

"Lord God, you have appointed me as a Bishop and Pastor in your Church, but you see how unsuited I am to meet so great and difficult a task. If I had lacked your help, I would have ruined everything long ago. Therefore, I call upon you: I wish to devote my mouth and my heart to you; I shall teach the people. I myself will learn and ponder diligently upon your Word. Use me as your instrument – but do not forsake me, for if ever I should be on my own, I would easily wreck it all."

"Sir, we would see Jesus."

Acts 14

⁸In Lystra there was a man who was sitting down because he had no strength in his feet. He had never walked because he was lame from birth. ⁹When he was listening to Paul as he was speaking, Paul looked at him closely and saw that he had faith so that he could be healed. ¹⁰Paul said in a loud voice, "Stand up on your feet!" And the man jumped up and began to walk.

¹¹When the crowds saw what Paul had done, they raised their voices, saying in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have come down to us in human form." ¹²Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes, because he was the main speaker. ¹³The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought bulls and garlands to the city gates, because he wanted to offer sacrifices, along with the crowds.

¹⁴But when the apostles Paul and Barnabas heard about this, they tore their clothes and rushed into the crowd, shouting, ¹⁵"Men, why are you doing these things? We too are men with the same nature as you. We are preaching the good news to you so that you turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and everything in them. ¹⁶In past generations he allowed all the nations to go their own ways. ¹⁷Yet he did not leave himself without testimony of the good he does. He gives you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons. He fills you with food and fills your hearts with gladness." ¹⁸Even though they said these things, they had a hard time stopping the crowds from sacrificing to them.

¹⁹Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and persuaded the crowds to stone Paul. When they thought he was dead, they dragged him out of the city. ²⁰But after the disciples had gathered around him, he stood up and went into the city. The next day, he left with Barnabas for Derbe.



Often I have read the book of Acts and wondered why there are so many miracles. Not that there shouldn't be miracles in the Bible, but compare it to our day and age. Why don't we get the same miracles of St. Paul? It's easy to focus on the supernatural. If we are really the true Church, shouldn't we be performing just as many miracles and witnessing just as many supernatural events?

But as you reread this book from time to time, you gain a greater appreciation for the events and sermons. This appreciation comes if you ask *why* they happen, or *why* they are stated and preached in that way. In fact, in a text like today's, you see how there is a deficiency, at times, in performing a miracle. The people did not understand it as derived from the true God. They took it to mean that the men of God involved were local gods themselves.

So it is with power. When we expect to cause a miracle, we place ourselves in the way of the gospel. When we expect to be the power of God, we become an obstacle. But we will see today how beautiful it is not to use God as our miracle-bank, but to speak God's Word, for ...

THE CHRISTIAN CAN ONLY BE THE MOUTHPIECE

Last week we heard how, in his missionary journeys, Paul would begin at the synagogue of each city. But what if the town had no synagogue? What was there, if not a synagogue, but a temple to Zeus, the Greek ruler of gods.

Paul and Barnabas were in a city called Lystra, and Paul began to preach. Paul knew that he was there to be only a mouthpiece for the Savior Jesus. It was God proclaiming the gospel through Paul, not to Paul's credit by any means. He was not there to self-glorify in the success of that day, or to show up his travel companion Barnabas, or to gain his own following. Paul came to preach the good news of salvation by faith alone in Jesus Christ, and preach the good news Paul did.

We are not given the content of Paul's sermon about the good news of Jesus Christ, as it seems because we have heard it in other sermons, and we would hear the gospel again if we continued to read the rest of the book of Acts. We are told that a paralyzed man heard the gospel, put his faith in Jesus, and that Paul cures the man with God's power.

Two things indicate that Paul is a mouthpiece of Jesus Christ already in the opening verses. First, Paul used a loud voice. He had confidence enough in the Savior Jesus to tell a man lame from birth to stand. Second, the man didn't get up slowly. *The man jumped up and began to walk.* It was an amazing miracle. (My mother recently broke her hip, and she was doing very well after surgery. With the assistance of my dad and a walker, Mom took 120 steps the first day. A month later, Mom is still recovering very well, but that still means Mom is using a walker. This man jumped to his feet instantly having never walked before!) Now if Paul had not been speaking by the name of Jesus Christ, as the mouthpiece of the living Son of God, who got to His feet after being whipped, nailed, speared and suffocated to death; this miracle would not have happened in any way, let alone as confidently and quickly.

