

ACTS 14: ADDING TO, REALLY EQUALS TO AN UNSEEN LOSS

Have you ever paid much attention to how a bill in congress begins, in its original form and compared that to what it looks like when it finally comes to the floor for a vote? A bill will normally start out as one idea or law and by the time it goes through committee, and is then voted on, on the floor of the house or senate, it has a multitude of other things attached to it. It looks nothing like it did when it was born. If we aren't careful, we can attach pre-conceived notions about something to the words of Jesus, or even the Gospel itself. This is dangerous, because we can totally "re-write" what the original intent was. This is the main reason I am constantly harping on context. Without the original idea, the original context, we can unknowingly attach our own ideas to the Word of God and come out with something completely different from the original message – especially if the Word has crossed cultural barriers.

Ravi Zacharias and his altar call.

Today, in Acts 14, we will see this very thing happen as the Gospel of the kingdom is preached to a culture that is so saturated in their pre-conceived notions of god(s) that they totally misconstrue what has been said. In chapter 15, we will see the same thing happen within Jewish culture. We can't hear the Word and then simply attach it to what we think we already know. If we do so, we do it to our detriment.

MAP

We now pick back up where we left off last week, with Paul and Barnabas moving further into the Roman province known as Galatia. Take note of the patterns of behavior, both with the disciples and with the people in general.

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. 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. 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.

Once again, according to pattern, Paul and Barnabas go to the synagogue, where they have a common thread in their message. And once again, some Jews and even some Gentiles, (God – fearers) believe and are saved. Once again, they face some resistance, but once again, they are emboldened by the Spirit and continue in the town. Once again, there are some Jews and even some Gentiles who resort to violence in order to get them to leave. But they don't leave until things get violent. From there, they make their way down the road to the next cities down the way. This is a set -up for what happens next.

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. 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.

They have now made it to Lystra, and while there, Paul took notice of a man who had never walked. Once again, we see that Paul is looking on him intently. Paul seems to be able to zero in on certain people who have been hit hardest by the message – people who are in need of a miracle. Paul is a discerning man. When he sees that this man has faith to be healed, he tells him to stand up and walk. The man immediately does and of course this creates quite a scene. Another pattern we have seen throughout Acts is that when a miracle occurs, it bolsters or legitimizes the claims of the apostles. This is one of the purposes of miracles, notwithstanding that the miracles helps the recipient.

Miracles, by definition are not a common, everyday occurrence. (Average 1 per year in Acts)

Faith is not based on miracles, (Luke 16:27-31; John 2:23 – 25) but it can be bolstered by them.

We do need to pray for them and expect them, but we should also see that there is a mixture of faith and God's sovereignty in when they occur.

But what we then see is the reaction of the crowd. We aren't told what Paul said, but we can be sure it was similar to what he has said in the cities he has visited previously. It was important to present a uniform message, though he would have tailored them somewhat to the people and their situation. But something goes awry here. They haven't heard what Paul said, or if they have, it has been thrown out after seeing the miracle.

This area of Galatia was known to be more superstitious than others. Paul and Barnabas are now seen to be Zeus and Hermes, (Mercury to the Romans – spokesman of the gods) who had supposedly appeared there years before, and were only recognized by one couple. Because of this lack of recognition, the area was punished with disaster.

The people aren't wanting that to happen again. This time they will do it "right." And so, they try to throw the typical pagan party where they will sacrifice to their gods with pageantry and sacrifice. This sort of thing was typical in the Greco-Roman world. The whole village would have come out to celebrate. (Except the Jews in the area.) Everyone was excited! But they have missed the point and now Paul has to attempt to correct their thinking.

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." 18 And with these sayings they could scarcely restrain the multitudes from sacrificing to them.

Paul and Barnabas, seeing what has happened, run into the crowd, tearing at their cloaks, (a Jewish way of exclaiming frustration and sadness) and tell the crowd that they aren't gods, but mere men just as they are. Paul then launches into his defense, something that would and has attracted Gentiles previously, but the whole city is now worked up into a frenzy.

