

## In the city of Iconium, Lystra, and Derba

The cities of Iconium, Lystra and Derbe are in the region of Galatia. So, we're still in Galatian territory. Later on, when Paul writes the book of Galatians, he'll have to deal with a particularly troubling heresy that has impacted the local churches in these cities. Men whom Paul refers to as **"the Judaizers"**—most likely a faction of Pharisaic Christians who have broken faith and ties with the Jerusalem church. They claim to believe in Jesus of Nazareth as Messiah. **But they are also insistent that the Jewish Christians maintain their commitment to sabbath observance, Torah (clean) dietary laws, and circumcision.** Adding these back into Christianity is anathema for Paul. **Why? Because the Sabbath was a symbol of the Sinai covenant, and that covenant is fulfilled in Christ.** Christ, Paul says in Romans 10, is the "end" of the law. Dietary laws likewise served to single the people out—the people who don't eat shellfish, camel meat, insects, and pigs are distinct from the peoples of the earth. It's an ethnic distinction. But now, in Christ, God is saving the nations by faith in the full sufficiency of Jesus apart from the law. Circumcision, again, was a sign of the Mosaic covenant—it pointed to a time when the Christ would set people apart by the Spirit inwardly.

**Transition:** Think about the difficulty for the Jews to hear the message that salvation for the Jew and the Gentile is by grace, through faith, in Christ's all sufficient sacrifice on the cross. Think about what a cultural barrier that will be for them to accept it. Think about the Gentile who believes that they have to sacrifice to the gods in order to appease them and keep them from unleashing their wrath in a flood, or an earthquake, drought and famine.

Paul, Barnabas and the team are proclaiming an otherwise unbelievable message in these Galatian cities. And as we'll see—people are coming to faith. The church is taking hold in these regions. And it's nothing short of a miracle.

## 1. Gospel ministry goes forward with mixed results (14:1-5).

“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. <sup>2</sup> But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. <sup>3</sup> So they stayed there a long time and **spoke boldly** for **the Lord, who testified** to the message of his grace by enabling them to do signs and wonders. <sup>4</sup> But **the people of the city were divided**, some siding with the Jews and others with the apostles. <sup>5</sup> When an attempt was made by both the Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to mistreat and stone them,

**They spoke in such a way that a great multitude both of the Jews and of the Greeks believed:** Paul preached the same message to both groups of people—the Gospel is first for the Jew and then for Gentile.

### How did Paul speak?

- **Paul preached with great humility and respect (1 Cor 1:1-3)** “When I came to you, brothers and sisters, announcing the mystery of God to you, I did not come with **brilliance of speech or wisdom**. <sup>2</sup> I decided to know **nothing among you except Jesus Christ** and him **crucified**. I came to you in **weakness, in fear, and in much trembling** No doubt one of the most misunderstood phrases in the NT, this does not mean, as many ill-informed commentators have supposed, that Paul was physically weak, fearful of Gentile retribution, nor trembling in his shoes when he spoke—hopelessly nervous and stammering. It is an idiom, like “**over the moon**,” means “**absurdly happy**” or “**Under the Weather**” means “**sick**” or to “**steal your thunder**” means to steal someone’s insight or moment in the spotlight. “In fear and trembling” is an idiom “in great humility and respect”—**so why does he call it weakness? Because humility and respectfulness weren’t virtues to Greco-Romans.**
- **Paul didn’t use insulting rhetoric (1 Cor 1:3, 4a)** “I came to you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling **(in humility and respectfully)** <sup>4</sup> My speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of wisdom...” **The persuasive words of *sophia* consisted of the decorative and charged rhetoric common among Greek rhetors. This speech was weaponized to dishonor rhetorical opponents.** Honor was a zero-sum-game in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. You gained honor at the expense of others..” It was derogatory rhetoric intended to disparage and destroy character. Paul says, “I never preached the Good of Jesus like that

- **Paul relied on a demonstration of the Spirit's power (1 Cor 1:4b-5)** “not with persuasive (Acts 18:4 “he argued persuasively that Jesus was the Messiah”/ this word can be used as convincing someone of the reasonableness of your case; or can be used to mean “a persuasive attack against someone’s character” Lk 11:22 “attack the strong man” stressing “insulting or injurious rhetoric”) words of wisdom but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, <sup>5</sup>so that your faith might not be based on human wisdom but on God’s power.” Paul’s preaching was accompanied by signs and wonders—miracles, the chief miracle of Jews and Gentiles believing the message of the Cross. A crucified Messiah was a psychologically impossible message for Jews and Gentiles to affirm.

