

Group Study Outline

Acts 14:1-28 Theme Sentence

Paul continues to establish Gentile churches, despite severe opposition.

Launching Question:

What do you think our Christian life/our church life should be like, normally?

Summarise the story of Acts ... from 1:8; 8:1-4; 9:15-16; 13:1-3.

READ Acts 14:1-7

How is the experience of Paul and Barnabas in Iconium typical of Acts so far?

When should we remain' (3)? when should we 'flee' (6)?

What does this passage tell us about the purpose of signs and wonders?

READ Acts 14:8-20

How is the experience of Paul and Barnabas in Lystra typical of Acts so far?

What is different here?

What is the significance of the mistaken identity given to Paul and Barnabas?

Why is it significant that a lame man is lying helpless near a pagan temple?

Thinking it through

This incident is very like the start of Jesus' ministry in Luke 4, and Peter's healing in Acts 3. Assuming this is deliberate, what might be Luke's point(s)?

Where does the opposition to the gospel come from?

Why do you think we need to keep being told this (repeatedly throughout Acts)?

How does Paul tailor his sermon (15-17) to speak into this very pagan context?

OPTIONAL EXTRA:

READ 1 Thes 1:9-10

Is this a good summary of what Paul preaches in Lystra?

Thinking it through

What do you think we can learn from this for our gospel preaching in UK today?

READ Acts 14:20-28

As Paul returns to re-visit all his new church plants, what does he give to them?

What is his encouragement? how is this encouraging?!

Why do we need to know that 'tribulations' are the normal Christian life?

What is the missionaries' report back to their sending, home base?

Why is this significant for the unfolding story/the structure of the book of Acts?

So why is this significant for us?

This chapter has given us a snapshot of a missionary's experience, of how churches are planted, and of what we should expect in the Christian life.

What themes link all this together?

So what is it that we should expect our Christian life/our church life to be like?

Acts 14:1-28



The story so far ...

The ascended Lord Jesus has gifted his apostles with the Holy Spirit, just as he promised (John 16:7ff), to become his 'witnesses', declaring 'what we have seen and heard' (4:20). They preach in Jerusalem, 'to the Jew first' (Rom 1:16), following the example of Jesus (cf his command when he first sent them out in Matt 10:6-7). But just as Jesus had promised in 1:8, 'the word of God is to increase' from Jerusalem into the 'half-Jewish' territory of Judea and Samaria: significantly, this largely happened as Jewish persecution caused preachers of the word to be 'scattered' (8:1-4). But the plan was that the gospel should go much further, 'to the end of the earth': it 'must first be proclaimed to all nations' (Mark 13:10). And so Paul is chosen and commissioned as Jesus' 'apostle to the Gentiles' (Rom 11:13) 'to carry my name before the Gentiles ... to suffer for my name' (8:15-16).

In 13:1-3, Paul and Barnabas are sent off from the new Christian church's head-quarters in Antioch to take the gospel into the pagan world.

Significantly, Paul preaches exactly the same gospel on his first missionary journey. And although his priority is still to go to the Jew first, he regularly meets opposition from the Jewish authorities that expels him from the synagogue to preach to any who will hear ...

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Acts 14:1-28 Theme Sentence

Paul continues to establish Gentile churches, despite severe opposition.

Application

- **Opposition and 'tribulations'** are the normal Christian life. 'Do not be surprised at the fiery trial ... as though something strange were happening to you' (1 Peter 4:12). Let's 'encourage' ourselves and one another to continue as Christians, not knocked off course by hardship.
- The normal means God uses to grow his church are **suffering and persecution**. Are there other Christians (particularly those in situations of hardship) that we could encourage with the examples in this passage?
- The mighty power of Jesus glimpsed in this passage (through the healing of the paralytic) is a good reminder that **the forces of opposition will never overwhelm us**. Because it is God's unstoppable gospel, we are on the winning side in the battle.
- As Gentiles are received into the Christian church on an equal footing, we should follow Paul's flexibility by preaching exactly the same gospel but so as 'to win them'. How **is our gospel culturally exclusivist?**

Commentary

This chapter forms the second half of Paul's 'first missionary journey' (which begins in 13:1). It's worth plotting the place names on a map to see that Paul's route is not a loop, but a 'there-and-back': he will retrace his steps to 'return' (14:21) to all the places where he'd evangelised and planted churches.

1-5 In Iconium, Luke describes a repeat of the 'normal' pattern that he's just described in Pisidian Antioch (in 13:14-52):

- Paul preached in the synagogue, and some accepted the message;
- Gentiles heard the message, and some accepted it;
- those rejecting the message in the synagogue ensure Paul leaves.

