

Lesson 2 - 5 August 2012

Difficulties on the First Missionary Journey

Lesson Scope: [Acts 14](#)

Lesson Focus

Paul and Barnabas had been encouraged with the interest of "almost the whole city" (Acts 13:44) at Antioch in Pisidia. We can imagine them reflecting on the various responses they had encountered so far. Certainly God would continue to bless their efforts.

As they plodded toward Iconium, another city on their journey, little did they know how severely their faith and steadfastness would be tested. But Jesus had made it clear that the crown could not come without the cross. And He had warned His disciples that "if they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you" (John 15:20). While we do not seek to antagonize, we must understand that a clear Christian testimony will often bring suffering, sooner or later.

The disciples of Jesus Christ face the age-old conflict between righteousness and evil. Only by God's grace can they continue in the faith and fulfill the work God calls them to do.

While the carnal nature shrinks from difficulty and hardship, the Christian rejoices when he is "counted worthy to suffer shame for his name" (Acts 5:41). He perseveres in spite of obstacles and does not flee as a hireling. When danger finally forces him to flee, he does not remain in hiding, but he looks for new opportunities to testify for the Lord, knowing that the whole world are candidates for the Gospel.

Consider what a dramatically different outcome this story would have, had the apostles basked in the approval of men when they were being looked up to. Always giving God the glory and looking to Him for our strength, regardless of man's approval, will help us to boldly preach "all the counsel of God" (Acts 20:27). We need to be encouraged to hold forth the ban-

ner of truth and to disregard the unpopularity of practical Biblical obedience.

Our heavenly focus as Christians will cause us to disdain the "sufferings of this present time" in light of the "glory which shall be revealed in us" (Romans 8:18).

Lesson Aim: To show how Christians should respond to difficulties they face in the Lord's work.

Theme Verse: [John 16:33](#) These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.

Lesson Text:

Encountering Jewish Envy

[Acts 14:1-6](#) ¹ And it came to pass in Iconium, that they went both together into the synagogue of the Jews, and so spake, that a great multitude both of the Jews and also of the Greeks believed. ² But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles, and made their minds evil affected against the brethren. ³ Long time therefore abode they speaking boldly in the Lord, which gave testimony unto the word of his grace, and granted signs and wonders to be done by their hands. ⁴ But the multitude of the city was divided: and part held with the Jews, and part with the apostles. ⁵ And when there was an assault made both of the Gentiles, and also of the Jews with their rulers, to use *them* despitefully, and to stone them, ⁶ They were ware of *it*, and fled unto Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and unto the region that lieth round about:

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[Acts 14:8-20](#) ⁸ And there sat a certain man at Lystra, impotent in his feet, being a cripple from his mother's womb, who never had walked: ⁹ The same heard Paul speak: who stedfastly beholding him, and perceiving that he had faith to be healed, ¹⁰ Said with a loud voice, Stand upright on thy feet. And he leaped and walked. ¹¹ And when the people saw what Paul had

done, they lifted up their voices, saying in the speech of Lycaonia, The gods are come down to us in the likeness of men. ¹² And they called Barnabas, Jupiter; and Paul, Mercurius, because he was the chief speaker. ¹³ Then the priest of Jupiter, which was before their city, brought oxen and garlands unto the gates, and would have done sacrifice with the people. ¹⁴ *Which* when the apostles, Barnabas and Paul, heard *of*, they rent their clothes, and ran in among the people, crying out, ¹⁵ And saying, Sirs, why do ye these things? We also are men of like passions with you, and preach unto you that ye should turn from these vanities unto the living God, which made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are therein: ¹⁶ Who in times past suffered all nations to walk in their own ways. ¹⁷ Nevertheless he left not himself without witness, in that he did good, and gave us rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness. ¹⁸ And with these sayings scarce restrained they the people, that they had not done sacrifice unto them. ¹⁹ And there came thither *certain* Jews from Antioch and Iconium, who persuaded the people, and, having stoned Paul, drew *him* out of the city, supposing he had been dead. ²⁰ Howbeit, as the disciples stood round about him, he rose up, and came into the city: and the next day he departed with Barnabas to Derbe.

