

The Gospel in Galatia – Acts 14:1-28

Sunday, 14th November, 2010

We've been working our way through the Book of Acts now for several months. Acts is the very honest, sometimes brutal account of how the Gospel – the Message of Jesus, grew out from Jerusalem after Jesus' Resurrection, across into Turkey and then into Europe.

It is a very honest, gloves-off story that tells the good bits and the bad; the great successes and the failures; the times of great blessing and the many times of real persecution and difficulty.

Last week we look at how Paul and Barnabas arrived in a city called Pisidian Antioch and despite massive setbacks and illnesses and opposition, Paul preached a message of encouragement there – how God's Big Plan is unfolding, and how we are part of this Plan – for the salvation of all Nations.

But as he was preaching, some of the Jews in the city hardened their hearts, thinking "We don't want to share our blessing with the nations; we are God's Chosen People – not them!"

So they stirred up opposition from some of the influential people in the city and Paul and Barnabas were expelled.

And that's where I want to pick up the story today – so if you want to follow it in the Bible, we're into Acts 14:1-28 and the action is taking place in a province called Galatia – in what is now Southern Turkey.

So Paul and Barnabas – forced to escape, headed 80 miles to the East to another city – Iconium, and carried on – and so, once again, as I talked about last week, God used the enemies of the Gospel to cause it to spread.

At **Iconium** Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue. There they spoke so effectively that **a great number of Jews and Gentiles believed**. But the Jews who refused to believe stirred up the Gentiles and **poisoned their minds**

against the brothers. So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to do miraculous signs and wonders. The people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews, others with the apostles. There was a plot afoot among the Gentiles and Jews, together with their leaders, to mistreat them and stone them. But they found out about it and fled to the Lycaonian cities of Lystra and Derbe and to the surrounding country, where they continued to preach the good news. (v.1-7)

Through History, there have been some amazing men and women that have paid a high price for something they have believed strongly in:

Aung San Suu Kyi
Tianenmen Square

What Paul and Barnabas were doing was something similar to this – and if you see someone living like this, it makes you want to see what they believed so strongly in.

The “poison” that the Jews were using to try to kill off the beginnings of the Gospel in the city, was stirring up hatred against Paul and Barnabas, but more specifically, it was probably twisting their message, trying to kill off the Gospel by saying “Gentiles – you need to first follow the Jewish Law, and, in effect, become a Jew – and then you can come to Jesus.

The battle ground was that some of the Jews were saying “We have been entrusted with God’s Blessing – so the way to get it is **through us.**”

Where Paul was saying “The whole of the Law – and the whole of History has been **leading to Jesus**, the Messiah and His Death on the Cross; this is the fulfillment of the Blessing. Now everyone needs to go to Him!”

Paul in his letter to the Galatians addresses this issue.

The Jews were saying “First you need to be circumcised, according to Jewish Law – and then keep the Commandments – and then, through that you can follow Jesus.”

Paul was absolutely against this; he had lived that way and knew firsthand how futile it was. Later on, on the same subject, he wrote this

If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless. (Philippians 3:4-6)

Paul was saying "I've done it all! If anyone could claim to have kept the Law, it was me – I had reason to be confident! I had the perfect pedigree! But it's all for nothing. It can't make you clean enough for God."

That may seem like something very distant from 21st Century Britain – some obscure religious argument; but actually the same thinking is still here.

Often I have talked to people about Jesus and asked what they think about the Gospel, which is the Message about His Love and Freedom, and they have answered in terms of their goodness: "I try to be a good person; I don't hurt anyone; I give money to charity; I respect people."

That's all very nice – but it's not enough, and it's not the answer to my question. It's not enough to say I'm a good person unless by good you mean perfect! – the pass mark is 100% - if you're 99.5% good, then it's not good enough to satisfy a Perfect, Holy God.

Later on, Paul wrote to these Galatians:

All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do **everything** written in the Book of the Law." (Galatians 3:10)

All the Law could do is hold up a mirror to you so you could see how much you need God's Mercy – it is Jesus alone who can make us clean.

And so this was the battleground and this was why Paul was so furious at the people who were saying you need to keep the Law – get circumcised – and then you can inherit all the Blessing of Jesus. He says in his letter to the Galatians,

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? (Galatians 3:1-3)

Despite the growing opposition from certain Jews, Paul and Barnabas were able to stay there teaching for “a considerable time and spoke boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to do miraculous signs and wonders”

Eventually though, as the pressure grew it became impossible to stay any longer, so they had to set off and travel another day’s journey, 25 miles South to the next city – Lystra.

