



Bible Study

May 6, 2015

Acts 14:6-18

John 7:14-30

Acts 14:6-18 (NKJV) -

They became aware of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding region. And they were preaching the gospel there. And in Lystra a certain man without strength in his feet was sitting, a cripple from his mother's womb, who had never walked. This man heard Paul speaking. Paul, observing him intently and seeing that he had faith to be healed, said with a loud voice, "Stand up straight on your feet!" And he leaped and walked. 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. But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard this, they tore their clothes and ran in among the multitude, crying out and saying, "Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men with the same nature as you, and preach to you that you should turn from these useless things to the living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and all things that are in them, who in bygone generations allowed all nations to walk in their own ways. Nevertheless He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good, gave us rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness." And with these sayings they could scarcely restrain the multitudes from sacrificing to them.

John 7:14-30 (NKJV) - Now about the middle of the feast Jesus went up into the temple and taught. And the Jews marveled, saying, "How does this Man know letters, having never studied?" Jesus answered them and said, "My doctrine is not Mine, but His who sent Me. If anyone wills to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or whether I speak on My own authority. He who speaks from himself seeks his own glory; but He who seeks the glory of the One who sent Him is true, and no unrighteousness is in Him. Did not Moses give you the law, yet none of you keeps the law? Why do you seek to kill Me?" The people answered and said, "You have a demon. Who is seeking to kill You?" Jesus answered and said to them, "I did one work, and you all marvel. Moses therefore gave you circumcision (not that it is from Moses, but from the fathers), and you circumcise a man on the Sabbath. If a man receives circumcision on the Sabbath, so that the law of Moses should not be broken, are you angry with Me because I made a man completely well on the Sabbath? Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment." Now some of them from Jerusalem said, "Is this not He whom they seek to kill? But look! He speaks boldly, and

they say nothing to Him. Do the rulers know indeed that this is truly the Christ? However, we know where this Man is from; but when the Christ comes, no one knows where He is from.” Then Jesus cried out, as He taught in the temple, saying, “You both know Me, and you know where I am from; and I have not come of Myself, but He who sent Me is true, whom you do not know. But I know Him, for I am from Him, and He sent Me.” Therefore they sought to take Him; but no one laid a hand on Him, because His hour had not yet come.

Commentary -

The city of Lystra was a small settlement in Asia Minor, what is now Turkey, and was much newer as a settlement than her neighboring cities. The land in which the city was built, on a small hill in its center, was the home of the Lycaonians, a native tribe of people related to the ancient Hittites who had their own language and culture. In the second century B.C., Lystra was built, and the land was given to a group of Roman military veterans by the Senate, who became the landed aristocracy, and who used the natives as peasant labor. After the construction of the city, over time a Greek speaking merchant class developed from other surrounding cities, including a small Jewish population. As a result of St. Paul's ministry in the city, St. Timothy's mother St. Eunice, a Jewish woman married to a Greek man, embraced Christ and educated her son in the faith. St. Timothy would go on to become St. Paul's most faithful companion and fellow laborer, and the Apostle would entrust him to be the first Bishop of Ephesus following his martyrdom.

Today's epistle reading from the Acts of the Apostles describes the events of St. Paul's first visit to Lystra with St. Barnabas. In order to understand what transpires during that visit, some knowledge is needed of local folklore. There was, in the region near Lystra, a great oak tree growing intertwined with a linden tree. A tale was told by the locals regarding the origin of the double tree which holds several parallels to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in the book of Genesis. We know this other story primarily through Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, written in the first century B.C. In the story, the pagan gods Zeus and Hermes, disguised as human beings, visited this region at the border of Phrygia and Cappadocia, and went from door to door, seeking someone who would give them hospitality. After being turned away from many magnificent homes and estates, they finally came to a tiny hut, in which lived an elderly couple named Philemon and Baucis. The elderly couple had very little to their name, but what little they had they eagerly offered up in hospitality to their guests. Seeing this, the two gods revealed their actual identities, and warned the couple that they had come to destroy the cities of the region, but because they alone had offered hospitality, they would be spared if they fled to the mountains and did not look back. After the promised destruction, they offered the couple anything that they wanted in return for their kindness and piety. The couple made only one request, that they die at the same time so that neither would have to mourn the other. When the time came for their deaths, they were instead transformed into an oak and a linden tree, to grow forever entwined together.

When Ss. Paul and Barnabas arrived in Lystra, this story had been taught for generations to the native Lycaonians, and had become known to the ruling class in the city. When St. Paul healed a man lame from birth, one of the signs that accompanied the Apostle's proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, those in Lystra interpreted it as a sign rather that these men were not men at all, but were Zeus and Hermes returned for another visit. The previous visit had meant that judgment and destruction were coming to all those who failed to show hospitality, and so the residents of Lystra fell all over one another in order to make sure that this time they honored their 'divine' guests. The various Greco-Roman gods were worshipped in regional variations, and the local version of Zeus was known as 'Zeus-at-the-Gates', and so it was there that the people of the town prepared to sacrifice animals and prepare a massive feast for Ss. Barnabas and Paul.

