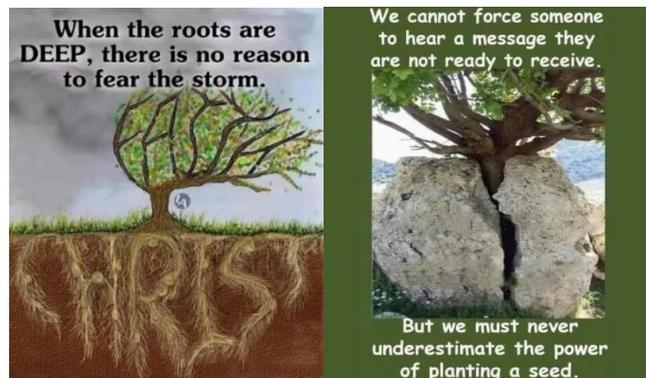


ADVANCING AGAINST OPPOSITON Acts 14:1-28

I've been thinking a lot about trees and our church's vision lately because I've planted around 100 trees this spring, mostly at the family farm. I've been thinking about what is needed for these trees to survive and get established and grow – like rain and mulch or weed barrier to decrease root competition. The other day I was at a friend's house for a birthday party, and they told me they had a tree in their yard for years and it just never grew. Been there since they moved in. So they decided to dig it up and when they did, they figured why: the roots were still balled up. They were able to lift it right up and out of the ground just like when it was put in. So **roots matter**.

As a church, we have this vision of being a healthy, balanced fruit tree. If a tree is going to bear fruit, it has to have some properly placed roots. Jesus likened some peoples' response to the gospel to seed that was scattered on shallow, rocky soil. The seeds sprang up quickly but had no depth – no firm root – so when the “sun” of affliction and persecution arises, they get scorched. But, He says, if the roots spread out in good soil, a seed can overcome incredible obstacles and bear much fruit.



That's sort of what we're going to look at today in Acts 14. As the gospel advances in this **first missionary journey** of Paul, so does the **opposition** and **obstacles**. Because of the nature of these chapters, we've been talking a lot about evangelism the last several weeks and maybe you've done a little bit recently or in the past and experienced opposition or rejection. Maybe your family and friends poke fun at you for your faith. How do you respond? Do you retreat? Do you become silent? Start to compromise or syncretize with the world? Paul and Barnabas are going to be our living illustrations on how to respond to opposition. At this point in their journey, they're in the south-central region of Turkey in Galatia, leaving Pisidian Antioch after being driven out of town.

“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. 2 But the Jews who disbelieved stirred up the minds of the Gentiles and embittered them against the brethren. 3 Therefore they spent a long time there speaking boldly with reliance upon the Lord, who was testifying to the word of His grace, granting that signs and wonders be done by their hands. 4 But the people of the city were divided; and some sided with the Jews, and some with the apostles. 5 And when an attempt was made by both the Gentiles and the Jews with their rulers, to mistreat and to stone

them, 6 they became aware of it and fled to the cities of Lycaonia, Lystra and Derbe, and the surrounding region; 7 and there they continued to preach the gospel.

I. GOSPEL ADVANCE TO ICONIUM. (VV. 1-7)

Having left Pisidian Antioch, the disciples travel a well-known Roman road called the **Via Sebaste**, the Imperial Road, which was built in 6 B.C. as a military road that would allow Rome to respond quickly to these mountainous tribes that plagued Rome and help pacify them. The reason why I point that out is because the gospel was carried efficiently down these Roman roads and it just seems like God had them built at just the right time. Roman roads connected end to end would circle the earth twice I heard. **Iconium** is about 90 miles down the road and today, is a massive city called Konya with millions of people. In Paul's day, it would have been much smaller but because it was on the Imperial Road, was still a bustling city. It was an administrative capital and culturally mixed city with travelers and traders and farmers and ranchers.

The first thing they do upon arrival is they **strategically** go to the Jewish **synagogue first**. If they go preaching the gospel in the town square first, the synagogue isn't going to allow them to come speak. The synagogue is where spiritually minded people would be and to be honest, it would be a lot easier (as we're going to see when we get to Lystra) to share the Jewish Messiah with someone who already has a Jewish, biblical worldview and expectation of the Messiah. But I like what Steven Ger said their experience in Iconium when compared to Antioch is the same song, just a different verse.ⁱ They preach in the synagogue; many believe; many don't; the city is polarized; and they are driven out of town through an instigation led by Jewish leaders who poison peoples' minds against the apostles. It's amazing to think of the ups and downs that Paul and Barnabas are experiencing. They preach and many believe – Hallelujah! What a thrill! But then comes the opposition and mistreatment. Over and over again. But that's the nature of gospel ministry.

