

The Acts of the Holy Spirit 17 – To the Jaws of Death and back. - Chapter 14.

Paul and Barnabas had travelled from Antioch to Iconium following the incitement to violence in the city by the Jews,
Acts 13:49-51. (See map in lesson No: 15)

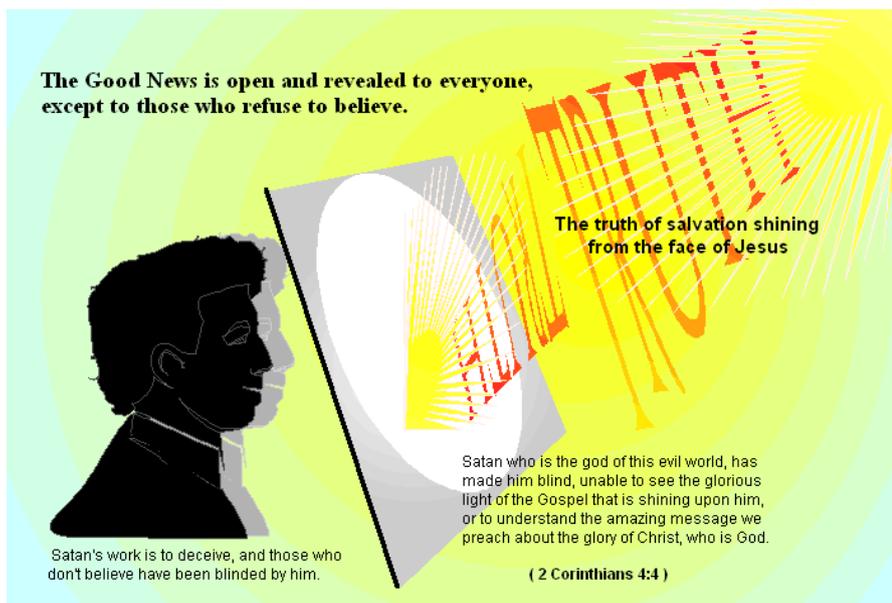
There are times in our Christian lives when we need to be as bold as Paul and Barnabas, in protest against the religion (Latin: re-ligeo, meaning 'to bind up again') that is rife in our land and the traditions that bring the Word of God to no effect:

'Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition. You hypocrites!
Matthew 15: 6-7

We need to speak out the truth of what God has done for us through, and **only** through the death and resurrection of Jesus, the anointed One and His anointing (which is the root meaning of the word 'Christ'). Christianity has absolutely nothing to do with a set of rules that must be kept. It has everything to do with a relationship with God Himself, the very Creator of the Universe. That relationship is one of Love – not that we deserve any of His Love, but rather He first loved us, **1 John 4:18-19.**

Acts Chapter 14.

So at the beginning of **Chapter 14**, we find Paul and Barnabas already in Iconium doing what they always did when they went to a new place, they went to the Jewish Synagogue where they were asked to speak, just as had happened in Antioch, **Acts 14:1.** The result was also entirely predictable! A great number of Jews and Gentiles believed, **Acts 14:2.**



Now, notice here that the Jews **refused** to believe. As we discussed above, Christianity is not a set of rules to be blindly followed. It is a series of choices that you and I are given. We can either believe them and act upon them, or we can **REFUSE** to believe them.

The choice is ours, but avoiding making that choice is the same thing as refusing to believe. There is absolutely no spiritual, logical or moral argument other than 'pig-headedness' for refusing to become a Christian – not one, even though the 'thinkers' of this world try their hardest to refute the Gospel, but in vain.

The natural sequel to refusing to believe is that you will side with those against Jesus. Jesus Himself told His disciples when He was with them on earth and therefore that has been passed to us today: "Anyone who is not for Me is against Me; if he isn't helping Me, he is hurting My cause." **Luke 11:23** When we stand before the Judgement Seat of God we would not want to be accused of hurting the cause of Jesus. Of course if we are a Christian, that will not take place, because when the Book of Life is opened, our names will be in it, and recorded against it will be the fact that Jesus is my Lord and my Saviour, **Revelation 20:11-15.**

The reaction of Paul and Barnabas was to remain and preach the Gospel, telling all those who wanted to hear, of the Best News of all – the Gospel of Jesus Christ. What would your reaction have been? That's a very pertinent question, because the more openly you and I preach the Gospel, the more we are going to be under attack in these days, **Acts 14:3-4.** However, we can take heart from the way in which the Lord upheld these two men. He backed up His Word as they preached it by empowering them to do miracles. Not only did

