

Exposing Idolatry, Attracting Opposition

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[0 : 00] We turn now to our reading for this evening, and we are continuing on with the book of Acts. So please turn to Acts chapter 14, page 923.

Acts chapter 13.

Paul and Barnabas, and so they've had to flee from Antioch, and so they now move on to the next destination. So chapter 14 and 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. But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. 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.

But the people of the city were divided. Some sided with the Jews and some with the apostles. When an attempt was made by both Gentiles and Jews with their rulers to mistreat them and stone them, they learned of it and fled to Lystra and Derby, cities of Lyconia, and to the surrounding country.

[1 : 43] And there they continued to preach the gospel. Now at Lystra, there was a man sitting who could not use his feet. He was crippled from birth and had never walked.

He listened to Paul speaking. And Paul, looking intently at him and seeing that he had faith to be made well, said in a loud voice, Stand upright on your feet.

And he sprang up and began walking. And when the crowd saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in Lyconian, 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. And the priest of Zeus, whose temple was at the entrance to the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds.

But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their garments and rushed out into the crowd, crying out, Men, why are you doing these things?

[2 : 54] We also are men of like nature with you. And we bring you good news that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them.

In past generations, he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. Yet he did not leave them himself without witness. For he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.

Even with these words, they scarcely restrained the people from offering sacrifice to them. But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead.

But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city, and on the next day, he went on with Barnabas to Derbe.

This is the word of the Lord, and may he bless it to us this evening. Well, please do have Acts chapter 14 open in front of you, and we'll spend a few moments now looking at the first 20 verses of Acts chapter 14, page 923.

[4 : 17] Now, one of the keys to contentment in life is right expectations, isn't it?

Much unhappiness can be explained by totally unrealistic expectations. Unrealist expectations about entering the workforce after university.

Unrealist expectations about marriage, perhaps, or children, or whatever it might be. The reality we experience perhaps falls a long way short of the expectations we had.

When I was leaving university, I thought, the world is waiting for Paul Brennan. This is what the world needs. And very quickly, I realized that was not the case. Bottom of the pile. Got to start at the

bottom.

Menial tasks. Unrealistic expectations. Close that gap. Get realistic expectations. And a happier life follows.

[5 : 25] And the same is true as you think about the gospel and our task of spreading the gospel. Our expectations about what is involved need to accord with the reality.

And our passage this evening shows us gospel realities. And it shows us that the gospel creates divisions.

It exposes idolatry. And it also attracts opposition. And so, says Luke, the writer, you need to be clear about those realities.

Make sure that your expectations align with reality. We are to expect division, confrontation, and opposition.

As well as new life and growth and joy. Both of those are true. But on our passage this evening, it's particularly the division, the confrontation, and opposition that are in view.

[6 : 24] So, let's listen in as Luke takes us on the next stages of Paul and Barnabas as they go forward on their first mission trip. Let's see what he shows us about authentic gospel witness.

Let's look at the first of these scenes here, verses 1 to 7. They're in Iconium. And we see in this section that the authentic gospel creates division. The authentic gospel creates division.

That is the pattern that we are to expect. So, Paul and Barnabas, they have shaken the dust off their feet as they leave the city of Antioch. And they head to Iconium at some 90 miles southeast of Antioch.

A few days' walk, I'd imagine. And we see here a very similar pattern. Paul heads to the synagogue. He preaches. A great number, we're told, in verse 1, of both Jews and Greeks believed.

And as in other places, people have wonderfully repented and believed the good news preached by Paul. But, just as predictably, there is a but.

[7 : 32] Look at the start of verse 2. But, the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. It's interesting, isn't it?

That what was reported here was not that the unbelieving Jews carefully sought to dissect Paul's gospel preaching and demonstrate where he had gone wrong.

But rather, these unbelieving Jews poisoned the mind of the Gentiles against Paul and Barnabas. They don't dismantle his gospel. They don't dismantle his gospel. They dismantle him. They play the man, not the ball.

They didn't target Paul's gospel message. They target Paul. They poison their minds against him. And that is so often the way of the unbelieving people of God today.

Those who are within the visible church. Who don't actually believe the gospel like these Jews here. They will attack true believers.

[8 : 34] True gospel proclaimers by attacking them. Not the message they proclaim. That's often the tactic of the evil one, isn't it? I was recently chatting with someone who was reporting just this sort of thing.