But they were in Gentile Lystra, and the people did not identify the miracle of an all-powerful God with Jehovah, the God of the Old Testament. Their minds went immediately to the gods they knew; Hermes was the messenger god according to Greek myth, and Zeus was the king of the gods, the god of lightning and agriculture.

Historians have made an interesting guess why the people may have been looking for these two gods. There was an ancient myth which was supposed to have happened in the territory of Lycaonia, This is the very region where Paul and Barnabas were preaching. The myth was about a married couple named Philemon and Baucis. They entertained the gods Zeus and Hermes when no one else would. As a result, Philemon and Baucis gained long life for themselves as temple caretakers. The townspeople who had not recognized and therefore rejected the two strangers were washed away in a flood.

Paul and Barnabas had performed a healing miracle – a miracle! This was wonderful. And the people of this land did not want to mess up again. Better to err on the side of calling someone a god, right? You can attribute their action to a kind of fear. They didn't want to be carried away by a flood, so, "Just in case, let's worship these guys!" Or you might attribute their action to a kind of opportunism. "If we acknowledge these guys as gods, maybe we'll get more good things out of them!" Their consciences either approved or condemned their actions. Whatever the motive, when you put them together, they figured that gods needed to be placated, to be worshiped to be happy. And you want to keep those moody Greco-Roman gods happy, no matter what.

But what does a mouthpiece of the true God say? Not placate God, not keep God happy, not simply fear God. The true God's messengers come to bring peace. The true God's mouthpiece sounds grace and mercy. The mouthpieces of God in Lystra on that day, Paul and Barnabas,

came to relieve the city of its obligation to Zeus and Hermes. They would rather tear their clothes and shout than be identified as gods.

Why is that? It is because we know the God who did not just expect the impossible, but who did the impossible. We know the God who does not need placating or appeasing, but who is satisfied in the work of His only Son. We know the God who reckons us innocent when we should have been guilty. We know the only God we can sincerely love, because He relieves us from the impossible. He did this by rejecting the bulls and wreaths of hard hearts, and by His selfless sacrifice on the cross once for all.

We can sincerely love only a God who relieves us of the impossible. He differs from other gods by His supreme power over nature. He is not localized, but He is universal in taking care of peoples and nations. He fed, clothed, and sheltered believers and unbelievers of every generation. Nor does He force faith in Him onto people. Paul preached that *in past generations God let the nations go their own way*. But now there were witnesses of Jesus' work so that sinners could put their faith in Him.

But what counted for faith in Him? Would miracles be the surefire way to believe in Jesus? In John 12, we are told that *even though Jesus had done so many miraculous signs in their presence, they still did not believe in Him*. We also know that those who asked for miraculous signs were asking for the wrong reason. We also see that these people were so upset that the true God did not fit their pantheon of gods that they stoned Paul until they thought he was dead!

What would possibly make believers out of these people? Only the Word of God caused faith. Only the Holy Spirit and His means of grace, the gospel in Word and sacrament, could make believers. By faith not in miracles but in the message, by faith not in the man but the Maker, by faith not in the mouthpiece but the name of Jesus is God powerful to save. *Not by my might, nor by my strength, but by my Spirit*, says the Word of the Lord. *God chose the weak things of this world to shame the wise, and God was pleased through the foolishness of what is preached to save those who believe*. And what is so foolish? The cross of Jesus seems like such a counter-productive message, because the Son of God seemed to lose. He died for those who put their trust in other gods. But it is a saving message when those who trust in false gods hear how Jesus has always been present, always taking care, always giving, always protecting and providing, and finally dying and rising again.

It is by that Word of God that He means to save, words like:

- *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*
- *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.*
- *Blessed are those who hear the Word of God and keep it.*
- *Come all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*

It would have been easy for Paul and Barnabas on that day to love themselves. They were about to be honored as divine! They could have feasted as gods in Lystra. But instead they preached the message that brought hatred and stones on them. How can we say it was effective?

Here's how: Sure enough, on their way back through the province, they came back to strengthen the churches in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra. That is to say that there was a church to go back to after all this was over. Their message had made an impact. In fact, Timothy, a future pastor of the church, came from this town of Lystra. The message made an impact, because they became the mouthpiece and did not make themselves more than the gospel. They boasted not in themselves but in Christ Jesus alone.

Amen.