to the point where they stoned one and left him for dead. But God had other plans, for Paul was not dead, he arose and the next day left for Derbe. In the following verses we get a summary of Paul and Barnbas journey, as they went into cities and preached the gospel then returning to Antioch the city where they were given the commission to take this journey. And there they gave a report of all of these things, as as verse 27 says, “They reported all that God had done with them, and that He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles.”

The gospel has been given for all, there is no distinction between Jew, and Gentile, but it is merely a call that has gone out to the world to believe in the one and only true God, who has by his own power, and good pleasure, provided for himself reconciliation with his creation. And he promises that his word will not return void, that is the preaching of this gospel is promised to be effective for in it is the power to save souls, for it is God who is working in the hearts of men and women from every walk of life to believe. We must simply preach, and God will increase.

