

Rescued by God

Acts 12:1-11

¹ About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. ² He killed James the brother of John with the sword, ³ and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of Unleavened Bread. ⁴ And when he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out to the people. ⁵ So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.

⁶ Now when Herod was about to bring him out, on that very night, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison. ⁷ And behold, an angel of the Lord stood next to him, and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him, saying, "Get up quickly." And the chains fell off his hands. ⁸ And the angel said to him, "Dress yourself and put on your sandals." And he did so. And he said to him, "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me." ⁹ And he went out and followed him. He did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. ¹⁰ When they had passed the first and the second guard, they came to the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel left him. ¹¹ When Peter came to himself, he said, "Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting." – Acts 12:1-11 ESV

In the preceding chapter, Luke mentioned the famine taking place in the land of Judea. This devastating natural disaster had left the congregation in Jerusalem in a state of great need and physical suffering. So much so, that an effort was made on the part of the new Gentile converts to raise funds to send to the church in Jerusalem to assist them in their time of need. Luke records that Barnabas and Saul made a trip to Jerusalem to deliver the generous gift of the Gentile church.

²⁹ So the believers in Antioch decided to send relief to the brothers and sisters in Judea, everyone giving as much as they could. ³⁰ This they did, entrusting their gifts to Barnabas and Saul to take to the elders of the church in Jerusalem. – Acts 11:29-30 NLT

But chapter 12 presents an even greater problem taking place back in Jerusalem. The persecution of the church was continuing to increase in magnitude and intensity. Now, Herod, the pseudo king of the Jews, who had been appointed by Rome, was getting in on the act. Herod Agrippa I was part-Jew but was greatly disliked by the Jewish people because of his close association with the Roman emperor Gaius, who had given him his position. In an effort to curry favor of the Jewish people, Herod used his political office to carry out attacks on the church, even going so far as to have James, the brother of John, executed. And when he saw how much this pleased the Jews, he made plans to do the same thing to Peter. The murder of James, one of the original apostles and a leader in the Jerusalem church, would have had a

devastating impact on its members. And, while the news of his death would have surprising and unexpected, Jesus Himself had predicted it. Years earlier, while Jesus was still on the earth, James and his brother, John, had come to Jesus with a request.

³⁵ Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came over and spoke to him. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do us a favor."

³⁶ "What is your request?" he asked.

³⁷ They replied, "When you sit on your glorious throne, we want to sit in places of honor next to you, one on your right and the other on your left."

³⁸ But Jesus said to them, "You don't know what you are asking! Are you able to drink from the bitter cup of suffering I am about to drink? Are you able to be baptized with the baptism of suffering I must be baptized with?"

³⁹ "Oh yes," they replied, "we are able!"

Then Jesus told them, "You will indeed drink from my bitter cup and be baptized with my baptism of suffering." – Mark 10:35-39 NLT

James was dead. And Peter was next. At least, that was Herod's plan. It was as if his plan was to eliminate the leadership of the church, one man at a time. And he was serious about it, having Peter arrested and thrown in jail.

This entire section of the Book of Acts provides us with an important interlude or break that separates the spread of the church to the Gentiles, as recorded in chapter 11, and Saul and Barnabas' trip to Cyprus, where they continued their evangelistic efforts among the Gentiles. As the gospel made its way into the world, the heat in Jerusalem was intensifying and the rejection of the gospel by the Jews was becoming increasingly volatile and violent. Yes, there had been thousands of Jews who had come to faith in Jesus, but as a nation, both politically and religiously, they were standing opposed to Jesus' claim to be their Messiah. John, the brother of James, recorded the nature of Israel's rejection of Jesus, illustrated in their corporate refusal to accept Him as their Messiah.

