

From Lystra to Antioch

Acts 14:16–28

The previous lesson was about Barnabas and Paul being mistaken for gods because Paul healed a lame man. They thought Barnabas was Jupiter and Paul was Hermes. The priests of the temple of Jupiter wanted to sacrifice to honor of these “gods.” It took Paul and Barnabas a lot of effort to finally convince them that they were mere humans who were working on behalf of the true God. This is the same thing that Paul came up against while in Thessalonica. When they heard Paul’s teaching, they turned away from their worthless idols to serve the living God (1 Thessalonians 1:9).

Permitted to go their own way (verses 16–18)

For approximately 1,500 years before the Apostle Paul was raised up, God dealt with the nation of Israel. Israel was raised up above all other nations because the Gentiles had previously rejected God and did what their evil hearts dictated. God put a stop to the wicked Gentile world at the flood, but it didn’t take long for evil men to take over the world once again, doing what was right in their own eyes. God intervened by confusing their language and forcing them to scatter from the tower they were building to the heavens (the Tower of Babel). It was shortly after that event that God came to Abraham with the promise that He would make him a great nation. Israel finally became a nation about 500 years later when God led them out of Egypt and gave them the Mosaic Law. Israel was made a nation to ultimately be a light to the Gentile world (Isaiah 42:6; 49:6; 60:3).

During the 1,500 years that God was dealing exclusively with the nation of Israel, He ignored the Gentile world. Israel was given the Mosaic Law and commanded to obey it. They were guaranteed blessings if they obeyed God, and curses if they were disobedient (Deuteronomy 28; Leviticus 26). If a Gentile desired to come to God, he had to go through the nation of Israel since salvation was of the Jews (John 4:22). An alien could become part of Israel by following the Law and, if male, become circumcised (Exodus 12:48). There were also blessings promised to Gentiles who showed favor toward Israel (Genesis 12:3; Acts 10:2; Luke 7:1–10). Ruth is an example of a Gentile coming to God by becoming part of the nation of Israel (Ruth 1:14–16).

All of this changed when God set Israel aside for not accepting Jesus Christ as their Messiah. God stopped dealing with Israel as a nation with the stoning of Stephen in Acts 7. In times past, God overlooked punishing Gentiles for their ignorance. This must be understood in light of Israel. God took action when Israel sinned. He disciplined or punished them to bring them back to Himself. He did not deal with the Gentiles in that manner, but allowed them to go their own way without stopping them. This does not mean that they escape judgment in the future, for all men will be judged (Romans 2:16; Revelation 20:12). As Paul writes in Romans 1:18–20, it is evident to all people that there is a God and there will be no excuse for those who deny God and live as if He does not exist. God makes His presence known even in things we take for granted, such as rain and the production of food from crops.

Unbelieving Jews (verse 19–23)

While Paul and Barnabas were ministering in the city of Lystra, unbelieving Jews came, convinced the crowds that they were troublemakers, and had the people stone Paul and drag him out of the city, leaving him for dead. Miraculously, Paul just stood up while the disciples were standing around him, and he went right back into the city.

Some speculate that it was this event that Paul mentions fourteen year later in 2 Corinthians 12:1–4. Second Corinthians would have been written no later than AD 57. Fourteen years earlier would have been AD 43. This is probably when Paul was in Antioch preaching for one year before he began his first apostolic journey (Acts 11:20–26). Paul wouldn't have been in Lystra until at least a couple of years later, perhaps longer. Although I believe that Paul had died when he was stoned in Lystra, and then miraculously healed (he jumped up without any apparent physical damage), I do not believe that he went into the third heaven at that time. He was given a glimpse of heaven perhaps in preparation for the major trips he was going to take and to give him the fortitude to endure the hardships that he would experience. Even as early as 2 Corinthians 11:23–28, he had already suffered greatly. It seems God was preparing him for what was coming by giving him this experience of heaven while he was yet ministering in Antioch. This is in line with what the Lord spoke through the prophet Ananias in Acts 9:16 when He told him that the Lord would show Paul how much he must suffer for the name of Christ. Significantly, Paul writes in verse 22, "...that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God." This verse is not about working to obtain eternal life, but about the trials a believer will go through because of his or her faith. He wrote this as he was only halfway through his first apostolic journey.

Return to Antioch (verses 24–28)

The town of Derbe was as far as they were going to travel. They turn around and revisit the churches they originally visited going through the regions of Pisidia and Pamphylia (Lystra, Iconium, Antioch and Attalia). From Attalia, they sailed directly to Antioch.

Back in Antioch, they shared with the congregation everything the Lord was doing, particularly how the Lord had opened up the door of faith unto the Gentiles. Again, this was a huge change in protocol instituted by the Lord. 15 years earlier, the God was still dealing with the nation of Israel under the Kingdom program. Now Paul has been going directly to the Gentiles with the Gospel of the Grace of God. He has yet to be called to the Jerusalem church to fully explain what message he has been preaching and giving a report on his ministry with the Gentiles. This will be coming up within a year of his return to Antioch. With a year of ministry under his belt, he will be able to show proof to the Hebrew church that God is indeed working a work among the Gentiles and that he is the purveyor of the new message of Grace given to him directly by Jesus Christ. It was important for Barnabas be with Paul during this first trip because he was directly connected to the Hebrew church as one of its leaders. He was best qualified to testify to the church as to Paul's qualification to be the preacher of this new message.

Scripture says that they stayed in Antioch a long time with the disciples. It would appear that he was with them for two years before embarking on his next major journey which will take him to the city of Corinth.

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