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## Pressing On Acts 14:1-28

**Intro:** The evangelistic work of Paul and Barnabas in Antioch of Pisidia would be considered a success under normal circumstances, even more so when you realize that this explosion of converts to the Gospel message occurred in just 8 days. Initial results are seen in [13:48-49](#). This passage reveals the 2 necessary sides of effective evangelism. There is the divine side: God has His elect people as is indicated by [Eph 1:4](#); [Rom 11:7](#), [Col 3:12](#), [1 Peter 1:2](#), etc. The word appointed refers to being enrolled. The people of God have their names written down in God's book of Life. Questioning whether those names are written down before or after the individual is saved seems rational from our perspective but when we consider that God is completely outside the limits of our time-space continuum universe then it becomes a moot point. God has perfect knowledge so He already knows the end from the beginning.

The other side of effective evangelism is the human side and that is seen in [13:49](#). If we as God's people and servants do not take the Gospel into the world and share the Word, then nobody will believe and be saved. Yes, God knows all who have been appointed to salvation but He has appointed us, His people, the task of carrying the message of hope and leading the lost to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. That's what Paul and Barnabas have set out to do and that's exactly what all those new believers in Pisidian Antioch were doing. The message of salvation was a breath of fresh air in a culture smothered by pagan ritual and dead ceremony. They weren't about to try and keep this to themselves.

But, as the message of the Gospel was seeing such great acceptance and success, it also began to see some well organized resistance. As we proceed through the missionary efforts of Paul and Barnabas, we begin to see a certain pattern developing in each area of new ministry. We've already seen it in Antioch and we'll see it again in [ch14](#) as they visit 3 cities in Galatia. First the apostles will preach and then, as a result of their preaching, there is division, persecution and true spiritual growth. Each of these happens in varying degrees in each case.

Preaching- There is a school of thought in some churches that recognizes the interest of today's society in things that are spectacular and they insist that miracles are the key to having an effective evangelistic outreach. The idea is that, after you've gotten people's attention by doing miracles then you will have an open door to preach the Gospel. Now, there were times in the 1<sup>st</sup> century when God did work miracles through the apostles as we will see. But the apostles did not go into these cities to do miracles, and then preach. It was always the other way around: They went in to preach; then sometimes there were signs and wonders performed. The miracles proved that the apostles were God's true messengers. It was how God authenticated them before there was a NT.

Division- When the Word is preached it always produces a division. Division means some will readily accept the message and some will adamantly reject it. We saw it happen constantly in the ministry of Jesus; we'll see it in the ministry of Paul and it happens when the gospel is preached today. When the light of God's Word comes into a dark area (human heart / environment) it does what light always does: it causes things to grow. The Gospel produces a warming of the heart that brings forth the fruit of the spiritual life God has already put there. It also causes the creatures of the dark to scatter. Jesus said some people won't come to the light "because their deeds were evil."

Persecution- When the message is rejected, opposition quickly develops and can become so intense that it leads to the persecution of the messengers. We will also see this again and again. Gentiles from this or that area (or Jews from this or that city) got so stirred up that they moved against Paul and his ministry team. He has to flee from city to city and his adversaries will even pursue him to new cities to foment opposition against him there.

Growth- In spite of the division and resulting persecution, the apostles always left a growing church behind. We know it was growing in this area because after Paul and Barnabas had visited and been thrown out of the cities of Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe the first time, when they went back to visit those they had left, in each case they found that each church was prospering.

How is this possible? The apostles had left behind only a small core of

believers, and these had hardly been taught anything, since the apostles had only been there at best for a few weeks. How could this little group survive? It survived because the work was actually being done by God. The church was His church. Thus, years later, in spite of persecution and lack of fellowship with strong believers, these churches were still thriving. This is especially true of the churches Paul will establish in the next 3 cities. These churches make up the core of the group known as the Galatians and judging from Paul's letter to them later, they had their difficulties. They were on their own for many years and they had been assaulted with a lot of false teaching but they were true churches and they remained strong for centuries. In the proceeding centuries, the churches in Asia Minor would be a fortress of authentic Christianity.

**1-6** – Paul and Barnabas had just experienced great success in Antioch but they had also just been expelled from the city. To our sensitive, modern minds, that would be enough to drive us out of the ministry for good. “Well, if it's going to be like that then...” Of course it's going to be like that – it has to be like that if you're doing it right! But, as products of our own TV culture, we've been trained to believe that all problems work themselves out in 30 minutes, or an hour tops. We think everything should just pan out and be hunky-dory and if it's not then something is seriously wrong. But that's just not the case, not at all. Often times, our expectation of comfortable success stems from a greater interest in our own stability and a lack of interest in the Lord's leading.