Opposition is expected in gospel advancement.

Opposition and acceptance go side by side. The gospel is narrow. Jesus said it will divide but it'd be worse not to preach it. So you can't quit when people oppose you or the gospel you carry. Quarterback Sonny Jergensen with the Washington Redskins was going through a slump and someone asked him if he was going to quit. He said, *"No, I don't want to quit. I've been in this game long enough to know that every quarterback, every week of the season, spends his time either in the penthouse or the outhouse."*ⁱⁱ Ministry is like that. Some believe and some gather stones to throw at you. But you move on by faith and not by feelings, knowing you have something that's worth it all.

I also want us to notice where they are drawing their **courage, persistence, and boldness** from (their Jewish chutzpah or moxie). Boldness is a theme in Acts. Where does it come from? It's from the Holy Spirit as they in verse 3 as they **rely upon the Lord (Acts 4:39)**. They pray for it! In everything they do, they depend upon the power of His grace. It's His Spirit that allows them to

do the miracles and to “so speak” that people believe. Btw, you can be bold and not speak so people be. People who are bold, but noisy gongs deserve to be persecuted.

Rely on the Lord for strength and boldness.

Without the Lord, we just can't do anything. It's not by man's might or man's power, but by His Spirit (Zech. 4:6). That's why Jesus said to wait until the promised Spirit came upon them because He would empower them to be witnesses. We tend not to like opposition. We hesitate. We cower. We retract. But look at how Paul and Barnabas respond in **verse 2**: “*the Jews who disbelieved stirred up the minds of the Gentiles and embittered them against the brethren. **Therefore** [!] they spent a long time there...*” The opposition caused them to stay longer and testify to the word of His grace. As time went on, with the city saturated with the gospel and more death threats on the rise, it was time to move on. They are bold but they aren't dumb either. They advance into the **province of Lycaonia**, to two cities: **Lystra**, about 20 miles south and **Derbe** about 60 miles southeast of Iconium where they have a somewhat amusing experience.

7 and there they continued to preach the gospel. 8 At Lystra a man was sitting who had no strength in his feet, lame from his mother's womb, who had never walked. 9 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, 10 said with a loud voice, “Stand upright on your feet.” And he leaped up and began to walk. 11 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.” 12 And they began calling Barnabas, Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. 13 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. 14 But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their robes and rushed out into the crowd, crying out 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. 16 In the generations gone by He permitted all the nations to go their own ways; 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.” 18 Even saying these things, with difficulty they restrained the crowds from offering sacrifice to them.

II. GOSPEL ADVANCE TO LYSTRA & DERBE. (VV. 6-20)

This could be a footnote, but I want to share it because many today lack trust in the Bibles and lack of trust in the Bible fosters atheism. And you won't be out there sharing the gospel if you don't think or believe this is the Word of God. You won't give your life for it. But for a long time Luke's accuracy here called into question because it says Paul and Barnabas **left Iconium and crossed into Lycaonia**. The reason why is because there are many records showing that Iconium was for some time a Lycaonian city. In my introduction to Acts, I told you about a brilliant but atheistic Scottish archaeologist named **William Ramsey** who believed Luke's record was an inaccurate. In his day, 150 years ago, many of these locations in Acts had been lost and

unidentified. But for years he, with Bible and shovel in hand, traced Luke's steps looking for **geographical and archaeological evidence** to disprove Luke. Well, it was at this point in his research that Ramsey started to have his "*first change of judgement*" as he called it and started to become a strong defender of Luke's historicity. He discovered Iconium was for a short time, between years 37-72 A.D. (when Luke wrote) not a Lycaonian city.ⁱⁱⁱ It was Lycaonian, then wasn't (it became part of Phrygia), and then was again.^{iv} It was on the borders of these two territories and was tossed back and forth by rulers. Luke's statement was accurate when Paul visited around A.D. 47-48 and when Luke wrote around AD 60. Ramsey said that every time he turned over a shovel, he found evidence of exactly those things Luke described and that Luke was one of the greatest historians. He said, "*I take the view that Luke's history is unsurpassed in its trustworthiness. You may press the words of Luke in a degree beyond any other historian, and they will stand the keenest scrutiny, and the harshest treatment.*" Another man, A.N. Sherwin White said, "*For Acts the confirmation of historicity is overwhelming... Any attempt to reject its basic historicity must now appear absurd.*"^v The first thing Satan had Adam and Eve question was God's Word: *Did God really say...?* One of the reasons we can be bold witnesses is because God's Word is trustworthy.

