

Missionary Memoirs

Acts 14:1-20

Introduction

Today, we will resume our study in the book of Acts with chapter 14. We are in the midst of Paul and Barnabas' first missionary journey into Asia Minor.

If I were to ask the average Bible student how they thought Paul and Barnabas would later feel about their missionary experience, words such as, "successful and effective" would be the typical response.

Setting the Stage

Let us read from Paul's own diary. These are comments he made public that are not only intensely personal, but rather surprising. And, I might add, they are incredibly encouraging. Rarely do you see such transparency from those we look up to. Turn to II Corinthians, chapter 1, verse 8.

For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life;

One paraphrase expands this verse in this way,
We want you to know about the hard time we went through in Asia. We were really crushed and overwhelmed, and feared we would never live through it.

Can you imagine?! Here is a missionary report, "Hey Paul, how's it going as you serve God? Hallelujah's right?!"

Paul responds, "Oh, it was really hard. I've never been so overwhelmed physically and crushed emotionally."

The words translated "overwhelmed or burdened excessively" come from a word that referred to the emotional burden of being treated unjustly; unfairly.

Paul goes on to write, "We felt we were doomed to die and saw how powerless we were to help ourselves."

The word "powerless" means, "we were utterly without a way of escape".

When facing tough times

Let me give several things from these verses to do when facing tough times.

Do not deny that serving God can bring heartache and discouragement

1. Do not deny that serving God can bring heartache and discouragement. Some people deny any pain, saying that, "If you live for God, then hey, everything is great."

Do not ignore the discouragement and pressure that comes naturally

2. Do not ignore the discouragement and pressure that comes naturally.

Do not forget that ultimately, God allows tough times that naturally create pressure and pain

3. Do not forget that ultimately, God allows tough times that naturally create pressure and pain, in order to also spiritually create dependency upon His strength and His grace.

Some people never get past the stress. All they ever do is talk about their problems. They never get to the point where they say, “But this is how God is using this difficulty in my life to change me and to challenge me.”

There is a balance between the natural difficulty and spiritual development – both are at work; both need to be acknowledged.

Would you like an example of balance?

Paul, after admitting to these deep issues of despair and a sense of being overwhelmed and being treated unfairly, said in verse 9,

Indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves, so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead;

One paraphrase puts it this way,

But that was good because it caused us not to trust in ourselves but to put everything into the hands of God.

What a wonderful balance! Paul does not jump right into, “Hey, our missionary trip has really caused us to trust in God’s power,” without first saying, “You won’t believe how tough it was; how betrayed we felt at times; how frightened we were for our very lives.”

Reception at Iconium . . . Then Rejection

When was this period in Paul’s life that he despaired of life and threw himself upon the grace of God? When would he have entered into his diary these deeply felt comments?

Acts, chapter 14, puts us right into the middle of the scene. Look at verses 1 and 2.

In Iconium they entered the synagogue of the Jews together, and spoke in such a manner that a large number of people believed, both of Jews and of Greeks. But the Jews who disbelieved stirred up the minds of the Gentiles and embittered them against the brethren.

Literally, the disbelieving Jews poisoned the minds of the Gentiles. They stirred into the soup bowl of imagination all kinds of lies.

It looks like a short stay in Iconium! It is time to leave, Paul and Barnabas. This does not look like a good place to start a church.

However, that is not what happened. Paul and Barnabas evidently talked it over. Their conversation

may have been something like, “Well, Barnabas, are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“Yes, I am. This is a great place for ministry to happen!”

Continue to verse 3.

Therefore . . .

(Remember, whenever you see a “therefore,” you need to ask what it is there for. It is there, in this verse, to help us realize that in spite of mounting opposition; in spite of embittered people who resent their presence and ministry, Paul and Barnabas did not leave. In spite of the action of the unbelieving Jews . . .),

. . . they spent a long time there speaking boldly with reliance upon the Lord, . . .

(Note the phrase “with reliance upon the Lord”. It was not that Paul and Barnabas naturally enjoyed confrontation, strife, or resentment from people – they did not. Remember Paul’s words in II Corinthians, “we were burdened excessively” or “we felt overwhelmed,” “but that was good because it caused us to rely entirely upon God”. And that, ladies and gentlemen, is the best place in all the world to be. That is the place where you are not relying on people or circumstances, but entirely upon the Lord; you are “abandoned on the island of God’s sovereignty”.),

. . . who [the Lord] was testifying to the word of His grace, granting that signs and wonders be done by their hands.

Continue to verses 4 through 6.

