

Opening the door of faith to the Pagan Gentiles

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The video version is available at: <https://youtu.be/Ys6ohEucs5E>

The scripture reading is: Acts 14:1-28

In this chapter of Luke's account of Paul's journeys, Paul and his traveling companions are in Iconium in the province of Galatia. In this city not only do many receive Paul's message, but Paul encounters much hostility and sharply divided opinions regarding Gentile inclusion in salvation and in the community.

Acts 14:1-2 NKJV 1 Now it happened in Iconium that they went together to the synagogue of the Jews, and so spoke that a great multitude both of the Jews and of the Greeks believed. 2 But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brethren.

when Paul travels to Lystra and Derbi we witness for the first time Paul's encounter with out-right pagan Gentiles who do not attend the synagogues as God-fearers and have no concept of the God of Israel.

Here in the province of Galatia, we see for the first time the development of a major divide between the believing and non-believing Jews. This leads to not only trouble for the God-fearers but for Paul and many of the Jewish disciples as well.

Thus far in Paul's journey, we have seen that he travels to the Jewish communities in the diaspora bringing the message of salvation and repentance to both the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles attending the synagogues. He had received the endorsement of the Jerusalem Council and, with the assistance of Barnabas, had broken down many of the halachic barriers bringing both Jew and God-fearing Gentile together in a unified community in Syrian Antioch.

Paul begins the next phase of his mission by traveling to Iconium where he once again takes his gospel of Gentile inclusion to the synagogues of that city. It first appears that his message is well received, yet there is growing opposition. This opposition is coming from the non-believing Jews, but there is another group also joining this opposition. Who are they? It seems unlikely that the pagan Gentile population of Iconium would take any interest in a theological dispute within the rather isolated Jewish community. But that seems to be what is happening.

Many Gentiles were flocking to the Jewish communities and the Roman government at this time had sanctioned Judaism as a legitimate religion, but Gentiles were not supposed to act as Jews. Paul's gospel message of Gentile inclusion not only broke down the barriers of Gentile inclusion within the Jewish community, it also allowed for the Gentiles to separate themselves from the greater society at large, thus creating an entirely different legal tangle for the surrounding pagan society.

Jews were protected from certain legal requirements to participate in the imperial cult, but no one else, not even God-fearers were exempt. First Fruits of Zion in "Chronicles of the Apostles" comments:

"Paul's God-fearing Galatian converts were, of course, ex-pagans who previously participated in the imperial cult... Civic duty and social expectations required their participation in the idolatrous cults. To abstain from participation in these civic religious functions disrupted relationships with family, friends, business associates, and civic authority."ⁱ

As we have seen previously, and here in Galatia, the Jewish community for the most part tolerated the God-fearers only to a point. They were not granted status as legal Jews and therefore not protected from their otherwise legal and civic responsibilities to Roman society.

The opposition in the Galatian province exploited this apparent legal and social status limbo, and enlisted help from the pagan Gentile community to fight against Paul and his gospel message of Gentile inclusion. Apparently, many of the God-fearing Gentiles, including those who became believers and brothers under Paul's teaching, tried to take the middle road and still participate in the pagan practices right along-side of their new religious status as followers of Yeshua. Later, when Paul wrote his epistle to the Galatians, he addresses the God-fearers, chastising them for their mixed practices.

Galatians 4:8-11 NKJV 8 But then, indeed, when you did not know God, you served those which by nature are not gods. 9 But now after you have known God, or rather are known by God, how is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire again to be in bondage? 10 You observe days and months and seasons and years. 11 I am afraid for you, lest I have labored for you in vain.

Is Paul referring to God's holy days as the "weak and worthless elemental things?" When we understand the entire historic, cultural, and geo-political context of Paul's time and the circumstances under which Paul writes these words to the Galatian community, it makes far more sense that Paul was referring to the pagan practices of the imperial cult. In the weeks ahead, we will be taking a closer examination of Paul's letter to the Galatians to help us better understand the context of this important epistle.

Paul and Barnabas spent a great deal of time in Iconium teaching the new believers and dealing with the many issues that arose there.

Acts 14:3-4 NKJV 3 Therefore they stayed there a long time, speaking boldly in the Lord, who was bearing witness to the word of His grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands. 4 But the multitude of the city was divided: part sided with the Jews, and part with the apostles.

The Spirit of God being with Paul and Barnabas testified to the validity of their message and mission by providing signs and miracles along the way. As more and more Gentiles became believers, the tensions grew both within the Jewish community and in the city at large. But the controversy was not about Yeshua and his place as Messiah. It was about the large numbers of Gentiles coming into the Jewish community and disrupting the social and ceremonial order. Eventually Paul and Barnabas had to leave.

