

## First Gentile Missions: Return – Acts 14:20-28

By Pastor Jeff Alexander (8/19/2012)

### Introduction

1. The proclamation of the Gospel results in two kinds of fruit. One kind of fruit is converts to Christ, for the gospel is the power of God unto salvation for those who believe it. However, it also provokes the fruit of hostility in many who reject it. We have seen this consistently as the apostles have travelled from city to city preaching the gospel. They have now come to the end of their first missionary endeavor, preaching the gospel once again in the city of Derbe.
2. Paul got up after he was stoned in Lystra, taken out of the city and left for dead. It would have been Jews who executed this punishment. Paul was considered a blasphemer for his insistence that Jesus was the Messiah. Jews punished blasphemers by stoning. The Gentiles supported the execution because they saw that the gospel threatened their way of life.

I can't help but wonder if Paul thought about another stoning that earlier ended the life and ministry of Stephen. The apostle had a definite hand in that event. Now the same hatred for God's truth that had burned in Paul's heart then motivated Jews from Antioch and Iconium to stir animosity in Lystra.

Whether he actually died from the stoning or not, one thing was abundantly clear, Paul was able to get up and walked back into the city. Nothing is said about the incident in detail, thus we are left to speculate. Some hold that Paul, bloody, battered, and on the verge of death, somehow determined to continue. I find this more difficult to swallow than to believe that there was some kind of divine intervention. Two things lead me to argue for this. First, the Jews who stoned him would certainly know if they were successful. They took Paul's body out of the city believing him to be dead. Second, nothing is said of dressing wounds or time spent in recovery and rehabilitation. A proper stoning would have left Paul with extensive and serious injuries. Mere resolve to continue his work would not explain his ability to travel in that condition.

3. The next day, Paul and Barnabas departed for Derbe, a city that lay some twenty miles east of Lystra and near the border of Galatia. Again, Luke gives us but a brief sketch of the gospel work done in that city. In fact the account is a mere clause in a larger sentence: "When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples . . ." (Acts 14:21). We may reasonably conclude that this time was relatively free of opposition.

The preaching there was very fruitful. Luke does not tell us how long the apostles spent in Derbe, but it was the end of their first missionary journey. However, they did not go back to Antioch of Syria directly. From Derbe they could have simply travelled east over the Tarsus Mountains, through the Cilician Gates and into the city of Tarsus, then east to Antioch. Instead, they retrace their journey back through the cities they evangelized. This time, instead of preaching publically, their aim is to strengthen the disciples.

Gospel work is no luxury tour of exotic places. It is dangerous work, as Paul shows in 2 Corinthians 11:21-29. This kind of work requires more character than ordinary people possess. It must be divine purpose driven and Spirit enabled. Jesus will build His church, but He will use His servants to accomplish the task. He commissioned them to "make disciples of all nations, teaching them to observe all that He commanded" (Matthew 28:19).

That is what the apostles return to do. These Gentile believers must be established in the truth.

## **I. Paul's Courage (vv. 20, 21)**

### 1. The cause of his courage

Paul's decision to return to Antioch of Syria after the ministry in Derbe is not recorded by Luke. Prudence would dictate that they take the shortest and fastest route, but responsibility drives them to backtrack through the cities where they have had fruit of converts. These Gentiles have no background in Scripture. These saints need to be trained and grounded in truth.

Any other motive would be foolish. Paul's enemies have not gone away. Their attitude is still murderous. Christ is with the apostles. The children of faith need instruction and discipline.

a. Passion for the truth (2 Cor. 4:2)

b. Fellowship of the saints (1 Cor. 2:15)

### 2. The source of his courage (1 Cor. 15:8-10)

a. His devotion to Christ and His cause (Col. 1:24)

b. His love for Christ's people and their spiritual welfare (2 Tim. 2:10)

## **II. Paul's Purpose (vv. 22, 23)**

### 1. Strengthening the souls—discipleship

Strengthening—"to cause to rest on" — "to establish" (Acts 15:32, 41; 18:23)

"The souls of the disciples" is a phrase that is used in the Hebrew sense of persons or mental activity. Paul longs for the saints to be established in faith through right thinking.

a. His aim: perseverance—continuing in the faith

Perseverance is the sole proof of genuine salvation (Matt. 10:22; John 8:31; Rev. 2:7, 17, 26, 3:5, 12, 21). While perseverance is the responsibility of each, it is possible only as grace enables obedience (Phil. 2:12, 13). That is why Paul prays for the saints to be strengthened in His power (Eph. 3:14-19).

b. His message: suffering—the necessity of tribulation (Rom. 5:3, 4; 8:17, 18; 1 Thess. 3:3; 2 Tim. 3:12; 1 Pet. 4:12-16)

"Entering the kingdom" is probably used here in the sense of the final consummation of all things at the return of Jesus Christ. In one sense, the Kingdom of God is already present in the person and power of the Spirit of Christ (Matt. 4:17; 6:33; 12:28; chapter 13; Luke 17:21; Acts 8:12). There is another sense that it is future, as it is in our text now (Matt. 7:21; 8:11, 12; 2 Peter 1:11).

### 2. Establishing the churches—organizing to carry out Christ's commission.

Local churches are God's plan to evangelize the world.

a. Ordaining elders

- b. Commending them to the Lord with prayer and fasting

### **III. Paul's Accountability (vv. 24-28)**

#### 1. Unfinished business—Perga (vv. 24, 25)

- a. The apostles have returned to a city they only passed through earlier. It may be that Mark's decision to return to Jerusalem may have contributed to their not staying at Perga. Now, they return to preach the gospel.
- b. Luke records the motive for their eventual return to Antioch. This church had commended them to the grace of God. Now they must report to the church that their confidence in their ministry has been rewarded with marvelous success.

#### 2. Reporting to the church at Antioch (vv. 26-28)

- a. These men are apostles, yet they submit to the church, reporting their work to them.
- b. They remain for a long time ministering with the disciples.