But the people of the city was divided; and some sided with the Jews, and some with the apostles. And when an attempt was made by both the Gentiles and the Jews with their rulers, to mistreat and to stone them, they became aware of it and fled to the cities of Lycaonia, Lystra and Derbe, and the surrounding region; and there they continued to preach the gospel.

Now the mood of the people has turned murderous. It is no longer a battle of theology and ideology, they are gathering stones with Paul and Barnabas’ name on them. Jesus Christ, in Matthew, chapter 10, verse 23a, told His disciples,

. . . whenever they persecute you in one city, flee to the next . . .

It is one thing to witness to a man on his porch who does not like you, it is another thing to stand there while he loads his shotgun.

This was not the only time, but Paul narrowly escaped with his life.

Praise at Lystra . . . Then Persecution

Now, verse 8, of Acts, chapter 14, introduces us to a problem that is entirely the opposite of the one in Iconium. It is one thing to keep your chin up when you are hated, it is another thing to keep your pride down when you are popular. Look at verses 8 and 9.

At Lystra a man was sitting who had no strength in his feet, lame from his mother's womb, who had never walked. This man was listening to Paul as he spoke, who, when he had fixed his gaze on him and had seen that he had faith to be made well,

In other words, as Paul preached, he could not help but notice the attention this man was paying to the gospel message. Paul could tell by the expression on this man's face that God was granting him the faith to believe. And in the case of this particular man, the gift of his faith in Christ would be coupled with the gift of healing. Look at verse 10a.

[Paul] said with a loud voice, "Stand upright on your feet." . . .

Paul, the divine healer, possessing the ability to heal and thus proving his apostleship; that he was indeed the ambassador of God's new message of salvation, intends to reveal the power of God. Notice he did not pray first. In fact, he never even mentions the name of Jesus or calls upon the Holy Spirit. He did not ask for a seed gift nor say to Barnabas, "I sure hope this works." No! He simply said, "Stand upright on your feet."

Continue to verses 10b through 12.

. . . And he leaped up and began to walk. When the crowds saw what Paul had done, they raised their voice, saying in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have become like men and have come down to us." And they began calling Barnabas, Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker.

Now, you need to know that Lystra, more than perhaps any other city nearby, was totally caught up in the worship of Zeus and Hermes. In fact, in the 1920's, two inscriptions were found near Lystra, both of which were dedicated to Zeus and Hermes.

Look at verse 13a.

. . . Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city . . .

This verse informs us that there was a temple to Zeus located just outside the city. In fact, that phrase could literally be translated, "The Zeus before the city". No one came into this city without being awed by the magnificent temple to Zeus. Zeus, by the way, was considered to be the father of all gods, and Hermes, was his spokesman.

This city has just witnessed an incredible miracle. Go back to verse 8 and notice the hopelessness of this lame man. We are told in three different ways that he cannot walk – "a man . . . who had no strength in his feet," "lame from his mother's womb," "who had never walked".

Only a god could perform this miracle – they were right in that respect – they just had the wrong god. And they begin cheering, verse 11 tells us, in Lycaonian, "The gods are here! The gods are here!"

At this point in time, Paul and Barnabas, who evidently do not know the Lycaonian dialect, do not know what is happening. However, it is surely a lot nicer than the last city they had just left where the people had wanted to stone them to death.

It is not until verse 13 that they get the picture. Notice verse 13 again.

The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates, and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds.

In other words, before Paul and Barnabas barely knew what was happening, temple assistants were putting garlands of flowers about their necks as the high priest of Zeus arrives to begin the worship ceremony. Continue to verse 14.

But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, . . .

(that is, when they had someone explain in their own language what was about to happen),

. . . they tore their robes and rushed out into the crowd . . .

How to handle undue praise

Now, granted, none of us will probably ever be mistaken for Zeus or Hermes. However, I want to follow the response of Paul and Barnabas and see how it provides a model for us. They show several things to do when we face the flattery of others or, what we could call, undue praise and recognition.

Be willing to refuse it

1. First, be willing to refuse it!

Look at verses 14 and 15a.

But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their robes and rushed out into the crowd, crying out and saying, “Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of the same nature as you . . .”

You cannot refuse flattery and undue praise unless you are willing to be transparent. Paul and Barnabas said, “We are also men of the same nature as you”. In other words, “We’re made of the same fragile stuff everyone else is made out of.”

We need more prominent Christians; such as, singers, authors, radio personalities, conference speakers, pastors, teachers, ministry presidents, and statesmen, who are willing to say to those who follow their writings, ministries, or leadership, “Hey, I’m made out of the same stuff you are.”