Things were just starting to take off in Antioch, why did Paul and Barnabas have to leave? Wasn't there much more work to be done? Here was another opportunity to build up a great teaching and preaching church after the pattern of their sending church in Syrian Antioch. In fact, this was the greatest occurrence of Gentiles coming to salvation yet seen in Acts. Were they only to have a small part in building this church? Apparently so! Why did God allow this persecution to drive them away? Because He knew there would be great success in other cities with other people. Sometime persecution is more than just Satan's attack. Oftentimes it is God closing one door so we will be more willing to go through a different open door. Would it have been easier for God to just tell them to go? I think God spoke loud enough in this particular instance. The missionaries move on to Iconium.

Again, we see them going into the synagogue and preaching the Gospel and the message falls on very receptive ears. A great multitude of Jews and Greeks believed! This success was refreshing after being thrown out of Antioch and it was confirmation that they were moving in the right direction, responding to the Lord's leading. See, God also had people in Iconium that needed to hear the Gospel so, since Paul and Co. were in the vicinity – they fit the bill.

True to form, the preaching of the Gospel brings a division and the subsequent success of the Gospel message brings persecution. Immediately, opposition arises from the unbelieving Jews who moved quickly to poison the minds of the Gentiles against the truth. Because of this, Paul and Co. stayed a long time, teaching and preaching the truth. How long? As long as they could, only leaving when it was absolutely necessary. They stayed because they knew these new Christians needed all the grounding they could get in order to be able to stand strong in a city with so much opposition. Obviously, it took a while for the opposition to become serious, so they stayed and continued to preach boldly and freely, facilitating real spiritual growth on the part of those who believed.

Notice that vs3 says that the apostles were granted the ability to perform signs and wonders, obviously by God, to authenticate the message of God's grace. This little bit of information reveals 2 important truths. 1) Apostles did not have the capacity inherent in themselves to perform miracles. This power was only present on certain occasions by a special granting from God. This power did not reside in them at all times. 2) Even though the Gospel was divinely authenticated by the performance of signs and wonders by the apostles, nearly half the city still refused to believe. Miracle may provide evidence of the truth but they don't create faith.

**7-18** – At first glance, it might seem like this contradicts what I previously said about miracles and preaching. It looks like Paul and Co. went into this city and the first thing they did was heal a lame man but that's not the case. The work of evangelism in Lystra didn't start with a healing – it began with them speaking (7). Paul did what he always did; he went into the city and preached. It was while he was preaching that he noticed the lame man, who was giving great attention to his sermon. Paul perceived that the man had faith to be healed and so healed him. This man was lame from birth and was known to be so by nearly everyone in town so this was quite an earth-

shattering miracle for them.

Upon moving to Lystra, they passed into an area where they no longer understood the local language. In the ancient world, almost everyone spoke Greek, even if it wasn't their native tongue. Here, the folks seemed more comfortable with their tribal language. When the miracle happened, there was a great response but Paul and Barnabas couldn't understand what they were saying about it. They could tell the people were impressed and excited, but to what end?

So they continued on their way, not really understanding what was going on, when they came upon a procession moving out of the city toward them. A priest was leading an animal that had been made ready for sacrifice. It was then that they discovered to their horror that the people were coming to sacrifice to them.

Clearly, these were a pagan, superstitious people. In fact, there was a local myth that said Zeus and Hermes had visited the area before, going from house to house, but everyone refused to take them in. Finally, an old couple invited them to stay the night in their poor hovel. The next day, Zeus and Hermes escorted them out of the city and up on a mountain and when they looked back, the valley had been flooded and everyone in it had perished. This story was well known in Lystra. When Paul reformed the miracle, they naturally thought Zeus and Hermes had returned and they certainly didn't want to offend them this time, knowing what happened the last time.

But, while the people of Lystra are merely confused, Paul and Barnabas are aghast! They tore their clothes to show they were completely human and because it was a distinctive Jewish reaction to blasphemy. For these missionaries, it wasn't just inconvenient that they were considered gods – it was blasphemy! We can see Paul's emotion when he warns them that they should turn from these useless things! These were strong words to a people who took their pagan worship seriously, but Paul wasn't afraid to confront this crowd with the truth and the truth was that their idolatry was wrong and they needed to turn from it. Paul was going to tell them about Jesus and Jesus is not just another deity that can be added into an already full pagan pantheon. It's Jesus and only Jesus or it's everything else.