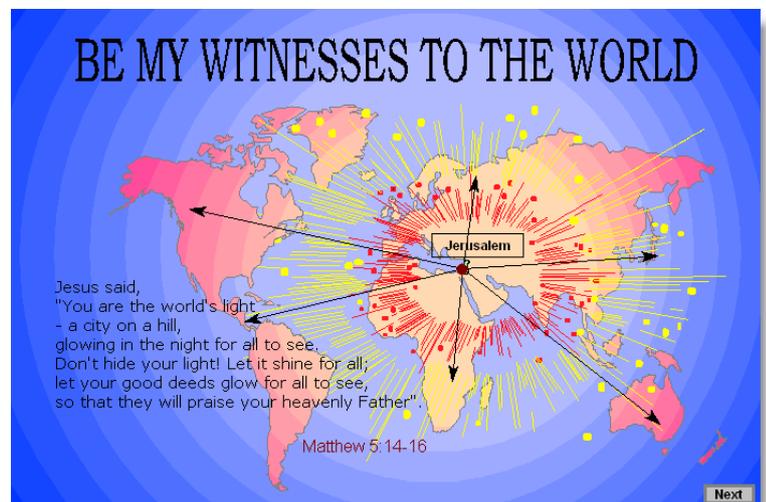
these people have the opportunity to receive the Word, but they could not ignore the miracles either. Those who listened to and received what Paul and Barnabas had to say had their lives turned right way up. Those who refused to accept the truth went about trying to silence permanently the men who had challenged them so deeply, **Acts 14:5-7**.

There comes a time in every Christian's life when he or she has to evaluate how much more they can contribute to the people among whom they are working without it affecting the wider picture of what God has called them to do. God had not called these men to die in Iconium, but to preach to the people and to establish churches wherever they went. What has God called you to do? Are you in the place He wants you to be, doing the things He wants you to do? Are you being effective, and if not, what do you need to change to rectify your situation? Ask God, He knows the answers to the questions before you even ask them! It was now time for Paul and Barnabas to move on or to lose their lives, so they moved on to Lycaonia, Lystra and Derbe and to all the surrounding areas. It was the same story: Go to the next place, preach the Gospel, encourage the Believers, then move on again.

Acts 14: 8-20.

So now they arrived in Lystra, **Acts 14:8-10**. It is a good place to be reminded that this is not the first time in the Book of Acts that we have seen a man lame from birth healed. We can remember the incident at the Beautiful Gate in Jerusalem when Peter and John commanded the lame man to walk, and he did, **Acts 3:2-8**

God's healing was not just designed for Jews, neither was it limited to the Apostles in Jerusalem to perform acts of healing. Jesus made it quite clear that not only do we as Believers have a responsibility to preach the Gospel everywhere, but it was and is the responsibility of the Believer to lay hands on the sick so that they shall recover, **Mark 16:15-18**. We can either believe what Jesus said, and get on and obey or we can disobey and fail to enter into the exciting challenges that the Holy Spirit will bring to us and of course, the sad part about that is that the Holy Spirit will eventually stop bringing us the opportunities, and our lives will settle into the hum-drum existence of people who are just hanging around not making a difference, waiting to die to be with the Lord – great, but missing out on life to the full, **John 10:10**.



Of course, the second point about this lame man in Lystra was that he had the faith to be healed. Paul noticed him and realised this. In today's society, things are not very much different. People may not want to be healed for a wide variety of reasons (reliance on State Benefits is just one example) so it is essential to listen to the Holy Spirit. He will guide you to the person or people with whom He wants you to spend your time. It is pointless laying hands on someone who doesn't believe in healing, doesn't want to be healed and rather likes the attention and sympathy of being sick!

Paul did not waste time on finding out where the lame man lived, who brought him to the meeting, why he was like he was, what his parents were like or what abuse he had had as a child, rather he went directly to the point! **Acts 14:10**. As Christians, we should not waste time, but we should get on with what God has called us to do. Time is short for each one of us, and each of us has work to do that can only be done in our lifetime. There is a parable told by Jesus that we need to remember about being watchful and prepared as wise stewards, **Matthew 24:36-51**. The consequences of not being so are truly dreadful! Jesus expects the world to end, and that's all there is to it. Perhaps the questions we need to ask at this stage are:

- Do you and I expect Jesus to return? When He does it will be in Judgement and Reward or otherwise for all the deeds that we have done.
- What will you and I be doing when (not if!) Jesus returns? And finally,
- What will you and I be in charge of after He has returned? **Matthew 24:45-47**

