

PAUL AND BARNABAS IN GALATIA:
DEALING WITH OPPOSITION TO THE GOSPEL
ACTS 14

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

This past Monday was set aside to honor work and those who are engaged in it. Certainly the Bible recognizes the value of work and those who work diligently. Our country is blessed to have technological advancements that make labor less physically demanding for many of us than it once was. We also have legal protections that make the workplace generally a safer place. But at times it can be more complicated, especially for Christians.

My brother Randy had a career as a computer programmer and information technologist. He lives just outside of Green Bay. He was told years ago that he was going to be appointed as a manager in his department. The formal announcement was to be made at 9 AM on a Monday. Randy showed up at that time to receive his promotion. But instead his boss and his boss's boss took him into a room and asked him, "What is your religious view of the role of working mothers?"

Randy didn't know what they were looking for and what that had to do with his promotion. He is a committed Christian and was not hesitant to take advantage of opportunities to share the gospel in the workplace. As it turned out, his Christian views had not been received well by at least some of the five women over whom he was scheduled to become manager. About six months earlier the ringleader of these women had asked Randy what he thought about working mothers. Randy barely remembered the interaction, but he apparently said something to the effect that ideally it was good if moms could stay at home with their younger children. That was the wrong answer in her book.

Then the week before the formal announcement of his promotion Randy had shown up with two of his children for a ceremony in which the governor of Wisconsin signed a bill into law requiring a 24 hour waiting period for mothers desiring to receive an abortion. A photographer happened to take a picture of Randy and his boys, and the picture happened to go on the front page of the local paper the next day.

So this one woman got her coworkers together and just before the Monday morning meeting with the expected promotion announcement, they met with his boss and told him that Randy had a biased view of women and that they could not imagine working for him as their manager. Randy's boss and his boss's boss decided that the promotion would have to be withdrawn.

How should he have responded to that? What do you suppose that you would have done? Randy apologized to the women for having offended them. He also decided to accept a job offer from another company.

There are many forms that opposition to the gospel takes in our culture. We are fortunate to live in a country where there are constitutional protections that guarantee our right to worship and our right to express our religious ideas. But there are situations in which we Bible-believing Christians are mistreated in the world around us because of our Christian convictions.

Jewish columnist Michael Horowitz called evangelicals the “**new Jews of the 21st century.**” He wrote, “**Every statement used to distance oneself from Jews is now being said about Christians. It’s utterly striking how verbatim the same language is used in newsrooms, at fancy dinner parties, in faculty clubs.**” (*Christianity Today*, 4/2/2001) The Christian group Open Doors said just before the recent uptick in anti-Semitism that 80% of all acts of religious discrimination around the world were directed against Christians. (Dennison Forum, 11/3/2017)

The opposition that the Apostle Paul and his companions faced in the first century took many forms. In the passage before us today we are going to look at a sample of the opposition that he received. The way that he dealt with it will hopefully be instructive to us in the encounters that we have with those who give us grief because of our Christian convictions.

I.

Let’s turn to our passage then and consider the first seven verses of #13 (PROJECTOR ON--- ICONIUM: WHEN TO STAY AND WHEN TO GO) and the subject of ICONIUM: WHEN TO STAY AND WHEN TO GO. In the last couple of studies in the Book of Acts we have looked at the beginning of the first missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas. We saw that they were sent out by the church in Antioch, which was composed of Jews and Gentiles. (FIRST MISSIONARY JOURNEY) They went first to the island of Cyprus, which was the home originally of Barnabas. During their visit at the provincial capital of Paphos the Roman governor was converted to Christ. Paul also appeared to become the leader of the group. The missionary pair then crossed over to Perga and then traveled up to Pisidian Antioch.

At this Antioch they preached in the synagogue. Many Jews and Gentiles responded to the message. Over time opposition also grew, and the missionaries were forced out of the area. Paul and Barnabas went next to Iconium. (GALATIA 2) Most of the cities where they preached on this missionary journey were part of the Roman province of Galatia in what we know today as Turkey. Both Iconium and Pisidian Antioch were part of the same administrative district within Galatia. But they were 80 miles apart, and Pisidian Antioch was a Roman colony, whereas Iconium had a Greek population that had a different form of government. So although the missionaries were kicked out of Antioch by the Roman authorities, they were initially accepted in the Greek town of Iconium.