Eugene Petersen sadly notes however, that “in the church today, we have celebrities but not saints.”

Now, we not only have a problem from the leadership side, but the laity side as well. Those who follow are not helping much either.

Lloyd John Ogilvie wrote these interesting words, which I have edited:

We have a seemingly limitless capacity to give the honor that belongs to Christ to the people who seek to introduce us to Him. Pastors, parents, leaders, friends, and teachers who have brought us the good news are often made the source of our security. We elevate them to super sainthood and miss for ourselves the dynamic that has made them admirable. We make matinee idols out of Christian leaders – we put the communicator on a pedestal and evade the communication. The reason there are so many proud Christian celebrities today is that we have given the messenger more honor than the message.

Now let me get personal with a couple of examples:

- As a parent, you may have raised a child who is now serving the Lord. As a result, people are going to want to build a shrine at your feet. They are going to want all the advice you have to give them on parenting. And what are you going to say? Will you say,

“Yeah, I guess we did a fantastic job . . . let me give you the thirty things we did right.”?

- People may perceive in you and your spouse the kind of marriage that they would like to have. They may want to put you on the pedestal. How do you respond?

I think we have way to much popularity in the Christian community. It is because we do not portray ourselves realistically; we do not refuse the focus of attention. And when the approval comes, we do not want to turn it away for the sake of the truth because we love the attention.

Be willing to refuse it!

Be willing to refocus it

2. Do not stop with just refusing to accept undue praise, take the next step – be willing to refocus it.

Paul and Barnabas were willing to refocus attention toward God. Look at verse 15.

and saying, “Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of the same nature as you, and preach the gospel to you 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 other words, “Don’t look at us; don’t burn a candle or pray to us, those are vain or empty things. Instead, look at our creator God,

. . . who made the heaven and the earth and the sea . . .

Be willing to risk losing it

3. Thirdly, be willing to risk losing it all.

Paul and Barnabas were willing to risk losing every bit of their popularity, which was giving them a hearing, by the way, for the sake of truth. Look at verse 16.

In the generations gone by He permitted all the nations to go their own ways;

In other words, “You and all the nations of the world have been permitted by God to go your own way – a way that involves the worship of false gods; by His longsuffering, you’ve been permitted to seek after your own way.”

Continue to verse 17.

and yet He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you

rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.

Notice the key word in verse 17, of “witness”.

Have you ever been asked, “What about those who’ve never heard the gospel? How can God hold them responsible? He shouldn’t judge them.”?

In this verse, before Paul and Barnabas had ever arrived, the citizens of Lystra are telling that they had received a witness from God – and it had to do with creation.

The revelation of God (Romans 1 & 2)

Turn ahead to the book of Romans where Paul speaks at length about the witness of God to every person.

God’s wrath toward the ungodly and the unrighteous

Look at chapter 1, verse 18.

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness,

So, the wrath of God is revealed against the ungodly and the unrighteous. Notice what group of people suppress the truth. “Suppress” is “katecho” in the Greek, meaning, “to hold it down”. In other words, this group of people keep the truth under wraps. The truth never makes it on the front page of the newspaper. The truth never gets prime time. Why? Because unrighteous and ungodly people are trying to keep a lid on it.

God’s existence witnessed by conscience and creation

However, even though they try to keep a lid on it, the truth is still announced. How? Look at verse 19a of Romans, chapter 1.

because that which is known about God is evident within them; . . .

Underline the two words “within them”. The first witness is within them, and it has a name; that is, “conscience”.

Look over at chapter 2, verse 14.

For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves,

Continue to verses 15 through 16a.

in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them, on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men . . .

How is it that people who have never read the Ten Commandments feel guilty when they break one of them?

God says, “That’s one of My witnesses that there is a higher authority – namely, Me.”

That is not all, however. Look at verse 19b of Romans, chapter 1.

. . . for God made it evident to them.

God not only made it evident within them, but to them. How? Look at verse 20.

For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.

Everyone has been given the witnesses of conscience and creation. Everyone is without excuse.

Continue to verses 21 through 23.

For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.

They have refused to acknowledge a Creator and have instead sought spiritual connection with creation – the river, the sun, the moon, the dolphin, the crystal, the tree.

The witness of creation shouts the existence of a Creator! Do we listen? Because of ungodliness and unrighteousness, mankind tries to find another cause other than the Creator.

So today, our schools and universities teach a generation that God did not create the earth and the universe – it evolved over trillions of years. God did not create man and woman after His own likeness – we are just the latest animal that has evolved over billions of years.