Here's another of Paul's sermons but it's markedly different than the one

recorded in **ch14**. In fact, it's different than all the sermon recorded thus far in Acts. So far, in every instance – whether it's Peter, Stephen or Paul preaching, the sermons have been very similar: quote from the OT; rehearse God's great acts in delivering His people and then point them to their rightful focus in Jesus Christ. But that can't happen here. Paul is speaking to a pagan Gentile audience with no knowledge of OT Scripture. He couldn't declare God's great acts for Israel because they wouldn't have understood that. So he starts with something they would understand and spoke of God as the Creator!

Paul made it clear that there is but one God and He is the living God, the giving God and the forgiving God. He has been patient with the sinning nations and has not judged them for their sins as they deserve. We don't know if Paul stopped here or was able to preach the Gospel. Luke just tells us they barely kept them crowd from sacrificing to them. We know Paul preached the Gospel to them eventually because many would believe. Because of this, the same divisions and persecutions happened here just as they did elsewhere.

**19-20** – Oh, how fickle the crowd! The same crowd that was ready to worship Paul one day was ready to stone him on another day – and they did! These disgruntled Gentiles had succeeded where all these other Jews had failed. Everywhere Paul went, he left a trail of broken hearts – Jews who wanted to kill him but never could. They had set themselves up for disappointment. But the Gentiles in Lystra finally got him – or at least they thought they did. They stoned Paul, normally an effective form of execution; they dragged him out of the city and then left him for dead.

But, the new converts – the ones who'd recently been saved through Paul's preaching – they gathered around him. They stood by Paul! Undoubtedly, they were doing quite a bit of praying; and Paul got up! Did Paul actually die? We don't know. Some people link this event with Paul's recollection of a man visiting heaven in **II Cor 12** but that is just speculation. We won't really know until we get to heaven; then we can ask Paul ourselves. Obviously, this was a sign for Paul and Co. to move on. Of course, this was much more than a sign. God would use this experience to not only strengthen Paul's faith but that of his companions and the faith of those new converts he is about to leave behind.

**21-28** – Luke’s record of the work in Derbe is brief and the focus is on growth. There’s no mention of division or persecution but we know it occurred to some degree in some way, maybe not organized and determined but still present and oppressive. But, in spite of that, they still made many disciples there. There is no church in Derbe today – the city is just a ruin. But, there was a church there and it was a strong church for a long, long time.

Well, after this, Paul and Barnabas must have thought they had gone just about as far as God wanted them to go at that time so, now what are they going to do? Believe it or not, after creating a wave of unrest through the region of Galatia, they decided to go back to all the places they had stopped and visit all the churches they had left behind! Talk about gluttons for punishment! Not really, these missionaries had just as much of a desire to strengthen new converts as they did to make new converts. So, going back to those cities where they had been persecuted and expelled or even left for dead, they did a number of things to help build up the new believers.

They gave encouragement. The new believers were called to live for Jesus in hostile, pagan communities and they didn’t even know much about him. So the apostles went back to encourage them. They taught them. Paul taught them the reality and purpose of suffering (**22**) and other things as well. They organized the church. Here for the first time in Acts we find the appointing of elders (**23**). These men they hadn’t been Christians very long, hadn’t known the Gospel very long. But, Paul had faith in what God was doing. The last thing Paul did (and probably the first thing) is that he prayed for them (**23**). We should be praying too, praying for those to whom we witness and for the church.

They finally make it back to Antioch in Syria – their sending church – and are able to report and all that the Lord had done for the Gentiles. The completed work was that of this particular journey, the first of 3 Paul would make. This was just the first stage and it had been completed! That’s a great thing to be able to say. How many Christians have started out in a work but never finished it! Too many give up because of the hardships, divisions, persecutions. But, the victory is not to those who start. It’s to those who finish. Paul did it, not just here but during his entire life. When he came to the end he was able to say, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (**II Tim 4:7**). Paul raced the whole way to the

finish line and when he reached it he passed over into glory. Will we be able to say the same thing?

Why didn't Paul die? He didn't die because God had more for him to do! In the same way, if God has more work for you to do, you can't die either. God will keep you living until you accomplish His will for your life, because the God who has ordained your salvation has also at the same time ordained good works for you to do (Eph 2:10) "that you should walk in them." 😊