Confirming the Disciples

[Acts 14:21-28](#) ²¹ And when they had preached the gospel to that city, and had taught many, they returned again to Lystra, and to Iconium, and Antioch, ²² Confirming the souls of the disciples, *and* exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God. ²³ And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed. ²⁴ And after they had passed throughout Pisidia, they came to Pamphylia. ²⁵ And when they had preached the word in Perga, they went down into Attalia: ²⁶ And thence sailed to Antioch, from whence they had been recommended to the grace of God for the work which they ful-

filled. ²⁷ And when they were come, and had gathered the church together, they rehearsed all that God had done with them, and how he had opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles. ²⁸ And there they abode long time with the disciples.

Questions for Study

Encountering Jewish Envy

1. How did the apostles respond to the difficulties they faced at Iconium?
2. How can we benefit from apparent difficulties in the Lord's work?

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3. List the elements that made Paul's interaction with the impotent man effective.
4. What opportunity did Paul derive from the misguided response of the people at Lystra?
5. What should be our response when men think well of us?

Confirming the Disciples

6. How did the apostles confirm the souls of the disciples?
7. In what should the Christian rejoice in the midst of persecution?

Analyzing the Passage

At the synagogue in Iconium, as a result of the apostles' preaching both Jews and Gentiles believed. But the unbelieving Jews tried to influence the Gentiles against the apostles. As long as they could (Acts 14:3), they kept preaching, motivated by God's abundant grace and the people's obvious thirst for truth.

At Lystra, a powerless, crippled man was healed. The pagan citizens first concluded that the apostles were gods and attempted to sacrifice to them. But Jews from Antioch and Iconium soon induced the fickle public to swing to the opposite consensus, that of stoning Paul. Having survived the stoning, Paul left for Derbe with Barnabas the next day.

They had now come as far from Antioch in Syria as they would

go on their first missionary journey. They now retraced the approximately six hundred fifty miles they had covered, half of which they likely traveled on foot. Refusing to become distracted by their trials, they preached the second time in each of the cities they had visited on the way. Confirming (Acts 14:22) means "establishing; supporting further."

Principles and Applications

Encountering Jewish Envy

1. Opposition to the Gospel must be met with patient but uncompromising persistence (14:1-3). Faithfully preaching the way of the cross will always stir some opposition. We cannot produce conviction without also producing a conflict. When men respond by resisting the truth and the voice of their conscience, we must not back down on holding forth all the requirements of Scripture.

2. God's purposes are larger than our present difficulties (Acts 14:4-6). Demanding reasons of God will only bring more questions. We will benefit from difficulties when we seek to understand God's purposes by faith. God's closing a door of opportunity is not license to sit back and say we tried, but rather to look around and discover where the new opportunity lies.

3. In the midst of difficulties, the Christian dare not forget his primary calling (Acts 14:7). We must be empty of self in order to keep sharing the Gospel during trying times. Could it be that God is testing our loyalty to Him by allowing the world to mock us when we share His message? Does our lifestyle help or hinder our focus on our primary calling? "Thou therefore endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ" (2 Timothy 2:3).

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4. Even in pressing circumstances, the Christian must remain sensitive to the individual needs of others (Acts 14:8-10). We dare never be so busy or so preoccupied with our own difficulties that we do not take time for others' needs. Even in the midst of a world that seems indifferent and hardened to sin,

there are sincere seekers.

5. The Christian rejects the opportunity for personal acclaim (Acts 14:11-15, 18). When someone comments on your well-behaved children, quickly acknowledge the use of Biblical methods. When you receive a compliment for the beautiful singing at the rest home, give your testimony regarding the message of one of the songs.

6. The Christian is willing to confront error even in those who think well of him (Acts 14:15). It may seem easy enough to challenge someone who lives in filth and depravity to make things right with the Lord. But what about challenging your business contact, who speaks well of your business, to give up his life of sin?