Paul was aware all the time of what Jesus had commissioned him to do, and whilst he was aware that his life would never be, in fact never had been, easy, he also knew when he had finished the work that he had been

given to do he would receive 'a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing'. **2 Timothy 4:6-8**

Paul also knew that while he was here on Earth, he had things to learn. He had to look ahead, not dwelling on past mistakes, as he strained to reach the goal – the end of the race that God had set for him – and to win the prize, receiving the fulfillment of what Jesus had done for him. Just as Paul did, so you and I should do, **Philippians 3:13-14**

Paul also recognised that this particular race that he was running all those years ago and we are running now, was and is one that requires stamina, diligence and single-mindedness. He also saw in his mind's eye all the Believers down through the ages who had lived, worked and believed for the times in which we are now alive – the culmination of the ages; the time immediately before Jesus' return – as they look on and encourage us on our way. He saw the men of the Old Testament – Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Elijah, Isaiah, Habakkuk, Josiah, Hezekiah, and all those who are mentioned in the Hall of Faith in **Hebrews 11** – looking on as we demonstrate, discuss and display our salvation. He also saw himself looking on, seeing played out before him the things that he had started, from the day of his salvation on the Damascus Road onwards and he was able to write in encouragement to us, **Hebrews 12:1-2**. Look to Jesus, look to the Cross, but don't stop there; look beyond it to what Jesus has accomplished on our behalf, to where He now

sits at the right hand of God, the very place of authority over all things and where we sit with Him also in a place of glory!
Romans 8:28-30



The healing of the man produced a result from the crowd of astonished onlookers that neither Paul nor Barnabas could have expected. They were hailed as gods! **Acts 14:11-13**. There was a reason for this unexpected turn of events. Zeus and Hermes (also known as Jupiter and Mercury) were two popular gods in the Roman world. People from Lystra claimed that these gods had once visited their city. According to legend, no-one offered them hospitality except an old couple, so Zeus and Hermes killed the rest of the people and rewarded the old couple. When the citizens of Lystra saw the miracles of Paul and Barnabas, they assumed that the gods were revisiting them. Remembering the story of what had happened to the previous citizens, they immediately honoured Paul and Barnabas and showered them with gifts.

When we begin to operate in the Gifts of the Holy Spirit, we must not assume that the people amongst whom we minister will understand either where the power to operate in these Gifts has come from, or the motives with which we do the miracles that Jesus has authorized us to perform. Some of the reaction to Paul and Barnabas was through fear – these people did not want what had happened to their ancestors to happen to them! – the other was amazement that the gods whom they had worshipped for so long and who had never responded before, had suddenly started not only to hear their pleas but had actually decided to visit them.

When responses of this nature happen to us, we must be prepared to act as Paul and Barnabas did, reminding people we are only human, **Acts 14:14-17**. First, they reacted immediately; second, they reacted decisively; thirdly, they refuted the accolades that these people wanted to shower on them; fourthly, they explained that they were ordinary men like the people of Lystra, and finally they explained why they had come – to give them the Good News from the One True God together with an opportunity for them to turn from their foolish ways and instead to give their lives to the Living God. They even explained to them that God never leaves himself "without testimony". Rain and crops, for example, are evidence of his goodness. Later Paul wrote that this evidence in nature leaves people without an excuse for unbelief (**Romans 1:20**). When you and I are in doubt about God, we need to look around us and we will see abundant evidence that He is at work in our world, and we, just as much as anyone else, will be without excuse! It was only with difficulty that Paul and Barnabas succeeded in stopping the people of Lystra from sacrificing to them as gods.

It is amazing what a difference a day or even a few days makes in the lives of people. One day they were hailing the disciples as gods and wanting to offer them sacrifices, just a few days later, they were listening to Jews who had come from Antioch and Iconium. These Jews poisoned the minds of the people of Lystra; from being an interested and fascinated crowd, they became an angry mob, **Acts 14:19-20**.

Occasionally we too will find that we are misunderstood and the doors of opportunity that just yesterday appeared exciting and about to open suddenly slam shut in our faces! This can often happen when people in authority allow their insecurities to get the better of them, or when people misunderstand, (perhaps deliberately!) our motives; there are many reasons that the devil can use to blind the minds and hearts of the people. Jesus understood how fickle crowds can be, **John 2:24-25**. When many people approve of us, we feel good, but that should never cloud our thinking or affect our decisions. We should not live to please the crowd - especially in our spiritual lives. Be like Jesus, know the nature of the crowd and don't put your trust in it. Put your trust in God alone.