The establishment church officials spreading lies, poisoning minds. Not about the message being preached, but against the preacher himself.

We've known that too, haven't we, as a church. And it's often an effective tactic, isn't it? Those unbelieving Jews planting poison in the minds of the Gentiles there in Iconium.

People love a bit of gossip, don't they? People love hearing poison. We're so very quick to believe, aren't we, what we hear. We believe a headline when we hear it, when we read it.

Especially when it's bringing somebody down a peg or two. We love to hear that sort of thing. We also love to believe it. It could be a very effective way for the great enemy to do great damage to the real gospel work and real gospel workers.

[9 : 44] So we need to be alert to that sort of thing. Be very careful. If you hear poison about this ministry or that ministry, this minister or that minister, check the facts before you jump headlong into believing it and then telling others.

No doubt there in Iconium, people are loving to hear this and spreading it around themselves. Did you hear what they said about Paul? Do you hear what he's like? So here in Iconium, the gospel message and the gospel messengers have the usual impact.

Belief. Yes, lots of belief. Those people turning and repenting. But also, there is opposition. The unbelieving Jews poison the minds of the Gentiles against Paul and Barnabas.

But note, Paul and Barnabas don't head for the hills. Look at verse 3. They learn about the Gentile minds being poisoned against them, so they remain for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord. They don't just head off. They stick around. The nature of the opposition wasn't yet life-threatening. That will come in verse 5. So they decide to stand their ground, to counter the poison.

[11 : 03] And their response to this opposition was to stay and patiently proclaim the word of God, to do so with boldness. That was the way in which Paul and Barnabas sought to overcome the opposition there in Iconium.

That's the way they sought to overcome the hardness and the opposition to the gospel of grace that was beginning to take root in the heart of the men there in Iconium. What happens after Paul and Barnabas' patient toiling?

Well, we're told that the Lord added his testimony to the word of grace. Look at verse 3. So they remain there for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord. And the Lord bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands.

Sometimes the response to opposition like this is patient forbearance and the continued teaching of the word over the long haul.

Sometimes that is the right response. But even at that, even with the apostle Paul himself having spent some considerable time in Iconium, patiently teaching, the end result, look at the end result, it's division.

[12 : 23] Verse 4. The people of the city were divided. Even after Paul spending some considerable time there, the result is division. Luke is showing us again that this is the pattern.

The gospel leads to life for some, but it will draw opposition. It always does. The gospel divides. This was the impact of the gospel wherever Paul went.

And by constantly showing us this pattern, Luke is telling us what the authentic gospel work is going to look like. He shows us what we should expect. So opposition like the sort we see here, it's not a sign of failure.

The fact there is division, it's not a sign of failure. That's just how it is. It's a sign of the gospel doing its work. The gospel divides because it calls people to choose one of two sides.

That is the call of the gospel. Will you repent and turn to the Lord and be part of his everlasting kingdom? Or will you reject that and be subject to his everlasting judgment?

[13 : 37] That is the choice. It is divisive. But that is the essence of the gospel. Which side are you on? Will you repent or refuse to repent?

So this short account of the apostles' time there in Iconium, it shows us that the authentic gospel creates division.

That is the pattern we're to expect. But let's look on now to the next stop, Lystra. Paul and Barnabas had to flee from Iconium because their opponents were seeking to stone them.

And so they head to Lystra. That was some 18 miles away. It's a good day's walk. And verse 7, as they go there, they continued to preach the gospel.

Yes, there was division in Iconium, but they go on and they keep doing it. They keep proclaiming the gospel. And Luke records for us a particular incident in Lystra and the fallout from it.

[14 : 40] So this is our second point. We see here, as Paul heads to Lystra, that the authentic gospel exposes idolatry. The authentic gospel exposes idolatry.

That is the confrontation that we're to expect. This is verses 8 to 18. Now things get heated very quickly in Lystra.

As you see at the end of our passage this evening, Paul is stoned. He's left for dead. What led to that? How did things get so bad, so quickly for Paul? Well, it all begins there in verse 8 with a lame man.

We're told that he was crippled from birth. He'd never walked. And this is an incident with very close parallels to one in chapter 3. Another crippled man, crippled from birth, in close proximity to a temple.

And there in chapter 3, it's the apostle Peter who heals the man. And here, in chapter 14, it's Paul. And I think Luke is wanting us to see that deliberate contrast, to see the contrast, the comparisons between Paul and Peter.

