

Chapter 34: The Darkness Cannot Overcome It

Acts 14:8–20

As we continue our study through the Book of Acts, some of the stories of the missionary works of Paul and his companions may seem to run together. In this specific story in Acts 14:8–20, the story of healing a lame man may also blur together in our memories with other healing stories of Peter (Acts 3) and Jesus himself throughout the Gospels. Yet, each story has a specific purpose beyond simply illustrating, once again, that the gospel continued to go out in those early days of the church. Beyond that, this story captures dramatically how the Jewish Messiah had become the Savior of Gentile peoples, to the ends of the earth. Especially, Luke shows us here that *Gentile darkness cannot overcome the light of the Messiah*.

The Light of the Messiah (Acts 14:8–10)

After having moved on from Iconium to Lystra, the apostles “continued to preach the gospel” (Acts 14:6–7). Luke tells us, “Now at Lystra there was a man sitting who could not use his feet. He was crippled from birth and had never walked” (v. 8). Although Luke does not explicitly tell us the setting where the apostles administered the miracle of healing this man took place, Luke later tells us that the miracle is observed by “crowds” of pagans who spoke in Lycaonian (v. 11). From this, we may deduce that (1) this miracle did not take place inside a Jewish synagogue, where Paul and Barnabas had been preaching at first in Iconium (Acts 14:1), and (2) this miracle was performed outdoors in the sight of general crowds of people in the city. Whatever this man had been doing before the apostles arrived and began preaching, Luke tells us that the man then “listened to Paul speaking” (v. 9a). Therefore, as in so many situations in the Book of Acts, we therefore have the apostles outdoors, preaching the gospel to whoever would listen. Here, the Holy Spirit captured the heart and mind of this crippled man through their preaching.¹

We should also note the many similarities between this history and the history of the lame beggar whom Peter healed in Acts 3.² In both cases, the man being healed was lame from birth (Acts 3:2; 14:8). Further, in both cases, the verb σῶζω (*sōzō*) is used to describe the healing (Acts 4:9; 14:9). This is important to understand the physical healing as symbolic of spiritual healing, since the

¹ “I answer, that this was a singular and extraordinary motion of the Spirit of God in the cripple...” (Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 2:8.)

² For a full list of similarities and differences in this paragraph, see Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 569–70.

verb σώζω is the word commonly translated as “to save.”³ In this case, Paul could see that the man crippled from birth “had faith to *be made well* [σωθῆναι; *sōthēnai*, from σώζω]” before his healing.⁴ In Acts 3, we do not have any indication that the man believed before being healed; however, Peter is explicit that it was “by faith in his name” that the man was healed: “the faith that is through Jesus has given the man this perfect health in the presence of you all” (Acts 3:16).⁵ Perhaps most importantly, in both of these passages Luke uses the rare verb ἄλλομαι (*hallomai*), meaning “leap,” to describe the response of these men to the healing.⁶ As we discussed in our study of Acts 3, this word is used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) of Isaiah 35:6: “then shall the lame man leap like a deer.” Here in Acts 14:10, this is the word used to describe how this lame man “sprang up [i.e., *leaped*]” in response to Paul’s command to “Stand upright on your feet.”

The comparison and contrast between these two stories is important for advancing the narrative of how the gospel is extending into the nations. In Acts 13:47, Paul had quoted part of Isaiah 49:6: “I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.” The first part of that prophecy explains the rationale for sending the Messiah’s salvation to the Gentiles: “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” In Acts 3, the Messiah’s healing came upon a lame man who was not particularly expecting it. It is unclear when exactly his faith arose in relation to the healing. For this Gentile man in Acts 14, however, we are told that Paul saw his faith that came through hearing the gospel preached, and on that basis he was healed.⁷ In Acts 3, the Messiah heals a Jew to bring him to faith. The result was that that Jewish man was then able to *enter* the temple, which he had not been able to do because of his physical defect (Acts 3:8). Here, the Messiah brings a Gentile to faith through the preaching of the gospel, and by that faith also heals him. In this case, the man is now permanently diverted from worshiping in the nearby temple of Zeus through his new faith in Christ (Acts 14:13). In both cases, the physical healing is symbolic of the spiritual healing, and the manner in which both come to experience that salvation is significant as a picture for how salvation comes to the Jews and then to the Gentiles.

³ “Paul does not speak directly of spiritual salvation here. The picture of the miracle, however, moves in this more spiritual direction because the scene typifies the signs and wonders Paul and Barnabas have done.” (Bock, *Acts*, 475.)

⁴ “Since Luke’s readers know that Paul’s message connects faith with Jesus the savior, with forgiveness of sins, and with eternal life (13:12, 39, 48), the faith of the lame man probably includes all of these. The expectation that the power of the God of the Jews whom Paul proclaims, a power that brought Jesus back from the dead, would bring him onto his feet and heal him from his birth defect and also grant him forgiveness of sins and eternal life.” (Schnabel, *Acts*, 606.)

⁵ “And in Acts, as in the Gospels, we should note how regularly faith is emphasized as a condition of receiving both physical and spiritual healing.” (Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 290.)

⁶ Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 407.

⁷ “The cripple was listening to Paul’s speaking. In this respect he differed from the beggar in the Temple.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 570.)