**There is no success without faithfulness to the message of the Gospel.** So if we have to change it to get you to buy it—we’ve adulterated it. It’s the Gospel that is the power of God unto salvation.

**Faithfulness will result in fruitfulness.** But bearing fruit, being productive for God’s Kingdom happens on God’s timetable and according to his will. **Remember 13:48** “All who were appointed for eternal life believed.” The word for “Appointed” is an administrative term which has to do with giving something structure, order, administration. Such as **Rom 13:1** “those authorities that exist are **put into place** (*tasso*) by God.” **Luke 7:8** The centurion says, “I have been **appointed under** the authority of someone, and I have men who are **appointed under** me.”

**There are two extremes to avoid here—the one is to say “well God is going to save whoever he wants to save”** resulting in **evangelistic apathy.** Typically, those who hold to an extreme view of predestination (meticulous predestination) tend to be tempted to this; producing apathy and missional laziness. **The other extreme is to think that everything is up to us—“God won’t save people unless I work hard enough, pray long enough, and do all the right things...”**

This can lead to an **evangelistic anxiety**—thinking that everything is up to me.

**God has always desired to accomplish his will through human agency**—We are faithful to speak persuasively—convincingly about Jesus the Messiah. And we do this with great humility and respect—resisting the urge to use insulting rhetoric to belittle the people we are trying to reach—and we proclaim this gospel boldly expecting God’s Spirit to testify to its truth.

**And all of that takes hard work and intentionality—and at the end of the day we trust God’s sovereign appointments. We rely on his timing. Paul and Barnabas experience both successes and setbacks in their mission (14:1). And this is just the way it is. Not everyone we share the Good News with will think it’s good news.**

## In the cities of Lystra and Derbe.

### 2. It's (fallen) human nature to attribute God's work to false gods (13:6-10).

<sup>6</sup> they found out about it and fled to the Lycaonian towns of Lystra and Derbe and to the surrounding countryside. <sup>7</sup> There they continued preaching the gospel. <sup>8</sup> In Lystra a man was sitting who was without strength in his feet, had never walked, and had been lame from birth. <sup>9</sup> He listened as Paul spoke. After looking directly at him and seeing that he had faith to be healed, <sup>10</sup> Paul said in a loud voice, "Stand up on your feet!" And he jumped up and began to walk around. 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!" And Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. 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.

**As Paul preached the good news of salvation in Jesus, faith awakened within this disabled man's heart.** Supernaturally, Paul could discern faith in his heart—believing that Jesus had the power to heal him—and Paul shouted in a loud voice for the man to stand up and walk. **Their first instinct is to interpret what God is doing through the grid of their own beliefs.**

**The Lystrans attempt to worship Paul and Barnabas as Zeus and Hermes.** Now, Paul and Barnabas do not at first realize what they are doing—because they are speaking in their native Lycaonian language which is not Greek—Paul and Barnabas do not understand them. Until it becomes apparent when they see the priest of Zeus and his attendants bringing sacrifices intending to venerate them. **The well-known Greek and Roman belief that Zeus and Hermes disguised themselves as humans. Only one couple (Baucis and Philemon) showed Zeus and Hermes hospitality—so the gods destroyed everyone else in a flood (Ovid *Metam* 8.618)** **In ancient myths, the gods often would come disguised in order to test the character of humans.** If they responded favorably they were spared. If they didn't—they were destroyed and judged. **Incarnation of the gods was so common a belief among the Greeks and Romans, that the message of the incarnation of God's Son—Jesus would not have been controversial for most.**

**Now they have before them two visitors who minister in power, proclaiming the news about King Jesus who was incarnate in human form. And they suspect that these men are Zeus and Hermes returned to test the Phrygians again—to see if they will pass the test of hospitality. And this time, they mean to pass the test.**

**But they have the whole event tragically wrong.**

They have attributed the acts of God to false gods. We have redirected our native appetite for worship to false gods.

### 3. Godly leaders point people's affections back to Christ (14:14-18).

<sup>14</sup> The apostles Barnabas and Paul tore their robes when they heard this and rushed into the crowd, shouting, <sup>15</sup> “People! Why are you doing these things? We are people also, just like you, and we are proclaiming good news to you, that you turn from these **worthless things** to the living God, **who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and everything in them.** <sup>16</sup> In past generations he allowed all the nations to go their own way, <sup>17</sup> although he did not leave himself **without a witness**, since he did what is good by giving you rain from heaven and fruitful seasons and filling you with food and your hearts with joy.” <sup>18</sup> Even though they said these things, they barely stopped the crowds from sacrificing to them.

