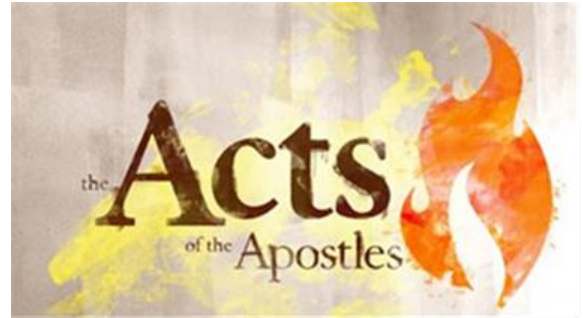


ZEUS, A STONING & IT'S JUST OUR FIRST TRIP! – PART 15

Acts 14

Acts 14 was a second round of jousting with traditional Jews who acted against the words of Paul and Barnabas. In Iconium several Jews and many Gentiles believed in and chose to follow Jesus. This angered the non-believing Jews who viewed all of this as a mix of heresy and borderline blasphemy. They encouraged



the Gentiles to oppose Paul and Barnabas and surprisingly, it worked. A group plotted to stone them to death (again, dislike the words of a prophet...so you kill them; and these were followers of the Most High God). Paul and Barnabas found out they were being targeted so they fled to the twin-cities of Lystra and Derbe, where they set up shop preaching about the Messiah/Savior Jesus.

In Lystra Paul saw a crippled man near him while preaching and decided to provide him healing. The man was exhibiting signs of faith, so Paul shouted, “Stand up on your feet!” It worked. The man jumped up and began to walk” (v.10). The Gentile crowd who witnessed the miracle responded by identifying Paul and Barnabas as gods, and not just any gods but upper echelon deities Zeus and Hermes. A priest to the Greek god Zeus from a nearby temple brought bulls and wreaths for sacrifice. This turned into a celebration of Zeus’ return.

Obviously, this wasn’t part of the outreach and evangelism plan, so Paul and Barnabas had to act quickly. In a patently Biblical act they tore their clothes and shouted, “Men, why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn away from these worthless things (such as pagan belief in non-existent gods) to the living God” (v.15).

Luke tells us even these words barely slowed the pagans down. Many were already sacrificing to the bodily return of Zeus and Hermes.

This fiasco was ample opportunity for the traditional Jews who opposed the Jesus-centered message. They successfully turned the crowd against Paul and Barnabas, possibly shouting, “These guys are not Zeus and Hermes, they are imposters, false prophets!” The “moments ago we were deifying these men” turned on a proverbial dime and now they were rushing them and taking them outside the City gate to be stoned. Paul was stoned and left for dead but being Paul, he was neither dead nor done. Luke tells us several believers surrounded him and he got up and re-entered the city (this guy just won’t give up). Soon afterwards they left town.

Possibly sore from being unsuccessfully stoned to death, Paul and Barnabas head to a new city where they preach and see a large number of people choose to follow Jesus. Then (surprisingly) they return to Lystra, the scene of the stoning, before going to Iconium and Antioch. In these places they continue to add disciples and provide strength and stability for the growing number of believers.

Their message is both constructive and instructive: Remain true to the faith and know hardships will come. Chapter 14:22 reads, “...strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. ‘We must go through many hardships to enter the Kingdom of God.’” Ain’t that the truth.

Soon afterwards they appointed elders and committed them to each assembly (now being called churches), then they left for Pisidia, Pamphylia, Perga and Attalia. This swing concluded the first missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas.

Takeaways:

1. The movement was growing, and it was attracting many more Gentiles than Jews. This new reality meant that fewer and fewer synagogues were open to Jesus followers. This necessitated the formation of assemblies, or churches, for the worship, teaching and common good of the believers. A change of structure and practice was in play as the “Gentile” church was being born, again, out of necessity, and I would argue not part of the “Grand Plan.” Remember, Jesus came for the Jews as their long-awaited

Messiah. If the majority of Jews had accepted and followed Jesus, Gentiles (and us today) would be worshipping more like traditional Jews than we do today.

2. More churches made up of former pagans (worshippers of multiple gods/goddesses) would need more care and feeding than those made up of complete Jews, thus the need for elders (and later pastors and teachers). The church was being formed.
3. The aforementioned persecution, which Paul calls “hardships,” was becoming more frequent (I suppose being stoned would count). The church and following Jesus in the late first century would be a difficult life. People would die and many would leave the church fearing for their lives. Virtually all the original disciples and many early followers would die martyr’s deaths. “Hardships” would be real, and we should realize just how few we have in the modern church. We are not a persecuted people.
4. The world is a bigger place than the early believers imagined. Paul and Barnabas were racking up frequent flier miles and this was just the beginning. This was missionary journey number one. There were more and bigger trips to come. We are called to impact the world for the Kingdom. It’s a really big task. Are we up to it? Do we really want to be up to it?

Some go. Some give. Some pray. It takes each of the three to get the task accomplished. I hope you find yourself in one of these options.

Amen and Amen.

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