Iconium had a favorable climate. It was surrounded by fertile fields, It had an abundant water supply. So it was a prosperous town. Today it is the city of Konya with a population of a million and half in the main city. (PROJECTOR OFF)

There were Jews in Iconium, and Paul and Barnabas followed their previous pattern of first preaching in the synagogue. Verse 1 tells us that they had a great response. Multitudes of Jews and Gentiles believed. Verse 2, however, adds, **“But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers.”**

So Paul and Barnabas again encountered opposition. The gospel is not a sweet little story which, when told, always results in hearers loving each other. Jesus is recorded (MATTHEW 10:34) as warning His disciples in Matthew #10, **“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. (MATTHEW 10:35) For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.”**

A number of years ago a federal court in California ruled that a cross in a cemetery had to be removed. (PROJECTOR OFF) US District Judge Edward Price said that it created **“a political division along religious lines.”** The cross does indeed produce division. In our politically correct society everything is often tolerated except that which claims to be absolute truth. When one makes a claim to possess absolute moral or spiritual truth, one can expect opposition.

In the first century Gentile world that was also the case. Except for the Jews, who did worship one God, the people of Asia Minor worshiped many gods. If Paul and Barnabas had come along and had simply suggested that people add another god to their pantheon of gods, there probably would not have been any trouble. But they called all of their gods false and said that there was only one God whose unique Son was Jesus Christ.

So the proclamation of the gospel encountered opposition. But notice how v. 3 begins: **“So they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord...”** The impression that we might get is that because there was opposition there, the missionaries stayed for a considerable time. Certainly the opposition did not scare them off. Perhaps what the author Luke was indicating was that the Lord was truly at work in this town. There were lots of positive spiritual results, and naturally there was opposition. So they kept at it for weeks and perhaps several months.

Just as the first preaching of the gospel in Jerusalem and in Samaria was accompanied by miracles, so also signs and wonders happened here. But miracles were not enough to convince the skeptics. So, v. 4 tells us, the city was divided. Eventually a plot was hatched to kill Paul and Barnabas. When they became aware of it, they decided that it was time to leave.

Opposition to the gospel alone was not enough to get these guys to leave. It should not shake us either. We ought to expect opposition to the gospel and to the Christian values for which we stand. But Paul and Barnabas did retreat when their lives were threatened. Also their plan was always to have an itinerant ministry. So they would have left Iconium anyway after a time.

The basic thought that we can take away from this is that we should expect division and opposition to result when we promote the gospel and the cause of Christ. If we are doing our job for Jesus, we ought to take flack from time to time. Opposition is often a sign that God is at work. On the other hand we don't need to be looking for chances to be a martyr. There are situations where retreat or change is appropriate. Our text does not give us a complete explanation of what those situations might be. But certainly being threatened with the prospect of death is a situation where leaving might be appropriate.

II.

In vv. 8-20 (PROJECTOR ON--- LYSTRA: THE TEMPTATION TO COMPROMISE...) we come to the subject of LYSTRA: THE TEMPTATION TO COMPROMISE THE MESSAGE. Lystra was only about 20 miles south of Iconium. We might wonder how Paul and Barnabas (LYSTRA MAP) could get away with preaching in a town so close to the place from which they had last been expelled without having more opposition sooner. There are a couple of reasons. For one thing, Lystra was in a different administrative district within Galatia than was Iconium. (LYSTRA RUINS) Then also Iconium was controlled pretty much by Greeks whereas Lystra was a Roman colony controlled by Italians. The ruins of ancient Lystra were discovered back in 1885.

Roman colonies were located throughout the Roman Empire. They were towns that were set up on the model of the Roman government, and they were colonized by Roman army veterans. (PROJECTOR OFF) After a soldier served in the Roman army for twenty years he could retire with certain benefits. Added benefits were given to soldiers who would settle in these areas outside of Italy. By having these Roman colonies throughout the empire the Roman government could help maintain its power and influence throughout its vast territory.

So Lystra was controlled by Roman army veterans and their descendants. But there were also poor, uneducated residents who had deeper roots in the area. The native people of Lystra and their language were called Lycaonian. Paul and Barnabas used Greek in their missionary travels. Most people in this part of the Roman Empire had some understanding of Greek. The lack of mention of a synagogue or Jewish residents may mean that there were not many Jews who lived in the area.

With no synagogue around to use as a place to introduce the gospel, the missionaries had to use other means. The Lord ultimately used miraculous means to grab the attention of the people. Perhaps it was while they were doing sidewalk preaching that they encountered a lame man. Notice that in v. 8 there are three separate references to this man's physical inability. Luke says that this guy could not use his feet and was

“crippled from birth and had never walked.” The author wants us to get the picture that what happened was truly a miracle.

According to vv. 9 & 10, **“He listened to Paul speaking. And Paul, looking intently at him and seeing that he had faith to be made well, 10 said in a loud voice, ‘Stand upright on your feet.’ And he sprang up and began walking.”** This is the first miracle in Acts performed at the hands of Paul.

Physical healing happens in a variety of ways in the Bible. Sometimes faith seems to be a necessary precondition. Other times, as with the healing of the lame man in the temple by Peter, it was not. Despite the attempts of many to bottle it or formulate it, the means to physical healing is tough to define. I suspect that the Lord intended this diversity of ways in which healing happened to have us focus on the sovereignty of God in physical healing.