7. The Christian recognizes suffering for Christ's sake as part of the cost of discipleship (Acts 14: 19-22). It is harder to practice a life of self-denial when we are not being persecuted. Self-discipline in our lifestyle, our spending habits, and even our eating habits is an exercise that will better fit us to suffer directly for the cause of Christ. No cost of following Christ is too high, yet the flesh tempts us to not pay the cost unless required.

Confirming the Disciples

8. Christian growth is possible despite hardship and difficulty (Acts 14:22-23). History has proven that the church has experienced growth during persecution. We need hardship and difficulty to keep us spiritually alert, rather than prosperity, ease, and convenience.

9. The Christian, rather than focusing on the difficulties of the way, rejoices that God's work is being accomplished (Acts 14:27). This is possible only when with the apostle Paul we can say, "I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content.... I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need" (Philippians 4:11, 12).

Important Teachings

1. Opposition to the Gospel must be met with patient but un-

compromising persistence (Acts 14:1-3).

2. God's purposes are larger than our present difficulties (Acts 14:4-6).

3. In the midst of difficulties, the Christian dare not forget his primary calling (Acts 14:7).

4. Even in pressing circumstances, the Christian must remain sensitive to the individual needs of others (Acts 14:8-10).

5. The Christian rejects the opportunity for personal acclaim (Acts 14:11, 14, 15, 18).

6. The Christian is willing to confront error even in those who think well of him (Acts 14:15).

7. The Christian recognizes suffering for Christ's sake as part of the cost of discipleship (Acts 14:19-22).

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Answers to Questions

1. How did the apostles respond to the difficulties they faced at Iconium?

They did not leave at the first sign of resistance. They preached out of a sense of obligation to fulfill their God-given assignment. They spoke boldly for the Lord.

They found inspiration in knowing they were in the Lord's will. When they finally could do no more, they moved on, preaching to others who would hear.

2. How can we benefit from apparent difficulties in the Lord's work?

We must look for and seize new opportunities instead of becoming discouraged. We can encourage ourselves with the positive response of those who are accepting God's call.

We dare never question God's wisdom in placing us in trying circumstances. Remember that our present difficulty is only a

small part of the whole picture of God's plan, which He is carrying out right on time.

3. List the elements that made Paul's interaction with the impotent man effective.

Paul noticed the impotent man's spiritual interest (Acts 14:9).

He was not seeking to draw attention to himself through the miracle he performed.

His loud voice in invoking God's power to heal gave testimony to Paul's faith, which in turn influenced the impotent man to respond in faith by leaping and walking.

4. What opportunity did Paul derive from the misguided response of the people at Lystra?

The people immediately linked this miracle to the "vanities" they so ignorantly worshiped. Paul seized the opportunity to clarify that there is only one God, the living God, to whom they should turn.

5. What should be our response when men think well of us?

Be quick to point them to God, the source of our strength and knowledge. Remember that opinions of carnal men are very fickle, and they are but shallow praise, at best.

Remember that carnal men may think well of God's people only until they understand the practical claims that truth is making on their own lives.

6. How did the apostles confirm the souls of the disciples?

They encouraged them to be faithful, proving by their personal experience with persecution that their encouragements were not empty words.

They ordained leaders in every church, thus adding stability (Acts 14:23). The work of instructing existing believers is as vital to the life of the church as the work of winning new souls for Him.

They commended the disciples' spiritual safety to God, knowing that He was able to protect and preserve each soul. They knew they could not stay personally to direct them.

7. In what should the Christian rejoice in the midst of persecu-

tion?

He can rejoice in being counted worthy to suffer for the cause of Christ. He can reflect on the souls that have been saved (Acts 14:27). He can reflect on the ways that God has graciously protected and provided for him. He can look forward to the great reward that follows suffering for the cause of truth.

Summarizing the Lesson

"God leads His dear children along.

Some through the waters, some through the flood,

Some through the fire, but all through the blood;

Some through great sorrow, but God gives a song,

In the night season and all the day long."

—G. A. Young

Research Guide

Read Acts 5:12-42, and meditate on the apostles' boldness and response to difficulty. What was their burning desire that kept them from succumbing to the fear of man? We need to cultivate a fear of God that produces holy boldness, regardless of circumstances.