Acts 14:5-7 NKJV 5 And when a violent attempt was made by both the Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to abuse and stone them, 6 they became aware of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding region. 7 And they were preaching the gospel there.

Even though Lystra seems to be devoid of any significant Jewish community (Luke does not record Paul and Barnabas attending or teaching in any synagogue in Lystra), the Jewish believers in Iconium must have recommended a safe place for them to stay. Because of this situation, we see Paul, for the first time recorded in the scriptures, taking his message of the gospel directly to the pagan Gentiles.

This would create some difficulties for Paul and Barnabas. Taking the gospel to the God-fearers in the synagogue is one thing. God-fearers already had a background and teaching about the God of Israel and the monotheistic world of Judaism. The pagan population of Lystra on the other hand, did not.

Paul would have set up shop in a public square or marketplace to share the gospel of Messiah Yeshua to anyone who would listen. We see Paul doing this in later accounts and it was a common practice at the time. Paul encounters a lame man and through the Holy Spirit heals him.

Acts 14:8-10 NKJV 8 And in Lystra a certain man without strength in his feet was sitting, a cripple from his mother's womb, who had never walked. 9 This man heard Paul speaking. Paul, observing him intently and seeing that he had faith to be healed, 10 said with a loud voice, "Stand up straight on your feet!" And he leaped and walked.

One would think this miracle healing would have a positive effect on those who witnessed it, but to the contrary, there was a misunderstanding and a misinterpretation of this miracle on the part of the crowd.

Acts 14:11-13 NKJV 11 Now when the people saw what Paul had done, they raised their voices, saying in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!" 12 And Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. 13 Then the priest of Zeus, whose temple was in front of their city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates, intending to sacrifice with the multitudes.

Oops! That didn't go well! The local pagans, not understanding the nature and true source of the power behind this miracle healing, attributed it to the Greek gods. They naturally interpreted this miracle as a manifestation of their own mythology. Their local legends contain a story of two strangers coming to town who are the gods Zeus and Hermes in disguise as humans. Paul and Barnabas, by their actions and appearance, were naturally mistaken for a replay of this legend.

This healing would have caused a great amount of excitement in the public square. Once someone bothered to explain to Paul and Barnabas what was actually happening, they immediately were distraught and tore their clothes in anguish.

Acts 14:14-17 NKJV 14 But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard this, they tore their clothes and ran in among the multitude, crying out 15 and saying, "Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men with the same nature as you, and preach to you that you should turn from these useless things to the living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and all things that are in them, 16 "who in bygone generations allowed all nations to walk in their own ways. 17 "Nevertheless He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good, gave us rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness."

This situation in the marketplace of Lystra was vastly different than that of the synagogues where the Gentile God-fearers already had a basic knowledge of God and monotheism. Here Paul was starting from zero! How was he to get the gospel message to the people across such an imposing cultural and religious divide? Paul tried to appeal to them through nature and the natural revelation of the created order. Something that was common to the Greek pantheon, and they would perhaps understand his references. But Paul's words had limited effect. Paul later expands on this approach in his letter to the Romans.

Romans 1:19-21 NKJV 19 because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. 20 For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, 21 because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

Paul and Barnabas did not have much success with the crowd that day or, as it appears, any other day in Lystra.

Acts 14:18 NKJV 18 And with these sayings they could scarcely restrain the multitudes from sacrificing to them.

Some time had passed when some of the non-believing Jews who opposed Paul and Barnabas in Pisidia Antioch and Iconium arrived in Lystra. Paul's attempt to take the gospel message directly to the pagan Gentiles nearly cost him his life!

Acts 14:19-21 NKJV 19 Then Jews from Antioch and Iconium came there; and having persuaded the multitudes, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead. 20 However, when the disciples gathered around him, he rose up and went into the city. And the next day he departed with Barnabas to Derbe. 21 And when they had preached the gospel to that city and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch,

Here in Derbe, Paul and Barnabas returned to teaching in the synagogues and made many disciples to take the gospel message further still.

Many Bible scholars believe that Paul also acquired a new disciple and traveling companion in Derbe by the name of Gaius. Gaius is mentioned in Acts chapters nineteen and twenty.

Paul and Barnabas could have easily traveled from Derbe to Tarsus, Paul's hometown, which according to the best scholarship, was not far from Derbe. However, Paul and Barnabas chose to retrace their steps and return Lystra, Iconium and Pisidian Antioch. In Lystra, Paul had been nearly stoned to death; in Iconium, a conspiracy had driven them from the town; and in Pisidian Antioch, they had been banished by the city officials. But they decided to return to these places to support and encourage the new Jewish and Gentile believers in Messiah Yeshua to remain strong and steadfast in their faith.