The disciples had just narrowly escaped being stoned in Iconium (**Acts 14:1-7**), but Jews from Antioch and Iconium tracked Paul down to Lystra, he was stoned and left for dead. However he had not completed the task that Jesus had assigned him. Paul got up and went back into the city to preach the Good News. That's true commitment! Being a disciple of Jesus, the Anointed One calls for total commitment. As Christians, we no longer belong to ourselves but to our Lord, for whom we are called to suffer. Suffering in this context can take many forms – ridicule, persecution, sanctions are just some – but whatever form it does take, we are called to overcome it and to press on with our calling and complete the race.

How difficult are things for you as you tell others about Jesus? Have you given up, or like Paul and Barnabas, gone back to the site of your discouragement, overcome it, then moved on? Satan will never be able to put out the fire of God in a person's life unless he has permission from the person himself. So **don't** give him that permission. Remember, he only prowls around **like** a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour, he is actually a toothless pussy cat when he faces up to the authority of the Living God, and then even Satan's worst is not good enough, **1 Peter 5:7-9**.

On that day, after the stoning, Satan probably thought that Paul would bother him no more. How wrong he was, and as a result of Paul's commitment and dedication, literally millions have received forgiveness for their sins and new life in Jesus. Some have gone on to change the world, but that would never have happened if Paul had given up when he was stoned that day in Lystra. What about us? Will we be bold and strong in Jesus and go on with our life, doing exploits as God intended? '... but the people that do know their God shall be strong and do exploits'. **Daniel 11:32**

Paul and Barnabas then went on to Derbe. There they went about their God-appointed task of winning many to Jesus. What an exciting way of leading your life! The people you meet and those who receive what you have to say will never, ever be the same again. We are called to make disciples of all nations. These two people did not just stand up on Saturday, Sunday or any other day of the week and get people saved; they taught them so that they would have a strong grounding in the Word of God, so that when they moved on to the next place on their journey, those left behind would be able to continue and in turn make disciples themselves. This is very much on the heart of God, Jesus said 'Feed My lambs.' **John 21:15**

Our lives can be like that? It is entirely in our hands. It's called commitment, so working together with the Holy Spirit can make a difference in just one life, then another, then another! And in so doing we will affect an entire community. It is up to us! After Derbe, the disciples returned the way they had come – through all the towns that they had been to on the outward journey – through all the towns where they had had trouble before. They risked their lives again by going back.

Commitment? Today very few of us know the meaning of the word in this context. Stick in to the very end, and then some more and you will see amazing fruit from your life. Christianity is not some quick excitement that lasts for a day then its time to give it up. Christianity is a lifetime commitment to Jesus. It is through times of plenty and times of shortage being thankful and keeping on keeping on, **Philippians 4:11-13**. The key to all of this is in Jesus. We too can accomplish all that God asks us to do with the help of Jesus Who gives us the strength and power. No Jesus, no power; it's as simple as that! If we don't work with Him, we work on our own, and we know which is easier and which will get the job done! Part of the reason that Paul and Barnabas risked their lives to return to these cities was to organize the churches' leadership. They were not just following up on a loosely knit group; they were helping the believers get organised with spiritual leaders who could help them grow. Churches grow under Spirit-led leaders.

One of the problems in the church today is that those who lead them are not leaders at all. Leaders have specific characteristics. A leader is a servant, but that does not mean that he sweeps the floor (although occasionally he may do that!). His servanthood is in the way he develops other people. A leader will help others to grow, and to climb up on his 'spiritual' shoulders permitting them to outgrow himself. Of course in doing that the leader will himself grow. Unfortunately, many so-called leaders are protective and defensive of

the role they have been placed in; under those circumstances a church will never grow. In the Church today, there are many managers trying to be leaders. They will never achieve what an anointed leader will. In too many cases, men and women have appointed people to a position that they call leadership when it is nothing of the sort, and are confused and distressed when the Church appears to be going nowhere.

King Saul was just such an appointee, man's choice, hiding in the baggage when he should have been leading the people. David on the other hand was a true leader. He was God's man. When he made a mistake, he went straight to God and put it right, accepting the consequences for doing his own thing, but nonetheless facing the problem. Pray for your church leaders and support them; if God puts his finger on you, humbly accept the responsibility of a leadership role in your church, but only do it if God says to do it. Are you a leader? An easy way to discover whether you are a leader or not is to turn round! If you have followers, then you are probably a leader. The reason that Paul and Barnabas did not appoint leaders in the church on their first visit (a common theme as they developed the churches, and helped them to grow) was that they wanted to see who would naturally rise to that position. They also wanted to see what the Holy Spirit said.