³⁷ But despite all the miraculous signs Jesus had done, most of the people still did not believe in him. ³⁸ This is exactly what Isaiah the prophet had predicted:

*"Lord, who has believed our message?
To whom has the Lord revealed his powerful arm?"*

³⁹ But the people couldn't believe, for as Isaiah also said,

*⁴⁰ “The Lord has blinded their eyes
and hardened their hearts—
so that their eyes cannot see,
and their hearts cannot understand,
and they cannot turn to me
and have me heal them.”*

⁴¹ Isaiah was referring to Jesus when he said this, because he saw the future and spoke of the Messiah’s glory. ⁴² Many people did believe in him, however, including some of the Jewish leaders. But they wouldn’t admit it for fear that the Pharisees would expel them from the synagogue. ⁴³ For they loved human praise more than the praise of God. – John 12:37-43 NLT

Now, years later, and long after Jesus had been put to death by the religious authorities of Israel and the Roman government, His disciples were facing the same threat of execution. But the hardness of the hearts of the people of Israel, while disappointing, had a purpose. It opened up the door to the Gentiles. Because of Israel’s rejection of Jesus as their Messiah, the gospel was taken to non-Jews, so that they might enjoy the righteousness and redemption provided by faith in Jesus Christ as their Savior. And Paul, himself a devout Jew, would later write that Israel’s rejection of Jesus would not be permanent in nature.

¹¹ Did God’s people stumble and fall beyond recovery? Of course not! They were disobedient, so God made salvation available to the Gentiles. But he wanted his own people to become jealous and claim it for themselves. ¹² Now if the Gentiles were enriched because the people of Israel turned down God’s offer of salvation, think how much greater a blessing the world will share when they finally accept it. – Romans 11:11-12 NLT

This was all part of God’s divine plan. Had the Jewish nation, as a whole, not turned its back on Jesus, the persecution and scattering of the church would not have taken place. But it did, because that is the way God ordained it. Even Peter’s arrest, while clearly the decision of Herod, was part of God’s sovereign, pre-established will.

Luke tells us that when Peter was arrested, the rest of the church got busy lifting him up in prayer. They feared for the worst. James was dead, and they had no reason to expect that the same thing would not happen to Peter. So, they took their need to God. Luke doesn’t tell us what they prayed, but we can easily assume that they pleaded for God to spare Peter’s life and to deliver him from the hands of Herod. And God did just that. The story of Peter’s deliverance provides us with a startling, but often overlooked reminder of God’s power. Herod, the king of the Jews, who had the full authority of the Roman empire behind him, had placed Peter in jail and had every intent to put him to death. And Luke tells us that, on the very night he had determined to carry out his plan, God stepped in. And He did so in a dramatic and memorable way. Peter was sound asleep, chained to two Roman soldiers, when suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared, filling the cell with dazzling light. Luke doesn’t tell us what happened to the two

guards, but they were either paralyzed or, perhaps, even killed by the angel. All we know is that Peter's chains dropped off and, after having gotten dressed, he walked out of the prison a free man. And the whole time this was going on, Peter thought he was dreaming. It wasn't until he had made his way out of the prison complex and the angel suddenly disappeared, that Peter realized that what had happened was real and not a dream.

"Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting." – Acts 12:11 ESV

God had much more for Peter to do. His work on behalf of the kingdom was not yet complete. In John 21, we have Jesus' prediction of Peter's death, but this was not the time or the place. Herod, even as powerful as he was, stood powerless before God Almighty. His execution of James could not have happened without God's approval. We don't know why God allowed James to die by the sword, any more than we know why God allowed Stephen to be stoned to death. And God is not obligated to explain Himself to us. But we can rest in the fact that God, in His sovereign will and almighty power, was in full control of all the circumstances surrounding His church. He was going to use each and every event – the good, the bad and the ugly – to accomplish His divine will for the spread of the gospel and the growth of the church. And as we will see later on in this same chapter, God would eventually deal with Herod, revealing that no one stands outside of or aloof from God's sovereign hand and righteous judgment.

Touched by an Angel

Acts 12:12-25

¹² When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying. ¹³ And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer. ¹⁴ Recognizing Peter's voice, in her joy she did not open the gate but ran in and reported that Peter was standing at the gate. ¹⁵ They said to her, "You are out of your mind." But she kept insisting that it was so, and they kept saying, "It is his angel!" ¹⁶ But Peter continued knocking, and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed. ¹⁷ But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, "Tell these things to James and to the brothers." Then he departed and went to another place.