Trust the Word of God amidst opposition to it.

Now, at Lystra there is no mention of a synagogue though there is likely Jews there because **Timothy** is from there and his **mother** is Jewish (16:1). They needed at least 10 Jews to have a synagogue. Whatever the case, it may very well be that Paul is preaching in the agora, the marketplace, where he notices the lame man. And what you notice is that Lystra highly revered **Zeus**, the chief god of the pantheon. There was **a temple of Zeus just outside the city**. The Greek god **Hermes** was viewed as the messenger for Zeus who was smaller in stature. Archaeological discoveries near Lystra include dedications of statues and altars to Zeus and Hermes, even mention the priests of Zeus.^{vi}

But to understand why these people try to worship Paul and Barnabas as Zeus and Hermes, it's helpful to hear about **a fanciful legend** one of the locals named **Ovid** wrote. He wrote that the Roman Gods, **Jupiter** and **Mercury** (equivalent to the Greek gods **Zeus** and **Hermes**), once came to that area in human form by the names **Philemon** and **Baucis**. They went to 1,000 homes seeking hospitality and only one elderly couple welcomed the disguised gods. In response, the gods judged everyone but this married couple and granted them 2 favors: 1) to be caretakers of the temple and 2) to die together so that neither would grieve the loss of the other. The gods granted their wish by turning their home into a temple and turning them into a pair of trees adorning the steps to the temple.^{vii} What a reward, right?! With our church vision, I want to be *like* a tree. I do not want to BE a tree! Some reward! I'd rather be present with the Lord than become a tree.

Well, here we are 40 years after Ovid wrote that and Paul and Barnabas show up and they think they are Zeus and Hermes because they have divine power and maybe even similar stature. Zeus was depicted as a large, bearded man. Hermes was his smaller assistant and speaker. And we don't know if it's true or not but there an apocryphal writing called the Acts of Paul where Onesiphorus, a resident of Iconium, sets out to meet Paul who is on his way to the city and describes him as a

man small of stature, with a bald head, bow legged, eyebrows meetings and nose somewhat hooked, and full of friendliness.”^{viii} Again, we don’t know if that’s true but it is interesting in light of their comparison to Zeus and Hermes.

For us though, we look at Paul’s healing and think, “*Jesus’ power is working through Paul! Acts is the continuing acts of Jesus through the apostles by the power of the Holy Spirit.*” But the people of Lystra look at this and say, “*These men are powerful gods! Zeus and Hermes have visited us again and we better not screw it up this time!*” And in idolatrous passion, they parade **oxen** draped with garland to offer **sacrifices** to Paul and Barnabas and they have to **tear their robes** and rush to stop them. The tearing of the robe is a Jewish way of indicating blasphemy had been uttered and would help get the crowds’ attention. This is not good!

This crowd is so far off base in their worldview that Paul can’t even share the gospel with them yet. I assume that between verses 18-19 where Jews come and Antioch and Iconium and stir up the people again, that Paul had time to get to the gospel – but right now Paul has to start from scratch and just **convince them of a living, Creator God**. Before they are told of the Messiah in the **Special Revelation** of the Son & Scripture, they have to be told about the one Creator who reveals Himself through the **General Revelation** of creation.

Remember how a couple weeks ago we talked about how in our witnessing we need to take people back to the beginning? Back to Genesis? Paul does it here and in Acts 17 at Athens. More and more we find ourselves living in a pluralistic culture where people have no basic knowledge of God or the Bible. Their worldview is so far off base in evolution that we often have to establish a Creator in their minds before they see their need for a Redeemer. Satan understands that. Evolution destroys the foundation for laying the gospel. The good news is that Paul says in Romans 1 & 2, creation is on our side. Because of it, every human has an innate knowledge of God because of Creation. It is evident within them because God made it evident to them. Their conscience knows it even if they say they don’t. They suppress it because they don’t want to be accountable to God. But God does not leave Himself without witness. Day after day creation speaks for Him (Psalm 19:1-2). Paul told Lystra that the rains God sends to satisfy them is proof of it. We say, “Amen!”

But before we are too hard on these gullible (Gal. 3:1-4) idolaters, let’s think about the vain and empty idols that we live for. We too, need to turn from vain things to the living God and live for Him. We have to constantly guard our hearts from idols: the idol of putting our identity in something other than Christ like our achievement or work; money; possessions; appearance; relationships; comfort; entertainment. An idol can be anything that becomes more important to us than God that we start to live for. If you’re not careful, that idol will bite. They can be very harmful to us. How many people have felt their lives ruined because their idol was taken away from them? A house? A job? A farm? A bank account? God gives us things to enjoy, and I’ll preach every day! But these good things must not become gods in our life (1 John 5:21).