[15 : 52] And he's showing us, the readers, that Paul, like Peter, is the real deal. We're told that this man has been listening to Paul speaking. Notice there in verse 9.

And no doubt, Paul was speaking what he always speaks, the gospel. We're told that in verse 7. And so here's this man listening to Paul. The news about Christ's death, his resurrection, and all that that means.

Forgiveness of sins, the restoration of all things, resurrection life. That would be a compelling message, don't you think, for a crippled man. That great hope of what was to come.

And Paul looks at him intently. And he sees that this man has faith to be made well.

He's been hearing what Paul's been saying. He can see that he believes it. And Paul proclaims loudly. This wasn't done in a corner. Paul proclaims loudly.

[16:52] He says to this man, stand up right on your feet. And he does just that. He springs up. This lame man, this cripple, he springs up. And he starts walking around.

It's astonishing. A real demonstration of the power of the Spirit. A real sign. Authenticating the message that Paul has just been preaching.

And as with the healing of the cripple in chapter 3, this healing of the lame man here is a demonstration of the reality of the restoration that will be one day.

That will be when Christ comes. That is the explanation that Peter gives back in chapter 3. Listen to what Peter says then. Listen to what he talks about in terms of that restoration life that is to come. Peter there says, repent, therefore, and turn again that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for restoring of all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his prophets long ago.

[18:15] So Peter then is talking about what is going to happen as a result of true repentance. Three things he says. First, sins are blotted out. That is something we enjoy now, isn't it?

Because our sins are, past tense, blotted out. times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord will come.

And that seems to be something that's going to be enjoyed by believers in the present. Times are refreshing. And that is the experience of Christians all through the ages.

The Lord is kind to us, kinder than we deserve. We can, I am sure, point to moments in life when the Lord has truly refreshed us, not least as we gather here week by week, enjoy fellowship together.

It's the place where the Lord promises to presence himself with us. So sins are blotted out. Times are refreshing, he promises.

[19:36] But also thirdly, he promises to send the Christ. When? Well, he promises to send the Christ at the restoring of all things.

And that is not yet. The full and final restoration of all things will only come when Christ returns at the appointed time. Then, and only then, will the restoration of all that was promised in the scriptures be fully and finally fulfilled.

Only then. Only then will every deaf man hear. Only then will every lame man walk. Only then will physical restoration be complete.

And so we must wait for that full restoration. This sort of thing, this healing, isn't going to be the norm in this age. But it is a demonstration of what will be one day.

What will be done when Christ returns. It's a foretaste of that great day that will surely come. that's how the apostle Peter explains a very similar sort of thing back in chapter 3.

[20:52] And it's the same here. It's a foretaste. This lame man being able to walk. It's a foretaste of what will surely come. That great restoration at the end of time.

So Paul by the spirit does this amazing miracle there in Lystra. But now the camera zooms back immediately.

It zooms away from this former cripple and Paul and we see the extraordinary response from those around who witnessed it. And this is really the focus of Paul's account.

This is what he draws our attention to and gives the most time to. Look at verse 11. When the crowd saw what Paul had done they lifted up their voices saying praise the God of Israel the great creator of the earth to give thanks for his son the Lord Jesus Christ.

Is that what they say? No. That's not it. Rather they lift up their voices and they say in Lyconian the gods have come down to us and the likeness of man.

[22:00] Barnabas they call Zeus. Paul they call Hermes. They deify Paul and Barnabas. And the next thing that happens is the temple priest brings out the oxen prepares to make a sacrifice to Paul

and Barnabas.

Now that is not something we've encountered before in the book of Acts in terms of responses to the gospel. The crowds deify they idolize they attempt to worship Paul and Barnabas.

It's the first time we've encountered that sort of thing. What is going on? Why do they do that? Well Lystra an ancient writer has put it was something of a cultural backwater.

It was a little bit rustic uncivilized. It's much like how anyone living in London or around London considers those north of Oxford you know it's uncivilized uncharted territory.

It's how Glaswegians perceive Edinburgh or vice versa. It was that sort of place it was a bit out there a bit of a backwater. And there was also a local legend it's recorded by Ovid from around this time and the legend goes like this the Greek gods Zeus and Hermes had visited this area of modern day Turkey this area around Lystra.

