

## TUESDAY 09 August 2022 "The Battle" (Acts 14:1-7)

Good Tuesday morning to you my "Walking with Jesus" friends,

As you look around our world, in almost every nation, would you say this phrase is a fair representation of what you see: ***"the people of the region are divided"***? We live in a dramatically polarized world, don't we? So... how can you and I help; *how can we make a difference in the deep divisions of our world?*

We have been traveling with Paul and Barnabas in Paul's initial 'missionary' journey about 2000 years ago. We find the log of that trip in Acts 13 & 14, and they've arrived in the city of Iconium in the region which would today be modern day central Turkey. They began their trip probably 3 months earlier on the Island of Cyprus, Barnabas' homeland, and found a good response to their courageous presentation of the Gospel. Many people responded affirmatively, placing their trust in Jesus as their Savior. Most significant was the day Sergius Paulus, the Roman assigned Proconsul of the Island, trusted what Paul proclaimed to be truth and it changed his life. *He did so in response to the power showdown between Paul and the sorcerer Elymas who was attendant to the Proconsul.*

You'll recall we looked closely at that experience when Elymas was blinded by the power of the Holy Spirit unleashed through Paul's bold accusation of him being a pawn of the devil, opposed to everything that is right. (Acts 13:9-11) I've often wondered if Paul was led by the Holy Spirit to speak blindness to Elymas because Paul himself had been blinded by his encounter with Jesus as he was zealously, enthusiastically, passionately opposing the Jesus movement in Jerusalem. *Paul's life was dramatically changed during those 3 days of his blindness as he prayed and gave careful thought to his angry life, and the Holy Spirit of God spoke powerful truth into his mind.* (Acts 9) We have no record of what God did in Elymas' life during his days of blindness, but I imagine as Paul and Barnabas left Cyprus Island and sailed for the mainland, and then hiked the 100 miles or so to Pisidian Antioch, they often prayed for Elymas, asking God to free him from the demonic strongholds in his life.

As Paul and Barnabas walked inland toward Pisidian Antioch this was now totally new territory for them. They knew no one and had never been to any of these towns. They were following the leading of the Holy Spirit who was their guide, as best they could discern His leading of them each day. (Acts 13:13:2-4) They were initially well received in the Synagogue in Pisidian Antioch but after some weeks, leading people in that city became very jealous of the affirming response of the people to Paul and Barnabas and they stirred up opposition and ran these two strangers out of their town. (Acts 13:42-50)

Paul and Barnabas headed east toward Iconium and yesterday we saw in Acts 14:1-3 ***"...that a great number of Jews and Greeks believed their message. But the Jews who refused to believe 'stirred up' other Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. So, Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time in Iconium, speaking boldly for the Lord who confirmed the message of His grace by enabling them to perform signs and wonders."***

We have no record of exactly what these 'signs and wonders' were, but we assume they were as we have seen elsewhere. Demons being bound and expelled from people, perhaps healings of people from illness or even lifelong paralysis conditions, and other such miracles which demonstrated the power of God unleashed under the direction of the Holy Spirit through Paul and Barnabas. Next Dr. Luke records this statement which caused me to open our thoughts today as I did: ***"The people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews, others with the apostles. There was a plot afoot among both Jews and Gentiles, together with their leaders, to mistreat Paul and Barnabas and stone them."*** (Acts 14:4,5)

Sadly, in many countries of our world in recent months and years, opposing opinions about important real-life issues have divided communities and even families, *and have exploded from disagreement in conversation into outright violence in the streets of cities around the world.* Too often that violence has hurt people and destroyed property, in some cases causing businesses to close and people to move away from their homes and their families to other communities for fear of their lives. In extreme cases lives have been lost in mob brutality. *What we've seen on our TV screens recently, no matter where you live in the world, is exactly what Luke describes was happening in Iconium 2000 years ago in response to Paul & Barnabas!*

Now, think about that my friends. **The issues dividing people in Iconium were not political, nor military, nor economic, the issues were SPIRITUAL and MORAL!** Paul and Barnabas were presenting what is today being presented all around the world as the Gospel (the good news) of Jesus Christ: *God incarnate, who came to our world to proclaim God's Truth; to live a sinless life; and to allow humanity to crucify Him thus paying the sin debt price so God the Father could accept Jesus' death payment and forgive any repentant person, anywhere in the world, and save them from their sin condemnation.*

But religious systems, then as now, were deeply entrenched and lots of people stood to lose their authority, their influence, their lucrative lifestyles if people abandoned the religious requirements of those religions and embraced the free Grace of God and trusted fully in Jesus for their salvation and restored relationship with God! *That's why Luke says the opposition arose from BOTH Jews and Gentiles.* That means Judaism, as a well-established religious system, and a wide range of Gentile religions practiced throughout Central Asia and the Middle East at that time. Most of those Gentile religions called people to build temples and worship man fabricated idols and pay financial fees of various kinds to earn the favor of religious leaders in those man-designed religions.

And none of those religions assured their followers of God's forgiveness for their sins; nor an authentic relationship with God; nor any promise of heaven after death! *Only the Gospel of Jesus promised those things... unattainable by human effort or payment.*

With their lives at great risk even of possible mob violence, of stoning them to death publicly, Paul and Barnabas were led by the Holy Spirit to leave Iconium and head for the cities of Lystra and Derbe. Lystra would have been only about 25 miles south of Iconium and Derbe about another 60 miles to the east of Lystra. We have no record of any farewell for them from those in Iconium who had accepted their message and trusted in Jesus, but I imagine some of those folks walked with Paul and Barnabas as they left Iconium, thanking them for bringing the life changing hope of Jesus to them. Once again, I envision hugs and handshakes and prayer alongside the road, and then Paul and Barnabas heading south toward Lystra, while those few new believers in Jesus walked back to their homes *wondering what life would now be like with such animosity and anger boiling over from some of their fellow Iconium citizens so totally opposed to the wonderful news of Jesus and His message.*

May I ask you my friends, does it sometimes amaze you when you consider the anger, even the violence of some people who so strongly oppose the Name, the Person, and the message of Jesus? Do you wonder why? Some years later Paul wrote about it as the Holy Spirit led him to write his letters to the Corinthian Christians, which helps us understand WHY there is such violent opposition to Jesus. 2 Corinthians 4:4 says: ***"The god of this age [Satan] has blinded the minds of unbelievers so they cannot see the light of the Gospel that displays the glory of Jesus Christ, who is the image of God."***

Paul also wrote: ***"The message of the cross [of Jesus Christ] is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God... The person without the Spirit of God cannot accept the things of God but considers them foolishness and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Holy Spirit of God."*** (1 Corinthians 1:18; 2:14) Does that help us understand my friends? ***It's a spiritual power battle!***

***The devil is determined to keep people spiritually blind, enslaved in their sin and condemned to spend eternity in hell with him. The Holy Spirit of God is determined to give people the opportunity to understand God's truth, to see the reality of their sin enslavement and to repent, turn to Jesus and be set free.*** And the battle rages... in every neighborhood, every city, every nation of the world! In closing I ask you... how is the battle raging in your town and how is that battle affecting you?

**Today's Scripture is Acts 14:1-7.**