

The Problem of Unbelief

Acts: The Spirit Moving / Acts 14:8-20 / November 16, 2025

Introduction:

Last week, we covered the opposition Paul and Barnabas faced to the gospel message at Antioch in Pisidia and Iconium in Acts 13:44-14:7, seeing how they remained sensitive to the Spirit's work and guidance to take the gospel to the Gentiles, shaking off the dust from their feet as a sign of judgement against those who rejected the gospel before moving on. The consistent theme in those stories was a stark contrast of belief and unbelief as opposition intensified in each location. Our passage today, in Acts 14:8-20, continues that theme to draw out the problem of unbelief and point to our only hope. Let's remember the setting from Acts 14:5-7, "When an attempt was made by both Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to mistreat them and to stone them, they learned of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding country, and there they continued to preach the gospel." After an attempt is made to stone Paul and Barnabas at Iconium, they flee to cities of Lystra and Derbe and note how verse 7 ends, "there they continued to preach the gospel." Despite those threats, they are continuing to faithfully preach the gospel and our story this morning is set within that faithfulness, containing two things that deepen our understanding of how God works through gospel proclamation. Let's observe these things together. First, in verses 8-13, we see,

A Familiar Miracle & Common Reaction

Consider if anything sound familiar to you in verses 8-10. Look there with me, "Now at Lystra there was a man sitting who could not use his feet. He was crippled from birth and had never walked. He listened to Paul speaking. And Paul, looking intently at him and seeing that he had faith to be made well, said in a loud voice, 'Stand upright on your feet.' And he sprang up and began walking." Note the detailed description of the man's condition, he "could not use his feet...was crippled from birth and had never walked." Why does Luke triple down on emphasizing his inability to walk from time he was born? Listen to Acts 3:1-2, "Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour. And a man lame from birth was being carried, whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple." If we compare these stories, the similarities continue. In verse 9, Paul looks intently at this man, just as Peter did in Acts 3:4. In verse 10, after Paul commands the man to rise, Luke says he "sprang up," which is the same sequence of events in Acts 3:6 and 8. Luke is intentionally linking these two events together. As God began Peter's ministry to the Jews with the miraculous healing of a man lame from birth, He begins Paul's ministry to the Gentiles with the same miraculous healing. However, in Acts 3, Peter declares the power of Jesus of Nazareth before healing the lame man. Here, Paul simply heals him. Why isn't the same declaration used? Because Jesus' healing power has been established to be connected to faith in the gospel and Luke is drawing our attention to a particular truth about that faith. Follow the flow of this story with me. The scene opens with Paul and Barnabas preaching the gospel and notice what this man was doing. He was sitting and "listened to Paul speaking." While he was soaking up the gospel Paul looked at him and saw "that he had faith to be made well." The Greek for "made well" can mean "be saved." Where Luke in Acts 3 focuses on Peter's proclamation of the source of power and the lame man's faith in response, in our passage he focuses on Paul recognizing saving faith was taking place inside this man's heart as what led to the release of Christ's healing power. Hang on to that, because we will come back to it at the end. Notice how the story continues in verses 11-13, "And when the crowds saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in Lycaonian, 'The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!' Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. And the priest of Zeus, whose temple was at the entrance to the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds." Luke quickly shifts to the crowds reaction who, upon seeing this miracle, appear to fall back on an ancient myth recorded in Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. The legend speaks of the Roman gods Jupiter and Atlas (Zues and Hermes in Greek Mythology) visiting a place in "the Phrygian hill country" disguised as mortals.

Upon arrival, they seek lodging from a thousand homes with no one willing to house them, until an old couple, Philemon and Baucis, extend warm hospitality towards them. In response to the couple's hospitality, the gods transform their humble home into a magnificent temple, appointing them as the priest and priestess before destroying every house in the area with a flood as punishment for their lack of hospitality. The legend was meant to serve as a warning against not welcoming the gods properly, and the crowd's response appears to be tied to that legend. They assume Barnabas and Paul are Zeus and Hermes visiting, leading the priest of Zeus' temple to bring out sacrifices to pay homage. This is a common reaction to God's power in Acts. In Acts 3, everyone rushed to Solomon's Portico attributing that healing power to the holiness of Peter and John. Here, the crowds in Lystra attribute it to false gods and mythological stories. Church, the natural inclination of the human heart is miss the glory of God even when it is right before our eyes. Think about it. Paul and Barnabas had been preaching about the majesty and glory of Jesus in the gospel throughout Lycaonia, and this man healing came while listening to Paul's preaching. Common sense would attribute it to the power of Jesus. Yet, they are quick to attribute the power to something else. They needed help to see the glory they were missing. Which brings us to the next thing we see in verses 14-19,