The Apostle, of course, does not allow this to happen. St. Paul does his best to correct the

people of Lystra, but he does so in relation to what they believe is happening. He does not correct their idea that their region is now come under judgment, but he does correct their idea of from whom that judgment is coming. They are not coming under judgment from their two visitors, who are only mortal men like themselves, nor from their false pagan gods, but rather from the true God who create the heavens and the earth, and all mankind. St. Paul had been specially called by Christ Himself to be the Apostle to the Gentiles, to witness their entering into the New Covenant in His Blood along with the remnant of Israel that had survived the judgment that fell upon Judea. But having read the Prophets, St. Paul also knows that with the knowledge of the true God going out to all the nations, so also would all of the nations soon come under the Lord's judgment. Until this point, He had been patient with the nations while He dealt with and disciplined His people to prepare for the coming of Christ. Very soon now there would be a reckoning, and the people of Lystra must repent, first and foremost of their idolatry, and be Baptized into Christ.

From the perspective of Greco-Roman paganism, anyone who was spiritually powerful, which they perceived in temporal power, such as the Emperor, in intellect, such as great philosophers or mathematicians, in healing, whether by priests or by physicians, or through the predicting of the future or great rhetoric either was of divine origin or was inhabited (or possessed) by a divine being. These lesser divine beings were called 'daemons'. From their perspective, being thus possessed was a gift and something to be honored (as by the offering of sacrifices to the 'genius' of the Emperor). The great men and women of the Roman world happily accepted these divine honors. Indeed, the Emperors frequently demanded them. Ss. Paul and Barnabas' response to the attempt must be compared to that of Herod Agrippa I in Acts 12, shortly before today's reading. Herod gratefully accepted the praise of the people and the claim that he was divine, and as a result of his pride, was eaten by worms and died, after five days of excruciating pain according to the Jewish historian Josephus. It was not a 'god' that dwelt within Herod, but worms and filth.

Ss. Paul and Barnabas, on the other hand, in humility not only refuse all of these honors, but continue to preach the Gospel, including condemning the offerings being made to them as idolatrous. After being forced to flee Iconium under threat of death, their message rejected, being well received for the first time and being the recipients of honors and over-weening hospitality likely represented a grave temptation for the Apostles, but they declined nonetheless, even though their refusal then led to men from Iconium catching up to them and turning many of the people of Lystra against them, as a result of which they were nearly stoned to death. The Saints set the message which they bring of Jesus Christ, and the revelation of the True and Living God which came through Him, and the salvation that that message offers to the people of Lystra above all else, including their own lives.

In the Gospel reading for today, we see that in so doing, Ss. Paul and Barnabas are emulating Christ Himself. Christ came and proclaimed the true knowledge of the Father. Those who heard Him were willing to do anything, it seemed, other than to believe Him, and accept the Truth which He revealed to them in His words, in the signs He worked, and through His Life. They would marvel at His rhetorical ability and His knowledge despite His lack of education. They would credit Him with having some kind of spiritual power and influence, of being possessed by some kind of divine spirit. They would do anything they could to fit Christ and His words into some box or category within their current way of thinking rather than turn, repent, and live. When He absolutely refused to be fit into their existing way of thinking, they sought to kill Him, to dispose of Him, so that He would trouble them no more. They were willing to treat Him as a great sage and give Him lauds and honors, even divine ones, as long as it did not require them to repent of their sins and transform their lives.

Brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ, let us also emulate His humility in this way. Very often in our lives we are called upon to weigh the value of the Truth, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the only Name in heaven or on earth by which men can be saved, against our own reputations, our own comfort, our own acceptance, and our own vainglory. Those of us who preach and teach, when we do so, all too often seek the approval of our audience over fidelity to the Truth. All too often we remain silent about

Christ and His commandments out of fear of offending someone or having them think ill of us, or label us as a religious fanatic. All too often we ourselves continue in sinful habits and destructive patterns in our life because they endear us to friends who share those same sinful and destructive behaviors, rather than repent and change and risk alienating them. Each of us is mortal and human and a sinner just like all those men and women who have gone before us, and yet we have been entrusted with the greatest treasure the world has ever received, the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Ss. Paul and Barnabas considered all else in their lives to be worthless in comparison, and in losing their lives for the sake of the Gospel, received eternal life in return, and the approval of their Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ; so much more precious than the approval of men.

Questions to Ponder -

- 1) The myth that was believe by the Lycaonians, though clearly a fable, does possess similarities to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, when two angels sent from God found hospitality in the home of Lot and brought salvation to his household from the judgment coming upon the cities of the plain. Indeed, St. Paul tells us that in showing hospitality, some have 'entertained angels unawares' (Heb. 13:2). Are your home and your wallet, and even more importantly your life and your heart open to strangers, travelers, and those in need? If these angels knocked on the door of your home, or of your parish, would they receive a warm welcome?
- 2) How do you respond to compliments, to praise, and to successes and victories in life? Do you take credit for these blessings, or do you thank God for them? Do you give thanks and praise to Christ publicly for the gifts and blessings you have received, or is your faith a closely guarded secret?
- 3) In that it convicts us of sin and calls us to repentance and change of life, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is often not what we would prefer to here. In our contemporary culture, in fact, those who say anything that is taken as 'negative' are vilified and labeled as 'haters'. People seek to cut such people out of their lives in favor of those who are 'positive' and who tell us what we would like to hear. How do you respond to criticism? Do you become angry and push people away that criticize you, or do you see them as a blessing from God sent to correct you and help you repent in humility?

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