

The Gospel – its nature, presentation and aftermath
Acts 14

Introduction

Acts 14 continues the details of Paul's first missionary journey. After Cyprus, and then Pisidian Antioch on the mainland (our modern Turkey), Paul and Barnabas travelled the 90 miles to the ancient city and important commercial town of Iconium. Here they were filled with joy and the Holy Spirit.

According to a second century book called "The Acts of Paul", a citizen of Iconium found Paul to be small in stature, with joining eyebrows, bow-legged, large nose, bald-headed, strangely built, but full of grace. At times he looked like a man, and at other times he had the face of an angel. This description is so vigorous and unconventional that F.F.Bruce concludes it must rest on good tradition about Paul's appearance.

The disciples preached faithfully at Iconium, but the Jews stirred up the Gentiles, and the disciples were abused and stoned, and had to flee to Lystra and Derbe. Lystra was 18 miles SW of Iconium, and a place where many Roman aristocrats lived. But it was surrounded by a great corn-growing area where the people were uneducated and full of crude pagan superstitions. When Paul healed the cripple who had never walked, the crowds thought he was the god Hermes (Mercury) and Barnabas was Zeus (Jupiter). (There was an old superstition that these gods had visited the earth in disguise once before, and no one except two old peasants had been hospitable to them. So the gods had wiped out the whole population except for these two old peasants. The people did not want the same mistake to be made again.)

Then these fickle and excitable people, having treated the disciples as gods, stoned them, and left Paul for dead. So the next day they left Lystra and went 30 miles SE to Derbe. Here they made many disciples. Then returned to Antioch in Syria, encouraging all the disciples they met on the way. Thus ended the first and shortest of Paul's missionary journeys.

The message they preached

Speaking boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to do miraculous signs and wonders (Acts 14:3). This expression "the message of his grace" is yet another way of describing the Gospel message. It describes God's character and His dealings with us. This word unites the Old and New Testaments. Throughout both, God is the God of grace. He pours love and blessing on sinful men and women who do not deserve anything except punishment and judgement.

God loves and blesses them, not because of anything in them, but because He is a God of grace, and therefore the reasons are solely in Himself. This is a complete reverse of the world. The world thinks it deserves and earns and merits God's blessing, as if God

owes us something. Grace tells us God owes us nothing but judgement. Grace means blessing when we rebels deserve the very reverse.

God gave a Saviour because of His grace (Acts 13:23). All began with God. He took the first step (Acts 15:11). God so loved the world (John 3:16). **God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us** (Romans 5:8). Grace is “God’s riches at Christ’s expense”. Our response to God is because of grace. **Apollus was a great help to those who by grace had believed** (Acts 18:27). Those who respond to the message repent and believe because grace is at work. We would never do so on our own.

Then the whole of the Christian life is not our own striving and struggling, but God’s grace in our lives. Hence Paul and Barnabas encouraging the converts at Pisidian Antioch to **continue in the grace of God** (Acts 13:43). In his farewell to the Ephesian elders, Paul said **Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified** (Acts 20:32).

How do people hear the Gospel? The answer is that God calls men and uses them. When men are committed to the grace of God, He works through them and opens doors of faith (Acts 14:26,27). The preacher cannot boast of wonderful sermons, personal achievement, clever conversations, and persuasive powers. He is merely an instrument or tool in God’s hand, doing His will. This cuts the preacher down to size. Too often Christian work is dominated by the worker’s sense of own importance and achievements, and feeling he is indispensable.

Besides bringing the preacher down to size, this realization ought also to bring relief. The final responsibility is the Lord’s. God is the real worker, and we are just His instruments, therefore we can roll the burden onto Him. The Christian worker who does not realize this will find his work frustrating and fruitless. He needs to relate everything to the Lord, and take his own hands off. There can be rest of heart in the midst of much activity.

So grace provides a Saviour, enables men to believe, builds them up, sends messengers and uses these messengers.