Paul would say, “You profess to be wise, yet you’ve become fools.”

Guilty of refusing to see in creation the hand of a Creator; guilty of refusing to listen to the conscience and as a result, pursuing adulteries, murders, and lusts, an ungodly, unrighteous world cannot find God for the same reason a thief cannot find a policeman – he does not want to; he avoids it altogether.

Paul declares:

- suppressing the truth does not destroy the truth;
- rejecting the truth does not dismiss the consequences.

Will the heathen who have never heard of Christ go to hell? “Yes,” Paul says, “they are without excuse for they have rejected the two witnesses.”

They refused to hear and heed the witness of creation to a wonderful Creator, and so they worshipped the evil spirits instead. They refused to heed their conscience and thus paid the price for their sins in their own bodies.

The question, my friend, is, “What are you rejecting?”

Are you rejecting the two witnesses of creation and conscience, plus God’s word, plus the gospel messages you have heard, plus the testimony of a spouse or friend? That is what Paul is hinting at in Acts, chapter 14. It is not a popular message – then or now.

Go back to Acts, chapter 14. Be willing to:

- Refuse it!
- Refocus it!
- Risk losing it!

Be willing to restrain it

4. Finally, be willing to restrain it!

It is one thing to resist accepting undue praise and adulation; it is another thing to go out of your way to stop it. Notice verse 18 of Acts, chapter 14.

Even saying these things, with difficulty they restrained the crowds from offering sacrifice to them.

Why? Don’t these people get it?

A legend from the history of this region will offer help in understanding this. Ovid, the Roman poet, told a legend that had become fact to these people. It was a legend telling that the Greek gods Zeus and

Hermes, had come to this very area many years earlier. However, Zeus and Hermes had come disguised as men in order to see how they would be treated.

Zeus and Hermes tried to find hospitality in the thousand hamlets or homes in the area. Everyone refused them except an older couple who lived in a simple cottage on a hillside. The couple welcomed these men in. They fed them and gave them everything they needed. And, after the meal was finished and the wine bowl was empty, this old couple, according to the legend, saw the wine bowl fill up miraculously. They then recognized that these two men were not just men – they were really gods.

After the gods identified themselves as Zeus and Hermes, they took the old couple to the top of the hill. There the couple watched as the gods set every home on fire, destroying them all. Then the gods turned their humble little cottage on the hill into a marble palace with a golden roof.

This legend was told in that day, and it had become fact. So, when Paul and Barnabas come to town and the people saw them miraculously raise a man to his feet who had never walked before, they thought, “Zeus and Hermes are back! Let’s dare not repeat the mistake of our forefathers. The gods are here!”

Now, we do not know how much time elapsed between verses 18 and 19. It is long enough, however, for Paul and Barnabas to win people to faith in Christ, the only true and living, creator God.

However, look at verse 19.

But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having won over the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead.

Can you imagine? People who once wanted to worship them, now attempt to kill them! They were fickle crowds who perhaps, soured on the apostles when they eventually realized no one’s home was going to be turned into a palace with a golden roof.

Now look at verse 20a.

But while the disciples stood around him, he got up and entered the city. . . .

Some believe Paul rose from the dead. The word “arose,” or “anistemi” in the Greek, is used many times in the New Testament for “resurrection from the dead”. However, in this passage, it is used by Paul when he tells the man to rise to his feet and then, divine power brings him up from a hopeless situation.

I believe that is what happened in this verse – a miracle, not of resurrection, but of immediate restoration; re-vitalization. He arose and went into the city. Continue to verse 20b.

The next day he went away with Barnabas to Derbe.

Multiple wounds healed; fractured bones re-set and healed; concussion healed. The text goes on to tell us that in a matter of hours, Paul will be preaching again.

Conclusion

Before we close, I want to go back to Paul's memoirs; personal notes recorded in his missionary journal about the events we have just studied. Look at II Corinthians, chapter 4. Start at verses 1 and 2.

Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we received mercy, we do not lose heart, but we have renounced the things hidden because of shame, not walking in craftiness or adulterating the word of God, but by the manifestation of truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.

Skip to verses 5 through 9.

For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Light shall shine out of darkness," is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed;

Skip to verse 16a.

Therefore we do not lose heart . . .

Take it from the memoirs of this missionary – God is faithful. As a result, you, His servant, can handle the extremes of life with balance – the highs of praise and the lows of rejection. The key, as Paul wrote, is, "We relied entirely upon the Lord."

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 8/3/1997 by Stephen Davey.

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