¹⁸ Now when day came, there was no little disturbance among the soldiers over what had become of Peter. ¹⁹ And after Herod searched for him and did not find him, he examined the sentries and ordered that they should be put to death. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and spent time there.

²⁰ Now Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon, and they came to him with one accord, and having persuaded Blastus, the king's chamberlain, they asked for peace, because their country depended on the king's country for food. ²¹ On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne, and delivered an oration to them. ²² And the people were shouting, "The voice of a god, and not of a man!" ²³ Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last.

²⁴ But the word of God increased and multiplied.

²⁵ And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark. – Acts 12:12-25 ESV

After his miraculous release by God from prison and from Herod's intentions to put him to death, Peter made his way to the home of Mary, the mother of John Mark. John Mark was the cousin of Barnabas, the man who enlisted Saul's help in Antioch. We are not told why Peter chose Mary's house as his destination, but it could have been that it was the one place of closest to the prison where he could seek refuge. Luke tells us that there were many believers who had gathered at Mary's home in order to pray for Peter. When he arrived, a young servant girl named Rhoda, was the one who responded to his knocks at the gate. But when she heard his voice, she was so surprised that she left him standing there and ran to inform the rest that Peter was standing outside the gate. Her news was met with incredulity and skepticism. Whatever it was that they had been praying for, it evidently had not been for Peter's release. They refused to accept Rhoda's word that Peter was standing outside the gate. They even went so far as to claim that it must have been his angel. The Greek word, *aggelos*, was typically used

to refer to a divine being or messenger from God. We cannot be sure exactly what those inside Mary's house meant when they used this word under these circumstances. They could have simply been saying that Peter had sent them a human messenger with news of his condition. That would have been a legitimate use of the word. But they could have also believed that it was an actual angel, sent from God with news about Peter. Finally, they might have been using the word in the sense of a guardian angel, sent by God to rescue Peter. Whatever they meant it seems that they were reticent to believe that it was actually Peter standing outside the gate. After all, they had just recently heard the devastating news that James, the brother of John, had been executed by Herod. So, even since Peter's arrest, they had been anticipating similar news. There is no indication in this passage that they had been praying for or expecting God to free Peter. They certainly could have been, but it seems odd that they were so dumbfounded and disbelieving when Peter showed up outside the place where they had been praying.

In fact, Peter was left to stand outside, knocking on the gate, hoping to gain entrance. He had found it was easier to get *out* of Herod's prison than it was to get *into* Mary's home. But eventually, they opened the gate and found Peter standing there, just as Rhoda had said, and they were amazed. The Greek word that Luke uses to refer to their reaction has a much more robust meaning than just amazement. It refers to a sense of astonishment or bewilderment. It was even used to refer to someone being out of their mind or insane. They were legitimately shocked to see Peter standing there. They had been expecting the worse. And they must have been shouting, crying, laughing and jumping up and down in excitement, because Luke indicates that Peter had to get them to quiet down long enough for him to tell them what had happened. And we can only imagine that they stood by in rapt silence as he related the details of his escape: The angel, the helpless prison guards, the chains falling away, and the self-opening prison gate. It was an amazing story and it must have left them awed and amazed at the power of their God.

When Peter had finished, he told them to take this news to James (the half-brother of Jesus) and the rest of the original apostles. This James, who had been in the upper room with the rest of his brothers on the day of Pentecost, had become a leading figure in the Jerusalem church and would later write the book that bears his name. Peter wanted these men to know what had happened to him, so that they might be encouraged by the news. Then, Luke tells us Peter departed. We are not told where he went or what he did. But it is likely that he left Jerusalem for a time in order to lessen the risk any of the other followers of Christ might face for harboring him as a fugitive. We know that Herod, upon discovering that Peter had somehow escaped, ordered a search for Peter, but he was never found. And, as a result, Herod had all the guards, whom he deemed responsible for Peter's escape, executed. Then, Herod himself left Jerusalem and traveled to Caesarea, where he had a palace. He got out of town. We don't know whether his departure was to save face or because he couldn't stand hearing the news circulating through the streets of Jerusalem that Peter had been miraculously rescued by God. This powerful man had failed in his attempt to put an end to the growth of Christianity. Even with his impressive resources and backed by the power of Rome, he was no match for the cause of Christ. In fact, Luke reveals that Herod's days were numbered.