In **Lystra** there sat a man crippled in his feet, who was lame from birth and had never walked. He listened to Paul as he was speaking. Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed and called out, "Stand up on your feet!" At that, the man jumped up and began to walk.

When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have come down to us in human form!" Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes because he was the chief speaker. The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought bulls and wreaths to the city gates because he and the crowd wanted to offer sacrifices to them.

In legend (written down by Ovid 50 years before), the gods Zeus and Hermes had come in human form to Lystra and had not been shown any hospitality, being turned away by everyone, except an old couple – Philemon & Baucis, who invited them in. They then revealed that they were gods and turned all the inhospitable people into frogs!

But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting: "Men, why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them. In the past, he let all nations go their own way. Yet he

has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy." Even with these words, they had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them.

This wasn't repentance though – it was a mob, and the people who had tried to execute Paul and Barnabas in Antioch and Iconium had turned up and managed to turn the mob.

So very quickly, attempts to worship Paul and Barnabas became an attempt to execute them horribly:

Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. But after the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city. (v.8-20a)

It's easy to skip over the three words "they stoned Paul", but just stop to think what this meant – this was, and is a horrible, slow, agonizing method of execution where Paul would have been face to face with the fury of the mob.

If some of the Jews stirring up the crowd were rabbis, which would have been a legal condition of a Jewish stoning so they could check that 'everything was in order' and give their approval, as Paul himself had done when Stephen was stoned, then part of their job would be to make sure that the victim was really dead.

This was part of their job and they would have been trained and familiar with what a dead person looked like.

I think it's probable that Paul actually died and then was raised from the dead. Years later Paul wrote this:

I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know--God knows. And I know that this man--whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows-- was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell. (2 Corinthians 12:2-4)

Many people believe that this was Paul's own experience, and so he may well have actually died.

Whether he died or not, it was miraculous that he could have got up straight after being stoned and left for dead, and incredibly courageous what he did next – getting up and going straight back into the city.

The next day he and Barnabas left for **Derbe**.

They preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. **"We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,"** they said. Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust. After going through Pisidia, they came into Pamphylia, and when they had preached the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia. (v.20b-25)

One theologian (Jarrett) was out walking once and saw the tracks of a bleeding animal (a hare) in the snow. He said that this is what Paul's ministry was like – he left a trail of his own blood across the Middle East and Europe.

In Paul's own words, this is what his life was like:

I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. (2 Corinthians 11:23-28)

Eyewitness accounts describe him as a small, bald man with eyebrows that met in the middle, frequent eye problems, and bow-legs and a crooked back. Not a very pretty picture. Probably the back problems and bent legs were a result of permanent ligament damage to his back from the floggings.

But in Lystra – straight after being stoned (to death?) he went back in and continued preaching; and after visiting Derbe, they turned around and went back to each of these dangerous cities to encourage the new Believers and make sure that the Seed of the Gospel was putting down good roots and growing well and strong.

And with his message acted out in front of them all – “We must go through many hardships to enter the Kingdom of God!”

What would motivate someone to behave like that?

I think it was because Paul knew the freedom Jesus had given him.

And he had a passion that people would know and live in and enjoy the Freedom that Jesus offers.

He had lived a “good life” and it had got him as far as supervising executions, full of self-righteousness; a prisoner of legalism and far from God.

And then he had an encounter with the Risen Jesus – the Living God, and it changed his life forever because he tasted God’s Grace and Forgiveness.

This journey of Paul and Barnabas finished some months later as they arrived back in Antioch, where they had been sent from, with amazing reports of the Gospel taking root amongst the Nations.

From Attalia they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed. On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. And they stayed there a long time with the disciples. (v.26-28)

As I mentioned, a short time later Paul wrote the Letter to the Galatians, which keeps going on this theme of freedom.

As I close, I want to leave this question:

How much do you know freedom in your life?

Paul was willing to suffer and ultimately die so that more people would know the same Freedom.

- Freedom from 'living a good life' – it's just not enough – it always leaves you with the question "Am I good enough?" – This can be like living in chains
- Freedom from religion – always trying to be good enough and obedient enough to please God; you can't be! It will always leave you falling short of the mark.
- Freedom from fear
- Freedom from habits and sins that keep on tripping you up
- Freedom from shame
- Freedom from guilt.

This was the Message Paul suffered for; and it's what Jesus still offers.

Pray.