

MONUMENTAL TRUTHS IN THE BIBLE

Acts 14: 1-23 – Pastor Richard P. Carlson

Richard Baxter, (1615-1691) a leading English Puritan of his day, said, “I preach as a dying man to dying men.” John Bunyan, author of the best selling “Pilgrim’s Progress,” said of his preaching, “I preach what I do feel, what I smartingly do feel.” As I come to this message today on the eve of our Monumental Vacation Bible School, I am calling all of us to pray, and I am calling all 65 VBS workers to teach and proclaim to all the children attending this week, what you deeply feel and know to be the greatest story ever told, of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. When I think upon the word monumental, I found Webster’s Dictionary defines the word as “larger than life size, conspicuously great, and historically prominent.” The Oxford Dictionary speaks of monumental as “being great in importance, extent, or size.” Synonyms would be enormous, gigantic, immense, stupendous, tremendous, colossal, gargantuan, exceptional, majestic, transcendent, exalted, immortal, epoch making, that which is enduring, lasting, and abiding. When I think of the truth of the Bible and the truth of God, monumental is one word that tries to explain God and His Word, but no word totally fits all that there is in God and in the truth of His Word. God and His Word eclipses all the staggering synonyms. Nevertheless, this familiar story of Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey, introduces three monumental truths that should shake our world so that we never forget the Majesty of our Creator and the miracles of our Redeemer. What are these three monumental truths about our Creator and Redeemer?

ALL GLORY FOR MIRACLES, CONVERSIONS, AND HEALINGS MUST GO TO GOD AND GOD ALONE. (I.) Acts 14: 8-15.

It is important for us all to know the history and background of what happened in Lystra. The people in Lystra had a strong belief in tradition and local folklore. Syncretism was their lifestyle, and their religious sickness of trying to blend the worship of more than one god. It never troubled the Greeks and Romans in Paul’s day to worship many gods, because the local people had a pantheon of hundreds of gods, and there was always room for one or two more gods. According to their tradition, the two gods, Zeus, and Hermes, according to legend, came down to earth disguised as mortal men. Zeus was the ruler of the sky and Jupiter was the same god as named by the Romans. Hermes was the Greek name and Mercury was the Roman name for the spokesman of the gods, ruling over wealth, good fortune, commerce, fertility, and thievery. When Zeus and Hermes came to earth, in their legend, the pagan people of Lystra did not accept them, except for one couple, Philemon and his wife, Baucis. This made these gods mad, so they sent a flood of judgment to all the people except this old couple, and the gods made them the guardians of a spectacular temple outside Lystra. Then Zeus turned them into two magnificent trees outside the temple when they died. As you know, Greek and Roman mythology is just that—a myth, and not a word of it is true. Yet, the people of Lystra were always looking for two more gods coming to Lystra again, and this time, they were not going to make a mistake, but they would welcome them and worship them. So that’s the background to this monumental story with three monumental truths—the first being that no one can steal God’s glory.

Now be certain, Paul and Barnabas were prepared for almost everything. They had been run out of town in nearby Iconium. They had survived hatred, hostility, persecution, and close escapes with death. But they were shaken in their sandals when the city decided to start worshipping them after Paul called for a believing crippled man to stand up on his feet. God forbid that any of us would allow others to give us glory for any miracle, healing, or conversion that happens when we preach, teach, or witness the Gospel story. It is a wonderful thing when God does miracles, heals, or uses us as His instrument to see a person come to faith in Jesus, to come to know Jesus as Savior and Lord. Isaiah the prophet, in 698 BC, said in Isaiah 52: 7, “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.” This giving of thanks or credit to those whom God used to lead us to Christ was a pattern of Paul. Paul exhorted the Thessalonians in I Thess. 5: 12, 13, “We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love, because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.” Yet, no matter whom we lead to faith in Jesus, none of us as God’s instruments dare ever take credit or glory for any person’s salvation. The delicate balance between showing honor and respect to a servant of the Lord and giving glory to any man or woman of God as the one who saved you—that is a big leap that God will not stand for. God will not allow anyone to take the ultimate glory for the work He does. Isaiah 42: 8 is perfectly clear. God says, “I am the Lord; that is My name. My glory I give to no other; nor my praise to carved images.”

Would any of us think or desire to rob God of His glory? Paul and Barnabas were not versed in the language of Lycaonian, the native Lystra tongue. What were the people saying after the crippled man was healed? They said, v. 11, “The gods have come down to us in human form.” But quickly their eyes were opened to the response of the people of Lystra. They were bringing oxen to slaughter in sacrifice to Paul and Barnabas, calling Barnabas Zeus, and the speaker, Paul, Hermes. Notice in v. 14, that this missionary team on their first journey were up in arms, tearing their garments and pleading with the crowd to stop. They could not, and we must not ever take credit or glory for what God alone accomplishes. This temptation in ministry has ruined many servants of God, who desire like the citizens of Babel, Genesis 11: 4, to make a name for themselves. In Moldova, in 1990, after praying for a demon possessed young lady, whom God healed, people got in line to be blessed, and it revolted me. I can heal no one. I can save no one. I told Cristi Tepesh, “No, we cannot do this! If you want to hear the Gospel of Jesus, come over against this wall and we will preach the Gospel to you.” That’s what we did, and eleven men prayed to receive Jesus. We must never see ourselves getting the glory and fail to call it to a halt, and to give all glory to Jesus alone.