The pagan gods were territorial, temperamental and whimsical. They could accept your sacrifice or not. It was all up to them. There weren't any rules and they weren't gods of character. It was a toss-up as to how they would react. As you can imagine, this would have kept the people walking on eggshells, never knowing what to expect. On the other hand, the God of Israel had character and spelled out what was required of those in His kingdom. If they turned to YHWH, they would always know where they stood. But in this case, the people saw the miracle, and took at least part of Paul's message and incorporated it into their flawed worldview. The result was a form of what we call syncretism – a mixing of Biblical worship and paganism. This problem was rampant throughout the history of Israel and we see it now among the pagan Gentiles. This is still a problem in many ways. When we don't let the text speak for itself and, (many times unknowingly)

incorporate the text into our worldviews, opinions as to what we think are correct, we can twist the scriptures into something that they aren't. Let the Word say what it is saying, within its context. There will be tension at times, but we have to live with that. If we continue rightly dividing the Word, in its context, the tension is usually resolved. There is no need to make excuses for God or to try to sanitize it. Let the Word speak!

Paul launches into what is called "natural theology" meaning that he shows the people how God, though He once let the nations go their own way, (Dt. 32) has never left them without witness of His power, glory and grace. He has always provided them with rain and crops, showing them grace, though He could have left them in perpetual famine for worshipping false gods. Paul is saying, "Look at God's goodness and see that He is a living God! Why do you want to go back to worshipping gods who are whimsical and of the same bad character and unpredictability as people? They are no better than any of us?" In fact, the Greco – Roman gods were no more than glorified bad humans. Their stories were nothing more than a bad soap opera. Nevertheless, the people weren't hearing any of this. And to make things worse, Paul and Barnabas had been followed from the cities they had previously

visited by Jews who were only too happy to cause them more trouble.

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.

Some people just like to stir up drama. It follows them wherever they go. Do you know anyone like that? When the Jews from Antioch and Iconium got to town and saw the riot, they also saw an opportunity to put an end to the mission of Paul and Barnabas. They poured gas on the fire, resulting in Paul being stoned by the people, who then dragged him out of the city and left him for dead. But Paul wasn't dead, he was probably just knocked unconscious and eventually got up and went back into the city. It was then that they decided it would be best to go down the road to the next town, Derbe.

21 And when they had preached the gospel to that city and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, 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.” 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. 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.

When they reached Derbe, they continued with their mission and there were many who were saved. At that point, they turned around, retracing their steps and went back to the cities they had previously visited on their journey. We can see that the overall journey was successful in that churches had been created along the way. These groups of believers were still there on their trip back through these towns. Paul and Barnabas stayed in each town for a while, encouraging the people and installing leaders in each group. These leaders were chosen after

much prayer and fasting. The quickest way to lose ground here and have the young churches fade into obscurity was to install ineffective leaders. Paul then had to trust that God would look out for them as he and Barnabas left on their way back to Syrian Antioch – the home base from whence they had left.

When they got back to Syrian Antioch, they gave a full report of all that happened, showing how God was continuing to open to the kingdom to the Gentiles. They remained there for some time, probably for a year or so.

But I want to go back to something right quick.

This will make the point I made in the beginning about attaching the Word to something we think we know, and how if this is done incorrectly, we will get the wrong message – a very wrong message.

, 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.”

The meaning of this verse hinges on how you understand the concept of, “the kingdom.”

If you have been taught or believe that the phrase, “the kingdom” speaks of something we will one day inhabit upon our deaths, then the passage has to say the we will enter the kingdom through trials and works. To evangelicals, this can be a problem – and rightly so. We don’t believe that anyone can be saved through works. We believe that works are a sign, or the manifestation of salvation. So, if you think of the kingdom as a state or place in which you will someday go upon your death, and that salvation is all about enduring here until you go to Heaven, then this can be problematic to your theology. However, if we look at how Jesus spoke of the kingdom, what it was and WHEN it was to come, then get an altogether different picture. Jesus said the kingdom was at the door. It was inaugurated at His ascension. Therefore, it is here now, though it is but a shadow of what it will be when He returns and establishes a new Heaven, a new Jerusalem here on earth. If we look at it this way, then we see that Paul means trials and tribulations are just an everyday part of what we, as Christians will have to go through as we take back sacred space – as we image the kingdom in this world. These are things that will happen to us, not things we must DO in order to get to Heaven when we die.

So, our concept of the kingdom, if it is wrong, can lead to a works – based theology, or at the very least, a hiccup in our theology that can create some angst as we struggle to balance faith and works. And that is something that shouldn't be an issue. It should be as clear as day.

The people of Lystra added what they had seen and heard to an incorrect foundation and came away from the Gospel with the wrong understanding. And we can also do the same thing if we just simply add what the Word says to our pre-conceived notions of what it actually says. Let the text, in its context, do the talking. Then and only then can we hope to walk in truth with a full picture of the character of God and the beauty of the Gospel.