In telling the details of this story Luke is also accomplishing another purpose. In this second part of the Book of Acts we are going to encounter several incidents that parallel events that happened in the life of Peter. This healing by Paul has striking similarities with the healing of the lame man by Peter in the temple in Jerusalem. In both cases there was a man lame from birth, a miraculous healing, and an opportunity that followed to preach the gospel. What Luke is doing is showing that Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, is just as much an apostle of Christ as was Peter, and Paul’s ministry to the Gentiles, therefore, was just as valid as the ministry of Peter. Thus Jewish Christians who sought to promote the view that Gentiles had to become Jews to be fully accepted by God would be discredited by Luke’s history book of the church.

Having witnessed this miracle, the Lycaonian inhabitants of Lystra began crying out that their gods had become men. They began calling Barnabas “Zeus,” who was the chief of the Greek gods. (PROJECTOR ON--- ZEUS STATUE) {The statue of Zeus at Olympia was regarded as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It was huge. It was destroyed in the fifth century AD. }

Hermes in Greek mythology (HERMES) was the chief messenger and spokesman of the gods. The people called Paul “Hermes.” The chief priest of the Zeus temple also began bringing offerings for a sacrifice. Because they were all speaking in the Lycaonian language, Paul and Barnabas did not understand at first what was going on.

There is a helpful story that the Roman poet Ovid describes which enables us to better understand what was going on here. According to this story Zeus and Hermes once came to this part of Asia Minor disguised as men. They looked for a place to stay, but no one would take them in. After being rejected one thousand times, they finally came to the primitive dwelling place of a poor, old couple named Philimon and Baucis. (REMBRANDT PAINTING) This scene is pictured in a famous painting by Rembrandt. The older couple took the two gods into their home. Supposedly Zeus and Hermes destroyed everyone and everything else in the area. But they transformed the hovel into a beautiful temple and made Philimon and Baucis its priest and priestess.

The people of Lystra apparently had this legend as part of their religious history, and the miracle convinced them that Zeus and Hermes had returned. If they did not want to have big trouble, they had to be nice to these two gods. As to why Barnabas was compared to Zeus and Paul to Hermes, Paul was the bigger talker of the two. Also there is an inscription that archaeologists have discovered in a nearby town that has a picture of the two gods together. Zeus is definitely the taller god. Hermes is shorter. You might remember that the name "Paul" means "little." Probably in physical stature Barnabas was taller than Paul. So the two missionaries fit the local understanding of the Greek gods. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The people of Lystra saw the miracle. It provoked a strong response from them. But they fit what they saw into their own categories and came to a wrong conclusion. It could have been tempting to Paul and Barnabas to appeal to their false conclusions for a while. They could have said, "Look, you guys think that we are gods. So listen to what we have to say. We want to tell you about another god whose name is Jesus." But they refused to compromise their message.

Instead Paul and Barnabas tore their robes and explained that they were human beings just like them. They also went on to proclaim the good news. Beginning in v. 15 they declared, **"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, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. 16 In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. 17 Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness."**

Notice that the style of preaching is much different from what we have previously seen. There is no appeal to the Old Testament or to Jewish history. The reason is that Paul and Barnabas are dealing with people who know nothing about the Bible. So they adapt the message to their audience. That is always important for any preacher or speaker to do. They did not change the gospel message itself. But they used a different way of getting to it. That is not compromise. Compromise would have been to accept the notion of the Lystrans that Paul and Barnabas were incarnations of their gods.

So Paul and Barnabas, whichever one was speaking, based their message on an appeal to natural revelation. There are certain things that all people can know about God by simply observing the creation. The existence of the creation implies the existence of a Creator. They were using an early version of what is often called today the argument from intelligent design.

Paul and Barnabas argued that the presence of the creation not only gave evidence of a Creator but also that the presence of rain and land and food suggests that there is some benevolence about this Creator. There were, no doubt, other things that were said

which Luke did not record. But still they had difficulty in restraining the crowd from worshipping them.

Then v. 19 tells us, **“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.”** How fickle people can be! One moment these people of Lystra are setting out to worship Paul and Barnabas as gods. The next moment they are trying to kill Paul.

Some months later the Apostle Paul wrote the Epistle to the Galatians to the new Christians of the entire region. (PROJECTOR ON--- GALATIANS 1:6) This is what he said to them: **“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel...”** The young Christians there were trying to grow in their Christian lives by focusing upon works rather than upon grace. In doing that they were turning from the message of grace that he had taught them. Perhaps the Galatians as a whole tended not to be stable people.

In his Second Letter to the Corinthians Paul may have had this difficult experience in Lystra in mind (2 CORINTHIANS 12:2) when he wrote in #12 vv. 2-4: **“I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven--- whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. (2 CORINTHIANS 12:3-4) And I know that this man was caught up into paradise--- whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows--- and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter.”** Today we might describe this as a near death experience. Fortunately Paul survived. In fact he got up and went back into the city. He was a tough guy. He was unwilling to compromise the mission or the message.