A Pointed Appeal & Tragic Response

As the story reaches its climax with the priest of Zeus preparing to offer sacrifices, pay attention to the resolution in verses 14-17. Look at verse 14, "But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it." Let's pause for a moment to answer a question that comes from this. Why is Barnabas called an apostle? It is important to understand the Greek term "ἀπόστολος" is used in Scripture to refer to two different groups of people. First, are the apostles of Christ, those who had seen the resurrected Jesus and were commissioned by Him. This is the ministry of apostleship spoken of in Acts 1:12-26 where Matthias was numbered with the eleven apostles to replace Judas. This ministry came with authority to establish God's New Covenant people and Paul becomes the last apostle, commissioned by Jesus in Acts 9 as the apostle to the Gentiles. This is confirmed in 1 Corinthians 15:7-9, where Paul says, "Then [Christ] appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God." The second group of people this term is used for are those commissioned and sent out by local churches for gospel work. We identify them as missionaries today. In 2 Corinthians 8:23, Paul speaks of the brothers in ministry as, "messengers [ἀπόστολος] of the churches." I am persuaded this is Luke's intended use here and likely why Barnabas comes first, as Barnabas and Paul were commissioned by the church at the beginning of Acts 13. With that understood, continue in verses 14-17, "But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their garments and rushed out into the crowd, crying out. Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, 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 past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness." Realizing the severity of what was taking place, Barnabas and Paul tear their garments to emphasize the dangers of blasphemy and rush into the crowd, crying out to stop them. As the pair's spokesman, Paul speaks and, just like Peter did in Acts 3, begins by proclaiming they are men operating under another's power and authority. Then, instead of recounting Scripture like the synagogue sermon, he appeals to them from its overarching truth. And what is that appeal? Turn from the foolish pursuit of empty idols and to the one true living God, who created all things and provides for all things. The God, Paul says, who allowed the nations to walk in their own ways but left them a witness to His goodness through His gracious activity in their lives. Family, consider how this shapes our own witness. Humanity's ultimate problem goes beyond immoral actions in this world. We have to help people see that sin, at its root, is a rejection of God's goodness and grace. God says He is the fountain of living waters and we choose instead to chase so many other things.

Our ultimate problem is denying the living God who satisfies our hearts with gladness, while replacing Him with various kinds of idols that will never satisfy. Saving faith must include turning towards God and all of His grace is designed to draw hearts toward Him. Yet, our story speaks to the tragic reality of the human heart. Look at verses 18-19, “Even with these words they scarcely restrained the people from offering sacrifice to them. But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead.” These responses show the problem of unbelief. Paul’s appeal doesn’t lead to saving faith. Rather, it barely kept the people from committing blasphemy and unbelieving Jews, traveling more than one hundred miles from Antioch and Iconium, persuade the crowds to move from idolizing the missionaries to stoning Paul and leaving him for dead. Imagine this turn with me. At one point, the crowds are praising Barnabas and Paul, equating them with the gods, and soon after they are treating Paul like a criminal and hurling stones at him before dragging him out of the city half dead. Does this ring a bell? Jesus was heralded as the promised Messiah with crowds rejoicing as He rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Yet, He too would be tried shortly after and crucified in the place of a notorious criminal. Unbelief leads hearts to foolish things. It causes hearts to deny God’s witness to His power and glory, attribute clear evidence of Christ’s healing power to false gods and pursue His messengers and stone them out of jealousy. Church, the intensified opposition we have seen to the gospel highlights the depravity of the human heart. The common reaction to God’s power displayed and tragic response to Paul’s appeal to turn to the all-satisfying God remind us of our need for God to do something we could never do in our own strength and power. Without His intervention through the life, death, and resurrection Jesus Christ, without the power of His Spirit moving in our hearts, we are hopeless. We would respond to His goodness and grace in the same tragic ways. That is one of Luke’s main points in this section of His narrative. Yet, praise God that is not the only point. Along the way, there have been signs of hope. In Acts 13:48, when the Gentiles heard the message of salvation was for them, “they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.” At Iconium in Acts 14:1, “a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed.” And, while it is hidden, there is hope in our passage. Look back at verse 9. What did Paul see? “That he had faith to be made well.” He saw the Spirit moving in his heart. 2 Corinthians 4:4 and 6 tell us that for those who don’t believe, “the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” But, to those who do believe, “God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” When Paul looked intently at the crippled man, he recognized the work of God opening His eyes to the glory of Christ. So, yes, the crowd’s response was tragic, but this man’s response was grace-filled. And there is more hope in Luke’s narrative. Peak into our passage for next week in verses 20-22. Note two things. First, rather than dying, Paul rises up and goes back into the city before moving onto Derbe. Second, he and Barnabas, “returned to Lystra... strengthening the souls of the disciples.” We only see one response of faith in Lystra. Did Paul preach the gospel again when he went back into the city? Were there more who believed before this tragic response? We don’t know for sure, but what we do know is God wasn’t done with the people of Lystra. There were more souls appointed to eternal life. More hearts God would shine the light of His glory in. Family, that is the motivation we need to boldly and unashamedly proclaim the grace of God in the gospel. God is not done saving people and He will open the eyes of the blind.

Conclusion:

As the worship team comes to lead us in a time of reflection and response, let these things speak to your hearts. No one is too far gone. If you are here and haven’t responded to the gospel of Christ, God is proclaiming His goodness to you in these stories. See the glory of Jesus Christ and ask Him to make you well. Desire His grace to save you from your vain pursuits and help you turn to Him to satisfy you with gladness.

If you are living for Christ, and are discouraged by people's depravity and lack of response to the gospel, cling to Isaiah 55:10-11, where God promises, "as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it." Let that truth embolden you to continue sharing the hope of the gospel, knowing that "faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ." If you are struggling in the fight the fight of faith, don't rely on your own strength. Turn to the living God and trust in His promise from Philippians 1:6, "that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ," knowing that God "works in you both to will and to work for His good pleasure." Sometimes the vain thing we need to turn from first is our self-reliance. Draw near to God today and He will draw near to you. He will give you strength. He will uphold you with His righteous right hand. In all circumstances, the exhortation is the same. Everything comes down to faith, which is trusting in all God promises to be for us in Christ. Hebrews 11:1 & 6 tells us, "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen...And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him." Turn in faith to the living God who will reward all who seek him. As you respond, you are welcome to come to the front and kneel before him in a posture of humility. We also have a team of people ready to pray with you and for you who will be worshipping on the front rows with lanyards on. Pray with me as we turn our eyes upon Jesus.