As they traveled, Paul would be able to relate his own hardships along the way and recount the pressures and persecution that he and Barnabas faced.

Acts 14:22 NKJV 22 strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God."

Perhaps Paul would have recounted the words of Yeshua Himself.

Matthew 5:10-12 NKJV 10 Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 "Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. 12 "Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

In each of these places, faith communities of new believers were forming, and Paul recognized they needed leaders and elders for guidance. Rather than breaking with the local synagogues, these small groups of believers would continue to attend the larger synagogue gathering on the Sabbaths to learn the Torah and the ways of God. These groups functioned much like a home Bible study group would today; meeting in private homes for fellowship, learning, and guidance in balancing the intricacies of life in their world. Paul later spells out the criteria and qualification for these appointed elders in his first letter to Timothy.

1 Timothy 3:2-7 NKJV 2 A bishop (elder) then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach; 3 not given to wine, not violent, not greedy

for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous; 4 one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence 5 (for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?); 6 not a novice, lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the same condemnation as the devil. 7 Moreover he must have a good testimony among those who are outside, lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.

It stands to reason that these appointed elders would be Jewish believers given that most God-Fearers would not have the extensive background in Torah and Halachah to steer the believing community in the proper theological direction.

After finishing their work in these cities, Paul and Barnabas began their long journey back to Syrian Antioch passing through Perga and Attalia.

Acts 14:23-26 NKJV 23 So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. 24 And after they had passed through Pisidia, they came to Pamphylia. 25 Now when they had preached the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia. 26 From there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work which they had completed.

Paul and Barnabas spent a long time back at their “home base” of Syrian Antioch. The community of believers came together upon their return to hear the news of the work being done in the far-off cities of Galatia. The community in Antioch took great pride in the new congregations of believers spreading throughout the region.

Acts 14:27-28 NKJV 27 Now when they had come and gathered the church together, they reported all that God had done with them, and that He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. 28 So they stayed there a long time with the disciples.

It wasn't long after Paul's return to Antioch that word arrived to him of a distressing nature from Galatia. The issue of Gentile inclusion was once again rearing its head in the communities there. There were still many questions and social, civic, and family pressures mounted on the God-fearing believers. There were some who still called for the God-fearers to undergo full legal conversion to Judaism. They still questioned whether Gentiles could receive salvation and remain as Gentiles.

Paul's position was that conversion hampered the expansion of the kingdom. Paul understood that salvation was not limited to just the Jews, and conversion would be counter to the prophecies about all nations being blessed in Abraham. It also implied another serious theological problem in that if full conversion were necessary, then salvation depended on “works of the law”; a theological point of view which Paul was unequivocally opposed. Paul found this kind of narrow-mindedness unacceptable and he wrote about it in his epistle to the Romans.

Romans 3:28-30 NKJV 28 Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law. 29 Or is He the God of the Jews only? Is He not also the God of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also, 30 since there is one God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith.

Instead of returning to the province of Galatia, Paul composed a letter addressing this complicated issue at length. Coming up very shortly, we will be examining the Epistle to the Galatians and make a careful and detailed analysis of Paul's core teaching. The Book of Galatians is perhaps one of the most misunderstood books of the Apostolic writings. This epistle is a key source for today's preplacement theology. But when studied in the context of contemporary culture and the geo-politics of the time in which it was written, then

the true intention and nature of the epistle becomes clear. Paul believed that the gospel message had universal implications for all; for both Jew and Gentile; both then and now. Stay tuned.

Study Questions:

1. In this teaching, we see for the first time recorded in scripture, instead of going to the synagogues to present his gospel, Paul takes his message directly to the general population. What is the reaction of the local population to Paul and Barnabas? How is this the situation in Lystra like what we face today in taking the gospel to non-believers?
2. Who is it that came to Lystra and reacted violently against Paul and why?
3. What are the specific issues that the believing Jews have with full inclusion and participation by the God-fearers who also believe in Yeshua? How does Paul address these objections?
4. As Paul and Barnabas travel back through their route returning to Syrian Antioch, Paul appoints elders to teach and guide these new communities of believers. Who would likely qualify to be such elders and why? What lesson can we learn from Paul's choice of elders?
5. In his epistles, Paul refers to himself as "the apostle to the Gentiles", or sometimes as a lesser apostle. Why is it that Luke refers to Paul as an apostle only twice and both times are found in chapter 14?
6. What new insight did you gain from this teaching? How do you respond to this new insight? How will you realign your life based on this new understanding?

Bonus: How is the Book of Acts like an apologetic defending Paul against his critics?

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ⁱ FFOZ, The Chronicles of the Apostles, D. Thomas Lancaster, Vol. 2 p440