Typically then in the missionary expansion of the early church, evangelistic preaching produces a divided response, and equally typically, vicious opposition comes from the religious authorities. But as we've seen repeatedly since 8:1-4, disciples on the run from hostility are the very means God uses to ensure the gospel spreads to new regions.

Note Paul's differing reactions as he is opposed: sometimes he stays (3), sometimes he flees (6) (cf 13:45-46 and 50). Perhaps the lesson here is that shaking the dust from our feet (13:51) is not to be a knee-jerk first reaction, but neither is martyrdom something to be sought!

8-20 In Lystra, different to the previous pattern of either faith or rejection, the people seek to deify, idolise and make sacrifices to Paul and Barnabas (11-14).

It begins with Paul's first recorded healing. Compare this with ...

(a) Luke's account of the start of Jesus' ministry (in Luke 4):

Luke		Acts	
4:1-13	Jesus confronts the devil	13:4-12	Paul confronts Bar-Jesus, child of the devil
4:14-30	Jesus preaches in the synagogue and is rejected	13:13-43	Paul preaches in the synagogue to a divided response
4:38-44; 5:17-26	Jesus heals many, including a paralytic	14:8-10	Paul heals a paralytic

(b) Luke's account of Peter's healing of the lame man in Acts 3: both men were lame from birth, both were healed in the vicinity of a temple, and both evangelists are opposed by the Jewish leaders.

Put these two striking comparisons together, and we see that ...

- Paul's ministry continues 'all that Jesus began to do and to teach' (1:1), just as Peter's had done.
- Jewish opposition to Christian ministry is ever-present (and Luke may be suggesting that behind this, lies Satanic opposition).
- both Jewish and pagan temples can do nothing for the 'paralysed-from-birth' who must wait outside, helpless: Jesus alone can heal. And because Jesus alone can help, in both 3:12 and 14:15 the apostles are at pains to deflect attention away from themselves.

The role of signs and wonders

This story gives a helpful pointer to the purpose of signs and wonders in Acts. Joel prophesied them (2:19), Jesus did them (2:22) and so did the apostles (2:43; 5:13), 'senior Christians' (6:8; 8:6, 13), and Paul and Barnabas (14:3, 15:12). There is a significant OT background to all this (cf 7:36). 'Signs and wonders' were the miraculous acts God performed as he delivered his people from Egypt (and around two-thirds of the OT references refer to the Exodus). 'Signs and wonders' after that time indicate moments when God is doing something in saving history as important as the Exodus. Acts 2:22 is saying far more than that Jesus performed miracles (which would be wonderful enough!) ... but that Jesus' life, death and resurrection were being attested by God as saving events on the eternal time-line. Similarly, in Acts, when people are enabled to perform 'wonders and miraculous signs' (2:43) Luke is saying more than that they had a healing ministry ... he's saying that God was attesting that these events in Acts are part of his saving plan. So, 14:3 says that 'the Lord bore witness to the word of his grace' for these apostolic miracles are God's authentication of their message. For sure, people are saved today, and miracles happen today ... but neither should be given the Biblically-significant title of 'signs and wonders' because such things today cannot have the ground-breaking significance of that first generation. (Cf 2 Cor 12:12 also, and note the context for the highly significant phrase 'the signs of a true apostle'.)

15-17 Luke's pattern has been to give a full account of an apostle's preaching the first time it occurs (eg 2:14-40; 13:16-41), and then briefer notes thereafter. But this sermon by Paul is significantly different, spoken as it is into Gentile culture at its most ignorant, idolatrous and murderous. It provides a good example of Paul's flexibility (in becoming a Gentile in order to win Gentiles cf 1 Cor 9:20-23). In summary, his points are:

- God the creator of heaven and earth has shown kindness to you by giving rain, crops, food and joy;
- People should therefore turn from idolatry to the living God;
- God's attitude to humanity had been patient acceptance, but that has now changed (cf Acts 17:30).

Another good summary of this message is given in 1 Thes 1:9-10.

20-23 describe Paul's missionary, church-planting ministry. His method is to visit the largest city of a region, preach the gospel there so a church is formed by converts, and move on (cf Rom 15:20). He returns later to provide 'encouragement' and 'elders': it has been suggested that this return trip is the kind of (episcopal?!) oversight a local church needs.

What will 'encourage' new Christians? It's being taught realistic expectations of normal Christian experience. Just as Paul must 'suffer for my name' (9:16), so all disciples 'through many tribulations' (14:22) must enter the kingdom of God. 'The Western church often seems too preoccupied with success or growth to notice that these are not alternatives to suffering and persecution, but their twins' (Green).

25 Perga is the one place that Paul evangelises on the return trip, perhaps because he appears not to have done so on the way out (cf 13:13-14).