[23 : 27] Zeus and Hermes took on the appearance of men and came around and walked around and according to the legend an elderly couple welcomed the gods into their home and their home was transformed into a temple and the couple were made priests.

But they were only welcomed in after having travelled around and knocked on many doors and they were rejected time and time again. And after these gods were accepted by the elderly couple they went back and destroyed the homes of all those who rejected them all those who refused them hospitality.

So that was the local legend Zeus and Hermes refused hospitality over and over again. And so with that legend in the minds of those men and women and Lystra with that legend firmly in their minds the people of Lystra they weren't going to make that same mistake again.

And so when they listen to Paul and Barnabas when they see this amazing healing well they assume this must be Zeus and Hermes they've come back for another visit and so they want to worship Paul and Barnabas.

Well how would Paul and Barnabas respond to this idolatry? Many men would lap that sort of thing up I imagine. We saw in chapter 12 King Herod he loved it.

[24 : 51] He welcomed it. He wanted to be deified. Well what would Paul do? Well once they cotton on to what is happening they strongly resist it.

It wasn't immediately obvious to them what was going on. They probably weren't familiar with Lycanian so they wouldn't have understood what was being said in verse 11 probably. But they got the gist. As soon as the auction was brought out as the priest began preparing the sacrifice before them they probably got the gist of what was happening there didn't they?

And verse 14 Paul says stop. They ripped their garments. That was a gesture suggesting that some sort of blasphemy was about to be committed.

They ripped their garments and Paul speaks to them. He urges them to turn away from this idolatry to turn to the living God. Look at what he says there in verse 15.

Why are you doing these things? Why are you doing this? He goes on then to rebuke them for their idolatry. He confronts them. Urges them to repent.

[25 : 59] You see the authentic gospel will always expose idolatry. It will confront idolatry wherever it's to be found because the gospel is the gospel of the only living God and he will not have any rivals.

Look how Paul goes about things here. Firstly he says we are not gods. We also are men.

We are just like you. We are of like nature. We're the normal men. We're creatures. We're not divine beings as you suppose. We're not Zeus. I'm not Hermes.

Don't worship us. We're of like nature with you. So he establishes a common ground. We're not that. We're just like you. We're normal human beings. And the second thing he says is this.

Yes we are like you but we do have better news. We bring good news. What is this good news?

[27 : 04] Well Paul says you are to repent. The good news is that you should turn from these vain things these idols and turn to a living God the one who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and all that is in them.

Turn away from empty religion. Turn away from these things that are not real not living says Paul turn away from them and whatever form idolatry takes it is fundamentally the worship of something that is false and untrue something unreal something that doesn't deserve our worship and it will take different guises others.

The folk here in Lystra they were fairly rustic they were ready to believe in the supernatural they were itching to believe these guys were Zeus and Hermes but nowadays our western culture is so much more sophisticated we don't go for the supernatural anymore we can explain it all away with scientific reasoning the big bang which started everything off still requires a monumental leap of faith doesn't it but we worship in vain even though we're sophisticated even though we're advanced we worship vain things in our culture anything that isn't the worship of the true living God is idolatry and says Paul it must be repented from turn from these vain things turn from your idolatry turn from your worship of false gods turn from whatever it is that you seek your salvation in turn from whatever it is that gives you ultimate meaning in life whether it is crass idolatry as it was in Lystra or whether it is more sophisticated atheism or Islam or Sikhism or Hinduism or materialism or Judaism whatever it is turn from them and worship the living God the true God and he says you're without excuse look at verse 16 in past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways yet he did not leave himself without witness for he did good by giving you rains from season to season fruitful season satisfying your hearts with food and gladness you're without excuse says Paul God's goodness is experienced by everyone who enjoys the benefits of living in this creation the good things that we enjoy in life are an encouragement to believe to believe in a beneficent creator to worship and serve created things well that is the essence of sin to ignore all that he's created and worship created things instead well

Paul says that is wrong that is sinful look at what he says in this book his letter to the Romans he says for what can be known about God it is plain to them because God has shown it to them for his invisible attributes namely his eternal power his divine nature have been clearly perceived ever since the creation of the world in the things that he has made so says Paul they are without excuse for although they knew God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him Paul says a failure to worship the true and living God that is the essence of idolatry it's the essence of sin and Paul says you must repent no matter what it is that you worship you must turn from it you see the authentic gospel it it exposes idolatry that is the confrontation that we are to expect the gospel confronts idolatry whatever it looks like whatever form it takes and yes it even confronts