*“Grace, tis a charming sound.
Grace wrote my name in life’s eternal book.
Grace first contrived a way to save rebellious men.
Grace taught my wandering feet to tread the eternal road.
And new supplies each hour I meet when pressing on to God.
Grace taught my soul to pray.
Tis grace has kept me to this day and will not let me go.
Grace all my work shall crown through everlasting days”*

What a wonderful word grace is. Take eyes off self and put them onto Christ for each step of the journey. Grace glorifies God.

How they presented the message

It is instructive to see how the Apostles adapted themselves to their audience. They never compromised the message, but always began where the people were. A good teacher always takes his students from the known to the unknown, from the familiar to the new.

So when the Apostles preached to Jews in the Synagogue in Pisidian Antioch, Paul reasoned from the Old Testament scriptures, and showed how Christ fulfilled them in His coming and in the Cross. But in Lystra, he was dealing with raw pagans, who did not know the scriptures. So he began with facts of nature. God has spoken in two books – the written and the unwritten, the Scriptures and nature, i.e. special revelation and general revelation. Paul began with the things his hearers knew about – heaven, earth and sea and all which was in them. God has shown kindness by giving rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; **God provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy** (Acts 14:17). Having started explaining how at first God had allowed man to go his own way, he would have gone on (though not recorded here), as he did in Athens, to explain that now God commands all men everywhere to repent. The Gospel was preached and Christ was offered. Nature shows God’s wisdom and power. Christ shows God’s holiness and grace.

Every witness needs to start where his hearers are. One might have guilt and an accusing conscience. Others might be questioning, “What is wrong with the world?”, “Why is my life in a mess?”, “What is the purpose of it all?”, “Why is life empty?”, “Is there life after death?”. Others may just be overwhelmed with the loneliness of life. Wherever we begin from, our witness needs to lead people to Jesus Christ. He alone can fulfil our aspirations, longings and questions.

Arrangements to follow up the message

We see more of this on Paul’s return journeys. He knew it was not enough to preach the Gospel, or to win souls, or to start a new church. It was important that provision was made for the future. Those who profess must be consolidated, strengthened and prepared for the future. Evangelistic work leads to pastoral work. Paul’s desire was to present every man perfect – complete and mature in Christ Jesus. He did this in three ways:

- (a) Teaching. **Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith** (Acts 14:21,22). He warned them that they would face many tribulations. He was utterly honest about the problems ahead. “Jesus had not come to make life easy but to make men great.” “No cross, no crown”. So he urged them to remain true. He taught them doctrine and central beliefs, as recorded in his epistles – they needed to know the truths about God, His Son, Salvation, holiness, the Holy Spirit, the costliness of being a Christian, strong hope laid up in heaven.
- (b) Pastoral oversight. The church was organised and elders were set apart to lead and feed the people. Elders were chosen from within the congregation and not imposed from outside. Note that each church had more than one elder. There was a pastoral team. According to the Pastoral Epistles, the qualifications of elders were moral integrity, loyalty to the Apostles’ teaching, and a gift for teaching. Like shepherds tending sheep, elders

were to feed and teach the church, men of Christian character and maturity.

- (c) Reliance on God's faithfulness. **Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust** (Acts 14:23). They left the young converts and church, with all the dangers within and without, to the Lord. The church belongs to the Lord. He can be trusted to look after His people. **He is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day** (2 Timothy 1:12). They could not be trusted to be strong and grow because of their own natural abilities and intelligence, but Paul's confidence was in God and in the Holy Spirit who indwelt them. So he felt he could retire from the converts and give place for Christ.

So here we have three grounds for stability and growth in a church. Apostolic teaching (for us, the New Testament) along with the Old Testament, faithful elders and pastors who teach and shepherd the flock, and divine faithfulness.

Conclusion

The message the Apostles preached was all about grace – God's undeserved favour to sinners and rebels. Grace saves, edifies, equips and blesses. They presented the message by beginning where the people were, and leading them to Christ who is the answer to every spiritual need and longing. Following the preaching of the message there was divine provision for the future, provided in apostolic teaching, pastoral oversight, and reliance on God's faithfulness.