

4. Even while the Antiochan saints were spreading the gospel throughout their region, the Jews were inciting the leading citizens against the apostles and their message. They were determined to put an end to this perceived threat, and the best way to do that was to generate opposition among the powerful and influential Gentiles. The hearts and minds of these Jews may have been dull with respect to the gospel, but when it came to their self-interest, they were shrewd and calculating; they knew how to accomplish their agenda.

Their efforts succeeded, and soon a policy of persecution drove Paul and Barnabas from the area. In a statement reminiscent of Jesus' instruction to His disciples, they "*shook off the dust of their feet*" in protest against their adversaries (13:51; cf. Luke 9:1-5, 10:1-12). The kingdom of God had broken in upon Pisidian Antioch and its environs, but many had refused to embrace it. They, like the unbelieving communities of Israel, would find their fate in the day of judgment more fearful than that of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Paul and Barnabas left Antioch and headed southeast toward Iconium. In marked contrast to his previous account, Luke provided only a brief summary of their time in that city. The thrust of his treatment was to further reinforce the patterns already established; in every place and time, the dynamics of human response to Christ and His gospel remain the same because neither people nor God's purpose and work change.

- a. As at Antioch, the apostles entered the synagogue at Iconium and experienced the same result of their gospel proclamation: Many synagogue worshippers – Greeks as well as Jews – embraced and believed their message, while the unbelieving Jews sought to contradict it and inflame the Gentiles against Paul and Barnabas (cf. 14:1 with 13:42-43 and 14:2 with 13:45ff).
  - b. So also the apostles continued to minister the gospel and instruct those who'd come to faith, even as the breadth and intensity of opposition was increasing around them. Luke wasn't clear how long this dynamic continued at Antioch, but he noted that Paul and Barnabas continued on at Iconium for an extended season (14:3). In both instances, however, the outcome was the same: Over time the city became increasingly divided and eventually tensions boiled over and philosophical and religious opposition turned to violence, forcing Paul and Barnabas to move on once again (14:5-6). God's appointed vessels of wrath continued to fulfill their ordained role as instruments of mercy on behalf of vessels of mercy.
5. From Iconium the apostles traveled to the Galatian region of Lycaonia and two of its prominent cities, Lystra and Derbe. After a summary introduction of their ongoing gospel ministry in that region (14:6-7), Luke turned his attention to a particular situation at Lystra involving the healing of a lame man. He constructed his account so as to tie it closely to the previous episode with Peter (3:1ff); in that way, he was able to spotlight the crucial points of contrast: a different kind of audience and very different results.
    - In both instances the witnesses were stunned and marveled at what they'd just seen. Though the Jerusalem crowd was Jewish and this one at Lystra was Gentile, both groups reacted similarly by ascribing the healing power to the healing agent.

- So Paul and Peter each responded to that uniform reaction by attributing the miracle to the living God; it was a sign by which He attested the “word of grace” they were about to proclaim. But whereas Peter had directed his Jewish audience to the God of their fathers and His fulfillment of His promises in the Scriptures, Paul explained the healing in terms of the *Creator-God* (cf. 3:12ff; 14:14ff).
- The reason for the different approach ought to be obvious: Both groups of observers had witnessed a miracle that pointed them to the deities they believed in; in the case of the temple crowd, it was the God of Israel; in the case of the Gentile gathering at Lystra, it was the gods of the Greeks. Thus Peter’s audience was moved to give glory to Yahweh, while Paul’s was moved to worship him and Barnabas as human manifestations of Zeus and Hermes (14:11-13).

As with Peter, this healing miracle gave Paul the opportunity to preach the gospel to those present, but he couldn’t do so in the manner Peter had. His pagan audience had likely never heard of the God of Israel and knew nothing of His Scriptures and the promises they contain. Whatever they might have known about Judaism, these Gentiles were convinced practitioners of the pagan polytheism of the Graeco-Roman world, and Paul needed to interact with them at the point of their own perspective and conviction.

- a. When Paul and Barnabas saw what their healing work provoked, they rushed into the crowd and confronted their would-be worshippers. Tearing their robes in shocked disbelief, they denounced the crowd’s foolish blasphemy. The people of that area embraced a legend about a past visitation of Zeus and Hermes, and they apparently concluded that this was another such theophany. Every culture has its myths, but myths distract from reality; they were overlooking the true God whose power had made this man well. This God had performed a healing in order to bring credibility to the good news His servants were proclaiming in His name. His intent was that these witnesses to His power would turn from their vain allegiance to human fabrications and acknowledge and worship Him, the only living God.

The people of Lycaonia were polytheists who recognized many gods. Their religious convictions were grounded in Alexander’s conquests and his success in spreading Greek culture and philosophy; Alexander’s goal was Hellenization rather than mere domination. When the Romans later gained control of those lands and peoples, they perpetuated the worship of the Greek pantheon, making them Rome’s gods by assigning to them Roman names. What Paul and Barnabas encountered at Lystra was not unusual, but consistent with the sensibilities of the majority of the population of the Roman Empire (cf. 17:16ff, 19:23ff).

