

THURSDAY 11 August 2022 "At the Bottom" (Acts 14:14-20)

Hello, my 'Walking with Jesus' friends.

Have you ever found yourself in a desperate situation where you felt things simply could not get any worse? What is life like for you when you find yourself at a dead end with no options or feeling you are so low there is no way but up? We've been walking with Paul and Barnabas, about the year 46ad, as they've been bringing the story and message of Jesus the Christ to towns in what is today Central Turkey. As they arrive in each place there are few if any what we would today call "Christians", for the name Jesus Christ was essentially unknown as Paul and Barnabas arrived in each town as recorded for us in Acts 13 & 14.

Yesterday I left you in the midst of a chaotic crowd out of control! Why? *Because in the town of Lystra a man who'd been crippled since birth was jumping and dancing as the crowd gathered to see the unexplainable.* Paul and Barnabas had just recently arrived in Lystra and begun talking about Jesus. This crippled man had been quite interested. Luke the author of Acts describes it this way: **"The cripple listened to Paul as he was speaking. Paul looked directly at the crippled man, saw that he had faith to be healed, and called out to him, 'Stand up on your feet!' At that, the man jumped up and began to walk!"** (Acts 14:9,10) *I've often wondered what it was that Paul saw in this man that led Paul to believe he had great faith and was ready to be challenged to act on that faith and experience a remarkable healing miracle?* It causes me to ask myself... do I have that amount of faith in God? What about you, my friends?

Immediately a crowd gathered and as we saw yesterday, because of their belief in Greek mythology and some ancient folklore in that city, the people broke into great celebration saying: **"The gods have come down to us in human form! Barnabas, they called Zeus and Paul they called Hermes, because he was the chief speaker..."** (Acts 14:11,12) *No one could deny the miraculous healing of the cripple and for the people of Lystra, there was no logical or medical explanation.* Therefore, the people concluded Paul and Barnabas were aliens, spiritual beings, perhaps the Greek mythological heroes of Zeus and Hermes who had come to visit them demonstrating their supernatural powers. These two miracle working men must be honored, celebrated, and worshiped!

For both Barnabas and Paul, I imagine it was a surreal experience! Luke writes: **"But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard the people, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd shouting, 'Friends, why are you doing this? We too are only men, humans like you. We are bringing you good news telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them..."** (Acts 14:14,15)

But the frenzy continued. The belief of the people in their ancient folklore was so strong, and their Greek mythology orientation so deeply rooted, they simply could not comprehend any alternative explanation to the miracle healing of the crippled man!

We don't know how long Paul and Barnabas had been in Lystra, perhaps only a very short time since Luke gives us no other accounts of people hearing and responding to Paul's messages about Jesus. In fact, this miracle day may have happened during their very first few days in town! It's one thing to be told to be quiet because the people don't believe what you say but it's an entirely different thing to be celebrated as a hero so that you can't convince the people of anything other than hero worship! I imagine music was playing and people were dancing and shouting, and others were lifting Paul and Barnabas up on their shoulders in honor! Perhaps others were bringing more sick people for healing. This scene was getting out of control, and it seemed nothing Paul and Barnabas could say would deter the worship these people were offering them! So, let's pause right here in this chaos and consider a few important questions:

** What would happen in your town, your neighborhood if a similar miracle took place and you were the person who was believed to have caused the miracle?*

** What are some of the strongly held superstitions or myths or folklore or other religious ideas that distort or make the truth of Jesus very difficult to be received in your town?*

** If you were Paul or Barnabas in this situation, what would you do next?*

Dr. Luke tells us that what happened next is almost unbelievable... ***"Even with these words Paul and Barnabas had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them. Then some Jews came from Pisidian Antioch and Iconium and convinced the crowd [to turn against Paul and Barnabas]. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead."*** (Acts 14:18,19) Oh the danger and power of a mob out of control. In this case the frenzy of celebration about a miracle healing suddenly turned to great confusion as new voices in the crowd began making accusations against Paul and Barnabas. Some people had come from the previous town where Paul and Barnabas had been and made wild claims about them, accusing them of horrible things. 'Mob think' took over and suddenly those reveling in celebration calling Paul and Barnabas ***'gods from heaven'*** now turned against them as criminals and taking measures into their own hands the crowd picked up rocks and started throwing them at Paul since he was the one who had demonstrated the miraculous healing power. As the rocks showered down on Paul he fell to the ground and was bleeding profusely. *Several men grabbed Paul's arms and legs and dragged him on the ground to the nearest city gate and threw him out of the city presuming he was at least dying if not already dead!!*

It had all happened so fast... as the crowd dispersed no one really understood or could explain what had just happened in Lystra!

The healed crippled man was no longer jumping, instead he was standing looking at Paul's bleeding body and the dispersing, angry crowd in disbelief! One fact was sure... he was no longer crippled. Who this Paul was, lying bleeding on the ground, or how he had been healed from his lifelong lameness, this man did not yet know, but one thing was unchangeable... *the crippled man was standing, fully healed, by the power of Jesus!*

Barnabas ran to Paul's bleeding body and knelt down to see if he was still alive. Around him gathered a few other people Luke calls "**disciples**", for Luke writes: **"After the disciples gathered around Paul..."** (Acts 14:20) Who are these '**disciples**'? Perhaps some are believers in Jesus who had come from Iconium, the last town Paul and Barnabas had visited. Perhaps some are people from Lystra who had trusted in Jesus. *One of them was, I believe, a young man named Timothy.* A few years later, as Paul returned to Lystra on his second missionary journey, Luke records for us in Acts 16:1 **"Paul came to...Lystra where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was a Jewess and a believer in Jesus, but whose father was Greek. The brothers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of Timothy. Paul wanted to take him along on his journey..."** (Acts 16:1-3)

Now, we'll look at that more closely in a few days when our chronological journey through the book of Acts brings us to Paul's second missionary journey and that event in Lystra. For today, let's pause, standing with Barnabas, and a few other Christians, as we look at Paul's badly bruised, bleeding body on the ground. Is he dead? What should we do? Is there a doctor in Lystra and if so, would he be willing to treat Paul? If young Timothy was standing there, perhaps with his Christian mother, what was he thinking about what he has just witnessed? *What would motivate a man to have the courage to travel from town to town proclaiming the truth of Jesus as Paul and Barnabas have done, and risk the anger of people who don't want to hear of Jesus, even the possibility of persecution or even death?* In 2022 it's important we ask ourselves that question as our world is increasingly intolerant of Christians and the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

So, I urge us all to talk with the risen Jesus about that right now. *What price are you and I willing to pay so the people of your town and mine have a chance to know Jesus and find their life gloriously transformed by Jesus into a life free from the shame and guilt of their sin, free from the darkness holding them in bondage, and free to live a victorious life filled with the Holy Spirit of God?* And I'll meet you back here tomorrow, standing around Paul's body.

Today's Scripture is Acts 14:14-20.