A couple of decades later some towns in Asia Minor, especially the Roman colonies, instituted a loyalty oath whereby the residents were required to go to the temple once a year to offer a pinch of incense to the Roman emperor, who was regarded as a god. (PROJECTOR OFF) For most of the pagans it was no big deal to add another god to their list. But for Christians there was only one God who deserved worship. The emperor was not a god. It was not right to offer him a pinch of incense. So some Christians were killed because of their refusal to compromise the message of the gospel.

The temptation that we Christians always face in presenting the message of the gospel to a sometimes hostile world is to tone down the message, to make it more acceptable. People are happy to hear things about a loving God, about a God who is accepting and forgiving. They will listen to Christians who talk about a Jesus who helped the poor, who performed miracles, and who went about doing good. But they may not so much like to hear that they are sinners headed for a place called hell, that there are moral and spiritual absolutes whereby a sovereign God holds us accountable for our behavior, that there is a real devil, and the only way that one gets to heaven is by faith in Jesus who died in our place.

So the temptation we face is to tone down certain aspects of the gospel, to leave out what the Bible has to say about hell and the devil, and to soften some of the harsh things that the Bible says about sin. But we need to give the whole picture. Jesus in fact said considerably more about hell than He did about heaven, at least as we have recorded in the Gospels. We can tailor the message to the audience, but we can't compromise the message. We have to give unbelievers the whole picture, and we have to be faithful to God's revelation.

III.

Finally, in vv. 21-28 we come to ANTIOCH: THE NEED FOR A SUPPORT BASE. (PROJECTOR ON--- ANTIOCH: THE NEED FOR A SUPPORT BASE) After being forced out of Lystra the missionaries went over to Derbe. Luke indicates that many came to faith in Jesus in that community. (FIRST MISSIONARY JOURNEY 02) Then Paul and Barnabas retraced their steps to pass through the cities that they had visited earlier.

Given the going away parties that they had originally received in these communities it seems like it was a bold and risky venture to return to these places. But there is no mention of any further trouble. It may well be that they confined their ministry to the Christians. Verse 22 says that they strengthened and encouraged the disciples in these places. All of these believers were new Christians, and the missionaries regarded it as important that they give them further encouragement. Notice what they said to these young disciples: "If you exercise enough faith, you can look forward to a happy, wealthy, and healthy life." Nope. **"...through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God."**

The missionaries returned through Pisidian Antioch to Perga. This time they did some preaching in Perga. What results they had are not described. Then they went to the seaport of Attalia. From there they sailed back to Antioch. This first missionary journey probably took about a year.

In their home church in Antioch Paul and Barnabas gave a full report of their activities. Verse 28 closes the chapter with the note that **"they remained no little time with the disciples."** (PROJECTOR OFF)

So there were two sets of Christians who received support in this last part of the passage. The new Christians in the towns of Galatia received support from the missionaries. Because Paul and Barnabas were aware of the hostile climate in which these churches were getting established, they believed that the risk involved in going back to the places where they had almost been killed was worth it for the sake of the support that these new believers needed. Spiritual support is important in the midst of a hostile world..

But notice that Paul and Barnabas also received support when they returned to Antioch. They needed rest and relaxation and support themselves. Thus they spent a considerable length of time there.

It is important for all of us to have a support base. We need it in the face of the regular challenges of life. I needed it in the recent death of my wife. Also we Christians live in a world that is sometimes hostile to our values. For some the temptation is to withdraw from necessary conflict. Sometimes the temptation is to withdraw from needed Christian fellowship.

In 2 Corinthians #11 Paul described the negative effects of the opposition to the gospel which he encountered. (PROJECTOR ON--- 2 CORINTHIANS 11:24) He wrote, **“Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. (2 CORINTHIANS 11:25) Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea...”** Because of this experience and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit he wrote in his Second Letter to Timothy (2 TIMOTHY 3:12), who was originally from Lystra, **“Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted...”**

If you never seem to encounter any opposition, maybe it is because you are not bold enough in your witness for Jesus. Maybe you have compromised the message. Maybe the pressure of the hostile world around us has softened your portrayal of the gospel. Tactfulness is always in order, but not at the expense of truth.

When we do encounter opposition from the world because of our commitment to Jesus, as my brother did, we should not be shocked. It is to be expected from time to time. Be sure to look for fellowship and support from your Christian family members. We all need it.

Opposition is to be expected in the Christian life. The leader of our cause encountered opposition. Ultimately He was crucified upon the cross. In just a moment we are going to focus upon the sacrifice that he made for us. Right now let's pause to ask Him to help us in dealing with opposition to the gospel.