Some dignitaries from Tyre and Sidon came to visit Herod at his royal palace. They were dependent upon Herod and his government for food, so even though they were at odds with the king, they found themselves having to grovel before him on behalf of their people. Luke goes out of his way to describe Herod in his royal robes, sitting on his royal throne and giving a royal speech before these men and all those in attendance. And these men, in spite of their dislike for Herod, were forced to listen, then to shower him with flattering accolades, shouting, “The voice of a god, and not of a man!” (Acts 12:22 ESV). And Herod basked in the glory of their words, thoroughly enjoying the experience of being compared to a god. But his pride and pleasure at being deified would not last long. Luke records, “Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last” (Acts 12:23 ESV). Herod was struck down by God. The angel who struck Peter’s side in order to wake him up and set him free, struck Herod with a debilitating and devastating disease. According to the Jewish historian, Josephus, Herod would suffer for five days and then die. Peter was alive and well, doing the will and the work of God. Herod was dead, for having tried to oppose to the will of God and eliminate the messengers of God.

And Luke matter-of-factly states that “the word of God increased and multiplied” (Acts 12:24 ESV). The gospel didn’t skip a beat. The kingdom of God continued to spread. And the chapter ends with the announcement that Barnabas and Saul left Jerusalem returned to Antioch, accompanied by John Mark. It was business as usual. There was work to be done. The death of James had not diminished the zeal and enthusiasm of the disciples. They mourned, but they went on with the work Jesus had assigned to them. Peter’s arrest had shaken them, but God had proven to them that He was in charge. He was not done with Peter and they were not done with their job of taking the gospel to the nations.

The work of spreading the gospel is not without its risks. There will always be enemies and opposition. We will always face difficulties and trials as a result of our faithful obedience to fulfill the commission given to us by Jesus. But like Peter and the other disciples, we have work to do. We must remain faithful and diligent to do what we have been called to do. As we will see, Peter didn’t give up. He didn’t quit or run in fear, viewing his work on behalf of Jesus as too dangerous or risky. He knew he could end up in jail again. He was well aware that his life could end in violent death, just like James. But as long as God gave him breath and kept setting him free from imprisonment, he would keep telling the good news of Jesus Christ to anyone who would listen.

Too Blind to See

Acts 13:1-12

¹ Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. ² While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." ³ Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

⁴ So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus. ⁵ When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. And they had John to assist them. ⁶ When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they came upon a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet named Bar-Jesus. ⁷ He was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. ⁸ But Elymas the magician (for that is the meaning of his name) opposed them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith. ⁹ But Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him ¹⁰ and said, "You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord? ¹¹ And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and unable to see the sun for a time." Immediately mist and darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking people to lead him by the hand. ¹² Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord. – Acts 13:1-12 ESV

At the close of the previous chapter, we saw that Peter left Jerusalem for parts unknown, while Saul and Barnabas headed back to Antioch in Syria, with John Mark as their traveling companion. In the opening verses of chapter 13, we get a glimpse into how God communicated with His church in those early years. He had equipped the church with prophets, teachers and a variety of other leaders. Paul would later include these very same offices or positions in his list of those through whom God had gifted the church.