As he would later do at Athens, Paul sought to narrow his audience’s purview from their polytheism to the recognition of one God who is the creator, sustainer and overseer of all things (14:14-15). The ancient Graeco-Roman worldview associated the various components, features and functions of the created order with different deities, and Paul’s gospel began with the insistence that there is but one God by whom and through whom all things exist and operate.

- b. There is only one Creator-God, which implies that everything pertaining to the created order must be understood in relation to Him. The gods of Greece are human inventions – Poseidon doesn't govern the seas any more than Zeus presides over the entire universe. The living God is the Lord over *all*, and this means that human existence, human history and human purpose are in His hands.

If these things are true, and if this God is the Savior of all mankind, *it follows that His gospel of salvation can only be understood in terms of a salvation history.* That is, if this one God is truly God, and if He created and rules over the whole human race with a saving intention, He must be ordering and directing the world's time-space features and progress toward the accomplishment of that goal; human history must be perceived and understood as salvation history.

Paul recognized the importance of this truth and so made it a central feature of his gospel proclamation. To the Jews and proselytes, he did so by rehearsing with them the biblical storyline. The history of God's salvation is recounted in the Jewish Scriptures, and the synagogue community was familiar with and believed those writings. But such a treatment was inappropriate for pagan Gentiles who had no connection with either the Scriptures or the history they recount. Explaining to them the salvation history, its fulfillment in Jesus and its meaning for them required him to begin with the concept of one sovereign Creator-God.

- c. This is precisely how Paul approached the people of Lystra with his gospel: Proclaiming the existence of only one God, he rebuked their idolatrous folly. This living God created the earth and everything in it, including *them*. He isn't the God of the Jews, but of all men. He created man by Himself and for Himself, but His purposes for mankind – including these citizens of Lystra – were being accomplished according to a precise, ordered and wisely implemented plan.

In that regard, God had "*permitted all the nations to go their own ways*" in the preceding generations, confining His self-disclosure and direct activity to the patriarchs and covenant household. This was an important truth for Paul to convey, for it answered a reasonable objection on the part of his hearers: If Paul's claims concerning this God are indeed true, how is it that they never heard of Him before that day? If He is the God of all men – the only true God who is the Savior of all mankind – why did He not make Himself known to them before?

Whether or not this objection had occurred to Paul's audience, it is certainly valid and deserves to be addressed. *And the answer to it is the salvation history:* This God hadn't been ignoring them or hiding from them; neither was His concern for them a recent development. He is unchanging in His person and purpose, but He eternally determined to accomplish that purpose in an orderly, staged manner. Now, in the fullness of the times, He has realized His saving intention in the promised Messiah. But also according to promise, that good news came first to the children of the patriarchs – not simply for the sake of their salvation, but in order that they should fulfill their calling by bringing His salvation to the nations.

Paul and Barnabas' presence in Lystra attested the salvation history set forth in the Scriptures: The living God had indeed brought redemption and restoration to the sons of Israel, and now the "natural branches" – as prophesied and directed by God – were laboring to gather in and engraft the "wild branches" of the Gentile peoples. The salvation history recorded in the Scripture disclosed Israel's role in mediating the knowledge of the one true God to all the earth; that work was taking place there in Lystra that very day, and Paul wanted his hearers to recognize it. *Most importantly, he wanted them to understand the implication of that fulfillment, namely their own place in God's purposes.*

- d. In previous generations God had let the nations go their own way, living in the darkness of alienation, "*excluded from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.*" According to His own covenant determination, God had made Abraham His point of connection with the human race, which meant that men came to know Him by joining themselves to Israel as the Abrahamic covenant household. At the same time, it wasn't as if God had left Himself without any witness outside Israel. Paul was proclaiming Him the Creator of all things, which implies that every resource and good thing is *His* endowment. And coming from His hand, all natural provision testifies of Him and His goodness to the sons of men (14:17).
- e. On the one hand, Paul's pronouncements left the people of Lystra unable to accuse God of caprice or unconcern; on the other, they left them without any claim of ignorance. The gospel of God's salvation in Christ may not have come to them before that day, but that didn't mean they had no previous knowledge of Him. His ceaseless, open-handed provision testified of His abiding concern and faithfulness to His purposes. And that witness, in turn, left them without excuse for their idolatry and unbelief. *But if God's common grace stripped them of excuse, how much more did the good news of forgiveness and life He'd now brought to them through His apostles?*

Luke's account only summarizes Paul's message and so doesn't explicitly draw all of these conclusions. It does, however, affirm that Paul intended his hearers to "connect the dots" and realize their responsibility of repentance and faith in light of the things he'd set before them (ref. 14:15). That this was his goal is further evident from his later, parallel sermon to the Athenians (ref. 17:22-31).

Paul was fully convinced that the gospel is the power of God for salvation, and so determined to proclaim no other message, regardless of the people, culture or circumstance in which he found himself. And yet, the preaching of the gospel doesn't always meet with the same results. Though it would be a mistake to conclude that the gospel bore no fruit at Lystra (ref. 14:21-22), Luke's account highlights the tone-deafness of the general populace – their inability to hear Paul's message over the roar of their entrenched and enthusiastic idolatry. So far from leading the throng of worshippers to faith in Christ, it was all Paul and Barnabas could do to overcome the momentum of the situation and keep them back from their intention to offer sacrifices to them (14:18).