If you have a barrel of stones and you want to select the big ones, just shake the barrel (you may have to shake it for a while) and you will find that gradually all the stones grade themselves with the big ones rising to the top. Put all your potential leaders in a 'spiritual barrel' then watch what happens to them as the Holy Spirit shakes them. You will know very soon who the real leadership in a church is – and many of you will get surprises! Paul and Barnabas' way of doing this is a God plan.

²² They encouraged them to continue in the faith in spite of all the persecution, reminding them that they must enter into the Kingdom of God through many tribulations.

²³ Paul and Barnabas also appointed elders in every church and prayed for them with fasting, turning them over to the care of the Lord in whom they trusted. **Acts 14:22-23**

When you have identified God's leaders in your church, pray for them, fast for them, and above all, hand them over to the Lord for safe keeping

Just imagine Paul and Barnabas return to Antioch. Every person in the church must have been present to hear what had happened and if the Gentiles had been converted. What an exciting trip this had been, **Acts 14:24-26**

Once the desire to be a missionary has taken root in our heart, it takes an enormous effort to come against it; when God has put it there in the first place, there is very little point in trying to prevent its development. 'Guard your heart for out of it is the wellspring of life' **Proverbs 4:23** What amazing stories Paul and Barnabas must have told, leading all to praise and thanksgiving, **Acts 14:27-28**



So, how do you feel after reading **Chapter 14 of Acts**? Has God spoken to you about your role and place? If He has, do not try to bottle it up, go for it with all your heart and mind. Enjoy what God has given you to do. It will always be a huge challenge to you. You will never stop seeing God performing miracles and answering prayer in your life. Accept the challenge, perhaps to pack your suitcase or rucksack and go where the Lord tells you and just trust Him for safety and the safety of your loved ones.

Above all, do not be like the Jews at Iconium who refused to believe! Never be in a position of attacking the man of God.

The Acts of the Holy Spirit 17 –To the Jaws of Death and back – Challenge Questions.

Please complete all questions marked with * and then complete the rest of the study. The more you look in the Word the more you will get out of it. Read the chapter at the beginning of the week then you have time to meditate on it, rather than rushing! Make the Word your number one priority.

- 1. *Read the Notes and the Bible Verses** referred to in them. Highlight the points that 'speak' to you and share with the group.
2. Do you think it is easy to refuse to believe? Would you share something you found hard to believe that God helped you with and how He has done it?
3. *Can you share practical ways of how to fix your eyes on Jesus?
4. Under the heading of 'Commitment' what do you find challenging?

Read Acts 15:1-5

- 5. *The Bible speaks of 'some men' coming from Judea to Antioch. Do you think that these men were Christians? What were these men teaching? Was it right or wrong?**
6. What was the reaction of Paul and Barnabas to these people? Was this a correct response? What would have been your response to these men's teaching? Explain your answer.
7. *What was the response of the Church to this new teaching? Do you think that they were confused? Explain your answer.
8. When Paul and Barnabas left Antioch, where did they pass through and what did they do as they went through these places? What result did their visit have on the Believers?
9. When the Paul and Barnabas and their travelling companions arrived in Jerusalem, what did those believers who belonged to the Pharisees say?
- 10.*Why do you think these people thought along these lines? What effect does 'traditions of men' have on the Gospel of Jesus Christ? Why?**

Read Acts 15:6-21

11.* Who met to consider these questions? Why was this such an important issue?

12. Peter, Paul and Barnabas and James all had different speaking roles in this passage. What were they and how did each help to develop the decision?

13.* What was the final decision of the Council at Jerusalem?

14. Acts 15:10-18 are a quotation from Amos 9:11-12. Why is this passage of scripture important enough to be cross-referenced by James here?

Read Acts 15:22-35

15.* How did the Council communicate its decision to the Believers in Antioch? Why did they choose to do it this way? How important is communication by the Leaders to the congregation in a Church?

16.* Judas and Silas were prophets. What function does a prophet have in the Church? Are there still prophets in the Church today?

17. Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch for a while. What did they do? In addition, Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians. Read Galatians 3:1-14. What points is Paul making to the Galatians that might help you in your Christian life?

Read Acts 15:36-41

18.* Some time later, Paul asked Barnabas to accompany him as he went back to all the towns they had visited on their first journey. Why did they not go together? What happened to Barnabas?

19. Paul did go back as he had suggested to Barnabas but with Silas instead. Did Paul and Barnabas ever repair the damage done by their quarrel? Why was it important that they should? Is there anybody you need to repair a broken relationship with? If so, do it now