So how do we show others only God must receive glory? (1) **We must show others who we are—just humans, who alone have no power to heal, do miracles, or save one soul.** Notice the words of Paul and Barnabas in Acts 14: 15, “Men, why are you doing these things? 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. (2) **We must tell others only God can do the impossible.** Notice in Acts 14: 8 that this crippled man was crippled from birth, and he had never walked. Luke, the beloved physician is confirming this account. Our world is filled with broken people needing healing. After the rich young ruler turned Jesus down and walked away, Jesus said in Matthew 19: 23-24, “Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich man enter the kingdom of heaven. Again, I tell you; it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” The disciples were greatly astonished and said, “Who then can be saved?” Jesus’ answer in Mt. 19: 26 as He looked at them should never be forgotten, “With man this is impossible, but with God, all things are possible.” No man can save any soul. Salvation is from God alone. Only He does the impossible.

Honor this in VBS, all of you. When God is calling, He may use you to be His instrument and that is monumental, but only God can save a lost soul, no matter how young or old they are. It is so tempting to manipulate children to pray a prayer, but we must remember and know that no one enters God’s kingdom by our manipulation. That robs or tries to rob God of His glory. We must never steal or try to steal God’s glory. When I was 14 years old, at Twin Rocks Bible Camp, the Camp speaker was calling for teenagers to be saved. A dear and sincere woman of God, a single missionary woman, slipped up to my side, and told me, “If you go forward to the altar, others will go forward.” Oh, the pressure, but my spirit revolted. I can’t make others be saved. I told her, “No, I can’t do that!”

(3) **We must remind each other that miracles are God’s work reflecting His glory and majesty, and remembering that allows us to break out in joy when God does miracles.** Isaiah 35: 1-10, tells us God alone strengthens weak hands, makes firm feeble knees, gives courage to anxious hearts, only God alone saves, opens the eyes of the blind, unstops the ears of the deaf, makes the lame, like this man healed in Acts 14 leap like a deer, and makes the mute tongue sing for joy. Every time you sense pressure on you to heal or save a person, remember who you are—just a human like me. Our job like Paul is to speak the Word. Romans 10: 17 tells us, “Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God. Faith only is given to people as God’s gift after they hear the Word of God. Notice in Acts 14: 9-10, that Paul, “seeing that he had faith to be made well, said in a loud voice, “Stand upright on your feet.” Only by faith could this lame man walk. He couldn’t pay for his healing or work it off or earn a miracle. Seeing faith in the man inspired Paul’s boldness. This was not a private miracle behind closed doors. And what did this man do. He sprang up and began walking. The desire to worship God was instant—but neither Paul nor Barnabas were God—they could not, they would not, they should not, and they did not allow themselves to steal God’s glory. It is a monumental truth that we must never agree to steal God’s glory. Secondly,

ALL MESSENGERS OF TRUTH MUST REJECT BEING IDOLIZED AND ACCEPT HAVING GOD’S TRUTH POISONLY IGNORED. (II.) Acts 14: 16-18, 14: 1-2. I warn us all. Never be caught by surprise by the human tendency to rob or try to rob God of His glory. When you do, you are agreeing to become someone’s idol. Guard against this pitfall. When you hear people say as

much as, “The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men,” shudder, stop whoever is mistaking who you are, whoever is idolizing you. Their thanksgiving to God for God using you is great, but when they begin to pedestalize you, and begin to speak words that sound like worship, it must be stopped. Such idolizing of us is misdirected vision, misdirected glory, and misdirected sacrifice. We must quickly redirect misplaced praise that credits us with saving or healing someone—pointing others quickly back to the living God, whom we are not. Notice v. 15. Also, let’s be honest about misdirected responses to our part in God using us. People who would one day worship us, will one day say we are worthless. We will go from hero to zero instantly. If you are being idolized or pedestalized, jump down quickly. When people pedestalize you and say you are the best in the west, and the greatest since Cream of Wheat, watch out—those who idolize us, will privately, behind our back, demonize us, and sometimes they will do that publicly. Those who would almost worship us as a god, will soon be willing to stone us as a devil. Such responses take crowds quickly from throning to stoning. Call any and all who would begin to idolize you, v. 15, “to turn from these vain things to the living God.” But know, there is a flip side to having folk wish to idolize us, and that is, to watch them ignore the truth & the divine power of the Word that you are speaking. This is a monumental truth that is repeated in history over and over for believers.