¹¹ Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. ¹² Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ. ¹³ This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ. – Ephesians 4:11-13 NLT

Both Barnabas and Saul are included in Luke's list, indicating that they were each either a prophet or a teacher, or perhaps both. Some believe, because of the way the list is configured in the Greek, that there are two groups of individuals listed; one being the prophets in the church in Antioch, with Barnabas being one of them. The second group is made up of the two men with the gift of teaching: Manaen and Saul. It is impossible to know who had what gift, but

it is clear that God was speaking to and through these men in order to give His divine directions for future ministry. We have already seen how God used the stoning of Stephen and the increased level of persecution against the church to spread the gospel by forcing the Christians to disperse from Jerusalem. We have also seen God use a dream to communicate His will to Peter, commanding him to go to Caesarea and minister to Cornelius and his household. Now, we see God speaking through men whom He had endowed with the gift of prophecy. But notice that there was not any one man who stood up and spoke up, acting as the voice of God and proclaiming His will to the rest in the room. It seems from the text, that these men were gathered together for prayer and had been fasting, most likely seeking God's direction. And it would appear that God gave them a unified, corporate manifestation of His will by speaking to them through His Holy Spirit, who told them, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them" (Acts 13:2 ESV). These two men, who were both part of the group that had gathered to pray and fast, were set apart by God for a specific task. This was the call of God, not that of men. Somehow, through the voice of the Spirit, God had communicated to these men that Saul and Barnabas were to be given a specific, God-ordained assignment, and Luke records, "after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off" (Acts 13:3 ESV).

Both of these men had become huge assets to the church there in Antioch. But the leadership recognized the clear call of God on their lives and, in spite of the loss of their services, gladly sent them on their way, having commissioned them by the laying on of hands. They didn't allow their own needs or desires to get in the way. I am sure they would have loved to have kept both Saul and Barnabas there in Antioch, but God had other plans. And Luke makes it clear that those plans were being directed by the Spirit of God. Their next destination was the island of Cyprus and, as would become their habit on the rest of their journeys, they made it their first priority to visit the local synagogue before they did anything else. While recognized as the apostle to the Gentiles, Saul never lost his deep desire to see his fellow Jews come to faith in Christ. Years later, in his letter to the Roman believers, he would write: "Brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved" (Romans 10:1 NLT). In that very same letter, he will go on to say:

¹³ I am saying all this especially for you Gentiles. God has appointed me as the apostle to the Gentiles. I stress this, ¹⁴ for I want somehow to make the people of Israel jealous of what you Gentiles have, so I might save some of them. ¹⁵ For since their rejection meant that God offered salvation to the rest of the world, their acceptance will be even more wonderful. It will be life for those who were dead! – Romans 11:13-15 NLT

And one of the most powerful indicators of his love for his fellow Jews and his deep desire to see them saved, is found in an earlier portion of his letter to the Romans:

*I would be willing to be forever cursed—cut off from Christ!—if that would save them.
– Romans 9:3 NLT*

So, we will see Saul and Barnabas make it a habit to visit the synagogues within each city they visit, focusing a good portion of their efforts in attempting to persuade Jews to accept Jesus as their Messiah.

Having visited the local synagogue, the three men made their way across the island, eventually running into a man named, Bar-Jesus, described as a magician and a Jewish false prophet. It's interesting to note that Saul and Barnabas are on the island of Cyprus because God spoke truth to men who were real prophets of God. Now, two of these men, Saul and Barnabas, one or both who were gifted by God as a prophet, run into a false Jewish prophet. This man is described by Luke as a magician, a fairly innocuous term that sounds a bit non-intimidating to us. But in that day and age, it had a far more robust meaning. A magician could refer to a wise man, teacher, priest, physician, astrologer, seer, interpreter of dreams, soothsayer, or sorcerer. In many cases, their so-called magic had direct ties to the occult. Like the magicians in Pharaoh's court who had opposed Moses, Bar-Jesus most likely utilized demonic powers to perform signs and wonders. Interestingly enough, his name literally means, "son of a savior."