**They tore their clothes:** When Jesus said to Caiaphas during his Sanhedrin trial that he was the Son of Man who would ascend in above the clouds to receive all glory, honor, and power over the nations from Ancient of Days (God the Father)—Caiaphas lost his mind and immediately, instinctively tore his robes in protest: “Blasphemy!” For heaven’s sake, do we need to hear more testimony? This is what a devout Jew does when they see or hear this level of blasphemy.

**P&B are not inconvenienced by this. They’re not amused, or flattered by the false worship**—they are distraught. **And in this Christian celebrity worship culture that we have**—We live in the age of the Christian celebrity pastor. Believers prop these people up on their pedestals, worship them like Greek gods, and then we produce endless articles and podcasts wondering how this could have ever happened. I’ll tell you how it happened, men who are mere image-bearers; sinners saved by grace (just like you) were enshrined and enthroned in people’s hearts.

- **False gods always fail you.** The only one worthy of our worship is the one true God of heaven. False gods will always fail you because **they were not designed to receive God’s glory but merely to reflect it.**
- **False gods will always turn on you.** In the story of Zeus and Hermes—when the people failed to show them the worship they demanded—they turned on the Lystrans, the Phrygians and cursed them.
- **Idolatry will always distort God’s image in you. We are made in his image,** now conformed to the image of Christ who is the express image of the invisible God—designed to reflect his glory. Whatever we worship is what we become—we’re formed into.
- **Idolatry will drag your soul to hell. The end result of a human species worshipping what is *not God* is moral depravity and spiritual destruction.**

Romans 1:29-32 “They are filled with all unrighteousness, evil, greed, and wickedness. They are full of envy, murder, quarrels, deceit, and malice. They are gossips, <sup>30</sup> slanderers, God-haters, arrogant, proud, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, <sup>31</sup> senseless, untrustworthy, unloving, and unmerciful. **<sup>32</sup> Although they know God’s just sentence—that those who practice such things deserve to die**—they not only do them, but even applaud others who practice them.

This is P&B's motivation. To somehow stop this freight train engulfed with the fires of hell to headed off a cliff into moral oblivion, into final, irreversible judgment.

**The Lystrans are directing the honor and glory that is due God alone to mere men.**

**4. False idol worshipers are fickle (14:19-20).**

<sup>19</sup>Some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and when they won over the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, thinking he was dead. <sup>20</sup>After the disciples gathered around him, he got up and went into the town. The next day he left with Barnabas for Derbe.

**False idols will fail you and turn on you—because they can't produce in you what only God can—his image. And all the blessing that come with that image-bearing vocation.**

**No one is more fickle and non-comital than the worshipers of these false idols.**

**Just look at what is happening in our culture of celebrity worship...every year, a slew of former idols gets knocked off their pedestals and devoured by a sinful and wicked generation.**

**Lea Michelle—an actress known for her role on the show "Glee."** It was a show that promoted the LGBTQ agenda regularly. She tweeted out her stance for this agenda and for the black lives matters cause—and her co-stars had her cancelled because she said some questionable things like 8 years ago. Cancelled for past micro-agressions.

**Sia: Pop star—famous singer** directed a movie about a girl on the spectrum of autism—but the SJW's didn't like the fact that she didn't cast an actual autistic star and instead had an actress play the part. She's cancelled.

**Ellen Degeneres—for 15 years, Degeneres** has been the poster-child for social wokeness after she came out famously as a **Lesbian**. Now she's been cancelled because the same worshipers who adored her for her radical views have turned on her because she was hateful and guilty of micro-agressions in the workplace.

And the list goes on. No one is more cruel to their gods than these false worshipers.

**Just look at the Christian celebrities who were exalted as little godlings by an idolatrous Christian celebrity worship culture—and now that these same** men and women have proven to be human beings and not gods—consumed by the very worshipers who held them up on a pedestal.

**Notice how easily the crowd of Greeks and Zeus worshipers are turned by the visiting Jews.**

**Application:**

- 1. We are to embody the humility, respect, and power of the Gospel message.**
- 2. We resist the destructive idolatry of our culture.**
- 3. We worship the one true God who created us, gave us everything and has graced us with his only Son.**