Well, apparently, Lystra doesn’t like Paul’s message to turn from idols. The Jews come again and kindle that flame: *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. 20 But while the disciples stood around him, he got up and entered the city.” 20 The next day he went away with Barnabas to Derbe.” They **stone him so bad they think he’s dead**. But he gets up and keeps going to **Derbe** where he **makes more disciples**. Talk about **persistence**! This guy is unbelievable – an example for all of us. This has to be where Paul gets some of the scars that he writes about in Galatians 6:17. He reminds them of this incident.

III. **GOSPEL FOLLOW UP ON RETURN. (VV. 21-28)**

21 After they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, 22 strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, “Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.” 23 When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. 24 They passed through Pisidia and came into Pamphylia. 25 When they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia. 26 From there they sailed to Antioch, from which they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had accomplished. 27 When they had arrived and gathered the church together, they began to report all things that God had done with them and how He had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. 28 And they spent a long time with the disciples.”

So rather than journeying eastward to Antioch, **the disciples courageously go back through all these cities where they’ve been mistreated and threatened**. Why? Because they have to do some follow up to do with these new believers in all these cities and see that they get established in Christ. Like **Colossians 2:6-7**, “*Therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, having been **firmly rooted** and now being built up in Him and **established** in your faith.*” What’s really going to help them get them rooted to grow amidst opposition:

1. **Appoint qualified elders to lead each church community.**

The new fledgling churches need trusted, humble, qualified leadership with a sufficient degree of maturity to care for the flock. Paul spent enough time with them to get to know them and surely the locals in each church already knew men of good character and sincere faith. Every church needs a plurality of elder-shepherd-pastors to lead the flock (Titus 1:5).

2. **Encourage them in their faith journey.**

One of the best things we can do to help a new believer, or a disillusioned believer is to tell them the truth about the faith journey. New life in Christ is amazing! He blesses your socks off! You really start to live an abundant life! But, at the same time, you are now in a spiritual war, You have a relentless **enemy within** (the sin nature) and a relentless **enemy without** (Satan and the world system) and they are going to cause trouble and hardship. It’s part of the faith journey until heaven or Christ comes to get us. He doesn’t want them to be the disillusioned seed sown on shallow, rocky soil that ends up scorched by “sun” of persecution. He wants them rooted in Christ because when you are rooted in Christ, nothing can steal your joy – no circumstance can take that from you. Even persecution becomes

something to rejoice in because you know you have something worth living for. You know the Savior and you know eternal life. To live is Christ and to die is gain. To experience hardship is only to become more like your Savior.

Keep looking to Jesus, our perfect example.

That's why you have to keep looking to Jesus. Paul is a great example. Jesus is the perfect example of one who endured hostility. We have not yet shed blood in our culture for Jesus, but opposition is increasing. And according to Matthew 5:11, Jesus still considers mistreatment and slander through words as a form persecution. Satan knows that he can poison peoples' minds against Christians through words and ideas. There are so many articles and tv shows today that in a roundabout and subtle way, are slamming Christians as bigots and prigs – making Christians look like the bad guys. You know what it does to us? It **silences** the witness of Christians. We become quiet and don't share when we know we should. It **carnalizes** Christians because they try to blend in with the world and not look so narrow. Or we start to **syncretizing**. We try to mix the world's ideas and faiths with Christianity so we don't look so narrow. That's lukewarm. And that's why we aim to pattern our lives after Christ and the Word of God because even the Christian community can become a downhill standard.^{ix} Hebrews says to look to Christ for joy and strength. Then you will be like seed planted in good soil that can overcome incredible obstacles.

A prayer for us: "Lord, just like this early church in Acts, we pray that you would make us bold witnesses for you. Witnesses that are unashamed of the gospel. Witnesses whose eternal joy is not phased by persecution but that the persecution only makes us more bold. May we refuse to be lukewarm Christians by blending in and syncretizing and instead, stand out and be the salt and light we're called to be."

ⁱ Steven Ger, *Acts: Beginning in Jerusalem...*, 189.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 278.

ⁱⁱⁱ Homer Kent, *Jerusalem to Rome: Studies in Acts* (Grand Rapids: Brethren Missionary Herald, 1972), 116.

^{iv} F. F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans), 272

^v Dave Stotts, <https://drivethruhistory.com/acts-to-revelation-episode/>

^{vi} Bruce, 275.

^{vii} Swindoll, 281.

^{viii} *Acts of Paul* 3.3

^{ix} Howard Hendricks, *Heaven Help the Home!* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1990),