Darkened Understanding (Acts 14:11–18)

Especially when we read this story in conjunction with the healing of the lame man in the temple in Acts 3, we are meant to understand this as an act of the Messiah’s extraordinary power that is breaking in as a light for the Gentiles. Yet, those Gentiles, “in the futility of their minds,” were “darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart” (Eph. 4:17–18). Rather than giving glory to the Messiah Jesus, they misinterpret what they have seen in the worst possible way: “And when the crowds saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in Lycaonian, ‘The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!’ Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker” (vv. 11–12). Luke tells us that the crowd declares this in a foreign language to explain why Paul and Barnabas did not respond more quickly to what was happening around them: “At this point Paul and Barnabas had no inkling of what was transpiring because the crowd’s exclamation was in their own native Lycaonian dialect.”⁸

Even so, the intentions of these foolish Gentiles become clear soon enough: “And the priest of Zeus, whose temple was at the entrance to the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds” (v. 13). Seeing a pagan priest begin the sacrificial rites does not prompt vainglory in the hearts of the apostles, but horror: “But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their garments and rushed out into the crowd, crying out...” (v. 14). Peterson reminds us that tearing one’s clothing was a Jewish response to perceived blasphemy (Matt. 26:65).⁹ More, it has not been all that long since Herod Antipas had been struck down because he pridefully basked in the praise of the people who shouted, “The voice of a god, and not of a man!” (Acts 12:22).¹⁰ Rather than pridefully lingering in the worship, the apostles immediately moved to stop what was happening.

As the apostles had preached the gospel through words, they now seek to stop the crowds’ actions through words:

“Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.” (Acts 14:15–17)

Literally, Paul declares that they were men, “of like *passions*” (ὁμοιοπαθεῖς; *homoiopatheis*) with

⁸ John B. Polhill, *Acts*, NAC 26 (Broadman Press, 1992), 313–14.

⁹ Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 409. The fact that the Jewish high priest was mistaken in believing that Jesus had committed blasphemy does not negate the meaning of his response. Here, Paul and Barnabas tear their clothes because of actual blasphemy.

¹⁰ Polhill, *Acts*, 315.

them. What the ancient people called “passions” are similar to what we call “emotions.”¹¹ For our purposes, the important point is that Paul and Barnabas argue that they are *not* gods because they experience similar passions to any other man—passions that the gods do not experience. From here, he proclaims the biblical account of God’s creation in simple, yet urgent, terms. Just as the doctrine of the Big Bang and evolution constitutes the creation mythology of our own generation, the ancient people had their own creation mythologies that understood the origin of the world as we know it as a result of conflict among the pantheon of the gods. To declare that a single, “living God” created the heavens and the earth and the sea and all that is in them (i.e., multiple domains, under the rule of multiple gods in the pagan mind) cut across their creation mythology in a way that they were not prepared to receive.

Paul then declares some good news about this God, in that God had been the one to provide them with rains and harvests and food and gladness (v. 17). Although he did not get to a clear declaration of Jesus Christ the Messiah, it is interesting to compare this sermon to Paul’s sermons to the pagans in Athens, where he starts again with a biblical statement of creation and a single God, and states simply that God “has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead” (Acts 17:31). These pagans were not ready for a full declaration of the story of Jesus as the Son of God, but the apostles begin laying the groundwork of overturning their pagan assumptions as they seek to preach to them the full gospel. Yet, “Even with these words they scarcely restrained the people from offering sacrifice to them” (v. 18).

Hardness of Heart (Acts 14:19–20)

The next verse in this passage is a stunning plot twist: “But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead” (v. 19). As Bruce observes, “There is grim irony in the quick reversal of the local attitude to the two apostles!”¹² One moment the crowds are persuaded that Paul and Barnabas are gods, and they seek to offer sacrifices to them. The next moment, they are persuaded that Paul and Barnabas are the worst kinds of troublemakers, and they seek to put them to death by stoning. Schnabel observes, “This is the raw side of popular piety; evidently convinced by the visiting Jews that Paul and Barnabas are politically dangerous agitators, their enthusiasm has morphed into the excitement for a stoning.”¹³

Yet, there is another layer of irony beyond the sudden shift in their attitudes toward Paul and Barnabas. The gods were supposedly immortal, but the crowds too quickly assume that Paul was dead, even though he was still alive. After Paul’s body is abandoned as dead, the people had moved on from any association of a man whom they had been prepared to worship. Luke continues the narrative with dramatic understatement: “But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city, and on the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe” (v. 20). Commentators disagree about whether a miracle is in view here, or whether the crowds had simply been mistaken

¹¹ Thomas Dixon, *From Passions to Emotions: The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category* (Cambridge University Press, 2003).

¹² Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 296.

¹³ Schnabel, *Acts*, 612.

about their estimation. Regardless, it is a remarkable thing for Paul to stand up, re-enter the city, and then continue on in ministry.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the setting for this healing story? How is this story of the healing of a man who cannot walk similar to the story from Acts 3? How are the two stories different? What role does faith play in healing this man (v. 9)? What was Paul “speaking” about when this man was listening (v. 9; see Acts 14:7)? What is the significance of the word translated here as “sprang up” (v. 10)? What Old Testament prophecy does this evoke?
2. How did the people of Lystra respond to this miracle (v. 11)? Why were Paul and Barnabas delayed in understanding the intentions of the people of Lystra (v. 11)? How does this temple compare to the temple nearby the place where the other lame man was healed in Acts 3? How do Paul and Barnabas respond when they realize what the people want to do (v. 14)? What do they say to persuade them against worshipping them (vv. 15–17)?
3. Why do you think that the Jews from Antioch and Iconium would have come to Lystra (v. 19)? What had been their reactions to Paul and Barnabas in those cities (Acts 13:45–50; 14:5)? How do you think the people of Lystra could have turned so dramatically from wanting to worship Paul and Barnabas to trying to kill Paul (v. 19)? What should we make of Paul’s rising up and going back into the city (v. 20)?
4. What have you learned about evangelism from the examples of the apostles so far in the Book of Acts? Where do they go in their attempts to reach the lost with the gospel of Christ? What fruit do they see from people coming to faith? What kind of opposition do they face from those who hate Christ and his gospel? In what way should these stories inform us about God’s vision for evangelism in his church today?