

Acts 14:1–28

Paul and Barnabas had stepped into new territory for the Gospel. Leaving Cyprus, they entered the region we now call Turkey, moving from the coastal plain of Pamphylia up into the interior of Asia Minor. It is likely that Paul became very ill along the coast, possibly with malaria, which was common in that lowland region. Later, when Paul wrote to the Galatians, he referred to how sick he had been when he was with them. This may help explain why he did not stay in Pamphylia but continued into the higher plateau country of Pisidia, heading to the city of Antioch in the region of Galatia.

In Antioch, Paul and Barnabas went first to the synagogue, preached Jesus Christ, and saw an overwhelming response. The next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of God. This stirred jealousy among many of the Jews, who turned the crowd against them. Eventually, Paul and Barnabas were forced out of Antioch, and as we enter Acts 14, they have traveled about fifty miles to Iconium.

Ministry in Iconium (Acts 14:1–7)

In Iconium, they followed their usual pattern: they went into the synagogue and spoke the word of God. A great multitude of both Jews and Greeks believed (Acts 14:1). However, some of the Jews who refused to believe stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers (Acts 14:2).

Instead of retreating, Paul and Barnabas stayed there “a long time,” speaking boldly in the Lord. The Lord confirmed the message of His grace, granting signs and wonders to be done through their hands (Acts 14:3). The city became divided: some sided with the unbelieving Jews, others with the apostles. Eventually, a violent attempt was made by both Gentiles and Jews, together with their leaders, to mistreat and stone them (Acts 14:4–5). When Paul and Barnabas learned of the plot, they fled to the cities of Lystra and Derbe and the surrounding region, where they continued to preach the Gospel (Acts 14:6–7).

Notice the balance here: they did not run from opposition, but they also did not deliberately seek martyrdom. They stayed long enough to ground the believers in the faith, then moved on when the situation became a coordinated attempt to kill them.

One weakness in much modern evangelism is the lack of follow-up. It is not enough to lead people to a new birth in Christ; they must also be grounded and strengthened in the faith. Paul and Barnabas remained “a long time” in Iconium because they knew the new believers would face pressure, misunderstanding, and hostility. They needed more than a decision; they needed discipleship.

The Lord also bore witness to the truth of the Gospel by signs and wonders. These were not publicity tools to draw crowds before the message; they were confirmations of the message after it was preached. The pattern in Acts is clear: they preached Christ, and then God confirmed the word of His grace with miracles as He saw fit.

The Healing at Lystra and Misplaced Worship (Acts 14:8–18)

In Lystra, there was no synagogue. That means there were likely fewer than ten adult Jewish men in the city—a reminder that Paul was now in an area with very little background in the Scriptures. There he encountered a man who had been lame from birth and had never walked (Acts 14:8).

As Paul preached, this man listened. Paul, looking intently at him, perceived that he had faith to be healed. By the Spirit's discernment, Paul recognized that this man was ready to respond. With a loud voice Paul said, "Stand up straight on your feet!" (Acts 14:10). The man could either scoff at such a command or trust and obey. He chose to believe. He leaped and began to walk.

Many times God gives us what seems like an impossible command: "Step forward." "Trust Me." "Forgive." "Be strong." We are tempted to argue: "Lord, I cannot." But if we will choose to obey His word, He will supply the strength, just as He supplied the ability for this man to stand and walk.

When the crowd saw what had happened, they did not interpret it through the lens of Scripture. Instead, they interpreted it through their myths. They shouted in their local language, "The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!" (Acts 14:11). They called Barnabas Zeus (Jupiter) and Paul Hermes (Mercurius) because Paul was the chief speaker (Acts 14:12).

This reaction was rooted in local legend. According to their stories, Zeus and Hermes had once come to that region in disguise. No one welcomed them except one poor couple. As a reward, the couple was transformed into trees standing at the entrance of a temple, while the rest of the city was judged. So when the people of Lystra saw a miraculous healing, they panicked, determined not to repeat their ancestors' mistake. They rushed to honor Paul and Barnabas as gods.

The priest of Zeus brought oxen and garlands to the city gates, ready to offer sacrifices to them (Acts 14:13). When Paul and Barnabas realized what was happening, they tore their clothes—a sign of horror and grief—and rushed into the crowd, shouting, "Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men with the same nature as you" (Acts 14:15).

They told the crowd that they were there to preach that they should turn from these empty things to the living God, the Creator of heaven, earth, the sea, and all that is in them (Acts 14:15). Paul explained that in past generations God allowed the nations to walk in their own ways, but He did not leave Himself without a witness: He showed His goodness by giving rain, fruitful seasons, and filling hearts with food and gladness (Acts 14:16–17).

Since the people knew nothing of Moses or the prophets, Paul began where they were—with nature. Creation itself bears witness to God. As another Scripture says, "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork. Day unto day utters speech, and night unto night reveals knowledge" (Psalm 19:1–2). The problem is not that creation is silent; the problem is that people often stop short and worship what God made instead of worshipping God Himself.