Notice in verse 18, “Even with these words, Paul and Barnabas scarcely restrained the people from offering sacrifice to them.” These Lycaonian people of Lystra were sticking to their guns—despite the protests of Paul and Barnabas. People often believe what they want to believe. People who idolize us in public, may ignore what we are preaching and the power of God’s truth. In what people wish to call Christian America, millions want to keep that label for our country and to have Jesus on a public pedestal, but yet treat Jesus as just another idol. America celebrates the birth, the death, the burial, and the resurrection of Jesus, but it is not worship for millions, but it’s a mythical admiration making Jesus an American legend like Zeus and Hermes were the legends of Lystra in Asia Minor. The former Chaplain of the United States Senate, from 1995-2003, Pastor John Lloyd Ogilvie said of America, “We deal with Jesus to keep Him from dealing with us. It is a patronizing kind of dishonesty which honors Jesus as our cultural and national hero at Christmas and Easter, but denies Him Lordship in our lives.” Remember, it is totally hypocritical to ignore the truth of the messengers of truth we claim to honor and respect. You heard Pastor Larry read to you from Acts 14: 1-7 about the unbelieving Jews who stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers, so they would be ignored, and they then attempted to stone them. Thirdly,

ALL GOD’S MESSENGERS MUST FOLLOW PAUL’S EXAMPLE OF REMAINING FAITHFUL UNDER FIRE UNTIL GOD SAYS, “MOVE.”

(III.) Acts 14: 3-7 and Acts 14: 19-23. We are living today in America on the precipice of active physical persecution for our stand for Christ. It doesn’t take a prophet to see what is on the horizon in America. The enemy of Christ has stepped up his attacks, knowing that wars are not only fought with weapons but with words. The serpent of old in the Garden of Eden didn’t use a sword, but words, words, words—Genesis 3: 1, “Did God actually say, “You shall not eat of any tree

in the garden.”? Satan is still at it today, and he was at it first in Iconium with Paul and Barnabas—poisoning minds against them. These unbelieving Jews in Acts 14: 2, understood the power of words, messaging, and evil propaganda. Words were their weapons of choice. That’s what the unbelieving Jews did in Jerusalem with Jesus, which resulted in His crucifixion for us, as God had it planned. Now these unbelieving Jews turned on Paul and Barnabas with slanderous, malicious, and fighting words. We are in the same fight today, incited by unbelievers and some professing believers who have chosen to fight God’s messengers with a war of words. This technique is to shift the narrative, to sway the truth, and to illicit fear. So, what happened first in Iconium? When the opposition could not win the argument by being truthful, they sought to poison the minds of Paul’s hearers, and to divide the followers of the Gospel of Jesus. Their tactic now was to demonize the missionary team of Paul and Barnabas. Then when demonizing Paul and Barnabas was ineffective, all the enemy had left was a physical attack. Finally, when Paul and Barnabas were tipped off, they fled to Lystra and Derbe.

What was this missionary team willing to do in the face of rabid opposition? Listen to Acts 14: 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.” Think of it. This is a monumental truth. Is it hard where you are right now to live for Jesus, in your home, at work, or at church? Remain where God placed you. Stay in your place, your home, your job, your church. Speak boldly. Witness to God’s grace even before your opposition. Then what will God do. God will find a way to stamp His approval on you, and it will be irrefutable. Here, Paul and Barnabas were affirmed by God with signs and wonders, done by their hands. Why does God do this? So, a few more people will believe in Jesus. This missionary team stayed in Iconium, speaking boldly, spreading the message of God’s grace even while they were being demonized. When God said, “Move,” just in time to miss being stoned, Acts 14: 5-7, they fled to Lystra and Derbe.

What did they do there? Acts 14: 7 says they “continued to preach the Gospel.” This plan of Paul and Barnabas is a plan our pastoral staff are following. We are not always affirmed, loved, supported, and appreciated. Over the past 55+years of pastoral ministry, not everyone speaks well of me. God’s plan for us to remain is biblical. On the same Sunday we hear God’s people say, “God really spoke to me through that message,” others may say, “When will you stop being negative?” I remind you that if you are ready to stone today the man who was your hero yesterday or last week, be careful. Are you different from the crowd who waved palm branches on Palm Sunday, but five days later cried, “Crucify Him!”? Perhaps you have been placed on a pedestal. Get off. Perhaps you have been ignored. Don’t quit your mission. When the Lystra crowd were talked out of worshipping Paul, with the help of unbelieving Jews in Antioch of Pisidia, and from Iconium, they dragged Paul outside the city of Lystra, stoned him and left him for dead. What did Paul do? God revived him. He went back into Lystra, then soon on to Derbe. Don’t quit being faithful, no matter how you are treated. Be faithful to your mission, whether you are respected or ignored. It’s monumental! There are still Timothy’s, Lois’s, and Eunice’s in Lystra waiting to be saved. God keep us faithful! Amen!