[31 : 31] Judaism that's the great surprise here at the end of our passage Paul doesn't really make much progress does he with the folk there in Lystra look at verse 18 even with these words he scarcely restrained the people from offering sacrifices to them but just one verse later they're stoning him how come such a turnaround how do these men of Lystra go from wanting to sacrifice to Paul to worship him how do they go from that to wanting to stone him like that and the click of a button well verse 19 the Jews came this is our final point the authentic gospel attracts opponents that is the contempt that we're to expect so this is verses 19 and 20 now this ought I think at first glance come as a real shock to us here are the

Jews and the Gentile pagan idolatrous from Lystra and they're teaming up against Paul the Jews who have as their very first commandment you shall have no other gods before me they team up with these Lystra who worship anything that moves what a strange alliance surely these Jews would back Paul surely they would take side with him against these blatant idolaters but they don't rather having traveled all the way from Antioch and Iconium that's over a hundred miles probably on foot they travel all that way and they persuade the crowds they stir them up to stone Paul why such fierce opposition why such a strange coalition against Paul these Jews siding with these pagan listerans well the root of that coalition is that they are all idolaters none of them worship the true God of Israel they don't worship the one God and so they oppose his messenger and here it's the apostle Paul the gospel that Paul has been preaching is one that challenges any false religion any false belief system you see its claim is an exclusive one the claim of Paul's gospel is an exclusive claim only in the risen Lord Jesus is their hope only in turning to him and repenting is their forgiveness of sin only in Jesus is their salvation that is the gospel message we've seen over and over and over in the book of Acts the gospel demands that we come to one place only for salvation and that claim that claim that there's only one place of salvation that's in Jesus that claim is deeply offensive it it always has been it was here in

Iconium and Lystra so much so that they stoned Paul it's deeply offensive and it is still today to say today that there is only one reality to say there's only one truth one savior one authority that is not a popular message is it it will draw opponents it will attract contempt Jesus claims not to be one of a multitude of gods not to be one of a multitude of options no Jesus claims rule over all of heaven and earth he presents himself not as one possible path to God but as the path to God as God himself

his claims the claim of the gospel that Paul preached cannot be one truth among many it is the truth the only way and it calls all people to turn from the idols that they're running after whatever those idols are turn away from them and turn to the one true living

God submit to his rule submit to his way and for some that message that call that call to turn away from idolatry to turn to the living God for some that is the fragrance of life and they do turn they do repent if you're here tonight and you call yourself a follower of Christ then that message to you was the fragrance of life but for others that message is the stench of death and they will reject the message and they will reject those that bring that message they will treat them with contempt even murderous contempt how quickly the crowd turn here on Paul one minute they want to worship him the next they want to kill him so we need to be warned about that and realistic about that contempt that opposition that we will face as

[37 : 18] Christ witnesses opposition that may and will come from all sorts of places even surprising ones even strange coalitions like the one here between the Jews and the pagans and Lystra that is what Luke is showing us here the authentic gospel it creates divisions that's the pattern we are to expect it exposes idolatry that's the confrontation the gospel issues the authentic gospel also attracts opponents that's the contempt we're to expect that is the reality of gospel witness but isn't it worth it because we are calling people today to turn away from worthless things to turn away from things that can't ultimately deliver from the greatest needs men and women face they're hopeless they can't do anything but rather we hold out life and hope and salvation we hold out good news we're men and women just like them but we hold out better news don't we we hold out the gospel of everlasting life we hold out the truth that in

Christ alone is hope found he alone is the hope for anyone so let's have our expectations in line with reality the reality of gospel mission that we see here in the book of Acts well let's pray before we sing our final hymn our father god we thank you for the great gospel of the lord jesus christ he is the way he is the truth he is the life there is no other way only in him is there hope only in him is their forgiveness of sin only in him is their full and final restoration forever so please help us to have confidence in that gospel message and please help us to have realistic expectations about what proclaiming that message involves and so knowing the reality as you've seen it tonight would you give us courage each one of us we are just men we are just women frail and timid so often please give us courage in the face of opposition of contempt that we might keep proclaiming as Paul does keep proclaiming the gospel to the ends of the earth so please help us to that end for we ask it in Jesus name amen