Even with these explanations, Paul and Barnabas could barely restrain the crowd from offering sacrifice to them (Acts 14:18). At this moment, Paul may have faced one of the greatest dangers of his ministry—not persecution, but misplaced praise. It would have been easy to rationalize: "We will

let them honor us for a while, and then we will redirect it to God.” But Paul understood that receiving worship—even with good intentions—is a deadly trap. God alone deserves glory.

From Worship to Stones (Acts 14:19–20)

The applause of the crowd is fickle. Not long after the people tried to worship Paul and Barnabas, Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, stirred up the crowd, and turned them against Paul. The same citizens who had been ready to offer sacrifices to him now stoned him, dragged him out of the city, and left him for dead (Acts 14:19).

Many believe that Paul actually died at this point. Later in his second letter to the Corinthians, he described an experience from about fourteen years earlier in which he was “caught up to the third heaven” and heard indescribable things (see Second Corinthians 12:2–4). He said he did not know whether he was in the body or out of the body. That experience may very well have occurred here in Lystra.

Whether he actually died or not, the believers gathered around him, and he rose up and went back into the city (Acts 14:20). The next day he and Barnabas left for Derbe. Paul’s courage is striking: the city that had just tried to kill him is the very city he walked back into before leaving.

Strengthening the Disciples and Appointing Elders (Acts 14:21–23)

In Derbe they preached the Gospel and made many disciples. Then, instead of taking the easiest route home, they deliberately retraced their steps: they returned to Lystra, then Iconium, then Antioch in Pisidia—the same places where they had been opposed, threatened, and persecuted (Acts 14:21). They did this to strengthen the disciples, encouraging them to remain in the faith and telling them, “We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22).

They did not promise the new believers an easy life. They did not say, “Now that you follow Jesus, all your problems are over.” Instead, they told them plainly that the road to the kingdom would involve pressure, hardship, and trials—but that it would be worth it.

In every church they visited, they appointed elders, prayed with fasting, and committed these believers to the Lord in whom they had trusted (Acts 14:23). They understood they would not always be there, but the Lord would, and He would care for His people.

Returning Home and Reporting God’s Work (Acts 14:24–28)

From Pisidia they traveled back down to the coastal plain of Pamphylia, preached the word in Perga, then went to Attalia, a coastal port, and from there sailed back to Antioch in Syria (Acts 14:24–26). This was the church that had first sent them out, commending them to the grace of God for the work they had now completed.

When they arrived and gathered the church together, they reported all that God had done with them and how He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles (Acts 14:27). They did not boast about what *they* had accomplished; they rejoiced in what *God* had done. Then they stayed there “a long time” with the disciples (Acts 14:28), resting, teaching, and strengthening the church that had sent them.

Practical Application

1. Ministry is both bold and realistic.
Paul and Barnabas stayed “a long time” where there was opposition in order to ground new believers. Faithfulness means more than starting well; it means sticking around to help people grow.
2. The Gospel must meet people where they are.
In synagogues, Paul started from the Scriptures. In pagan cities like Lystra, he started from creation. We should learn to explain the Gospel in language and categories that people can understand without compromising the message.
3. Beware of receiving what belongs to God alone.
Being used by God is a blessing, but it is also dangerous if we begin to crave credit, praise, or admiration. When people elevate us, we must do what Paul did—tear our “garments,” so to speak, and give all glory to God.
4. God’s deliverance comes in different forms.
In Antioch, Paul was delivered by being driven out of town. In Iconium, God warned him of a plot, and he left. In Lystra, God allowed him to be stoned and then raised him up. We cannot box God into one method. He is faithful, but He is not predictable.
5. Tribulation is part of the Christian journey, not a sign of failure.
“We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). Hardship does not mean God has abandoned us; often it is part of the path He uses to shape us and bear witness to others.

A Challenge for Believers

Are you willing to follow Jesus when it is hard, misunderstood, or costly?

- When you are opposed, do you press in to strengthen others, or do you pull back?
- When people compliment you, do you quietly steal the glory, or do you turn it back to God?
- When God calls you to obey in something that seems impossible, do you argue, or do you step out in faith like the lame man in Lystra?

Ask the Lord to show you where you may have begun to hunger for people’s approval more than His, or where you have been shrinking back from obedience because of fear or pain. Then ask Him to fill you afresh with courage, humility, and perseverance.

An Invitation to Non-Believers

The same Jesus whom Paul preached in Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe is alive today.

He is the Son of God who:

- Came into this world,
- Lived a sinless life,
- Died on the cross and shed His blood for your sins,
- Rose again from the dead, declaring that He is God, Savior, and Lord.

You were created for a relationship with God, but sin has separated you from Him. You cannot fix this by your own efforts, religion, or good works. Only Jesus can forgive your sins and restore you to God.

The door of faith is open.

If you are willing to turn from empty things and turn to the living God, you can respond to Him now. You might pray something like this:

“God, I know I am a sinner and I cannot save myself.

I believe that Jesus died on the cross for my sins and that He rose again.

I turn from my sin and ask You to forgive me.

Jesus, I trust You as my Savior and confess You as my Lord.

Take my life and make it Yours.”

The words themselves are not magic, but if this is truly your heart before God, He hears you. He will forgive your sins, give you new life, and begin a lifelong work in you.