Luke indicates that Bar-Jesus had some kind of relationship with the local proconsul, a man named Sergius Paulus, who held the distinction of being the highest-ranking Roman official on the island. Sergius Paulus, upon hearing of the arrival of Saul and Barnabas, summoned them to appear before him, but Bar-Jesus, also known by his nickname, Elymas (Sorcerer), tried to intervene, seeing these two men as competition. He had the ear of the Roman proconsul and was not interested in having Saul and Barnabas interfere by sharing "the faith." But Saul, now mentioned as Paul for the first time in Luke's account, confronts this man, declaring in no uncertain terms his disdain for Bar-Jesus and his unholy agenda. "You son of the devil, full of every sort of deceit and fraud, and enemy of all that is good! Will you never stop perverting the true ways of the Lord?" (Acts 13:10 NLT). Paul saw this man for what he was: an enemy of the gospel. Out of jealousy and motivated by selfish ambition, he was attempting to dissuade Sergius Paulus from hearing the good news of Jesus Christ. And Paul, under the indwelling power and inspiration of the Spirit of God, struck Bar-Jesus blind. This man, who supposedly had the power to provide insight and wisdom by way of his sorcery, was suddenly without sight. The one who claimed to be a Jewish prophet, with the power to see into the future and declare the will of God, could not see his own hand in front of his face. His physical blindness became an apt representation of his moral and spiritual blindness. No longer would he mislead people with his lies. Instead, he would have to be led by the hand just to make his way around the city of Paphos.

And while Paul's display of Holy Spirit induced power left one man blind, it opened up the eyes of another. Sergius Paulus "believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord" (Acts 13:12 ESV). Paul had not just shut down Bar-Jesus, he had opened up the Scriptures to the proconsul, revealing to him the truth regarding Jesus and His offer of salvation. This Roman official believed. He heard the good news and received the gift of eternal life made possible through Jesus Christ's death on the cross. There on the island of Cyprus, Luke records only the salvation of a single individual: a Roman proconsul. His emphasis seems to be less about how many were saved, than about *who*. The nature of the evangelistic

efforts of the church was dramatically shifting. It was moving out of Jerusalem and Judea and away from the Jews. Bar-Jesus had been a Jew, but he had been struck blind because of his unbelief and opposition to the gospel. He is an apt representation of the entire Jewish nation at this point in time. He was mired in deceit, selfishness, idolatry and evil. He saw the gospel as competition, not a means of salvation. But Sergius Paulus, a pagan with no prior knowledge of Yahweh or any concept of who the Messiah might be, was miraculously converted to the faith. His eyes were opened, and his life was irrevocably changed forever.

I Am Doing a Work

Acts 13:13-41

¹³ Now Paul and his companions set sail from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia. And John left them and returned to Jerusalem, ¹⁴ but they went on from Perga and came to Antioch in Pisidia. And on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down. ¹⁵ After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent a message to them, saying, "Brothers, if you have any word of encouragement for the people, say it." ¹⁶ So Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand said:

"Men of Israel and you who fear God, listen. ¹⁷ The God of this people Israel chose our fathers and made the people great during their stay in the land of Egypt, and with uplifted arm he led them out of it. ¹⁸ And for about forty years he put up with them in the wilderness. ¹⁹ And after destroying seven nations in the land of Canaan, he gave them their land as an inheritance. ²⁰ All this took about 450 years. And after that he gave them judges until Samuel the prophet. ²¹ Then they asked for a king, and God gave them Saul the son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, for forty years. ²² And when he had removed him, he raised up David to be their king, of whom he testified and said, "I have found in David the son of Jesse a man after my heart, who will do all my will." ²³ Of this man's offspring God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, as he promised. ²⁴ Before his coming, John had proclaimed a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. ²⁵ And as John was finishing his course, he said, 'What do you suppose that I am? I am not he. No, but behold, after me one is coming, the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to untie.'

²⁶ "Brothers, sons of the family of Abraham, and those among you who fear God, to us has been sent the message of this salvation. ²⁷ For those who live in Jerusalem and their rulers, because they did not recognize him nor understand the utterances of the prophets, which are read every Sabbath, fulfilled them by condemning him. ²⁸ And though they found in him no guilt worthy of death, they asked Pilate to have him executed. ²⁹ And when they had carried out all that was written of him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb. ³⁰ But God raised him from the dead, ³¹ and for many days he appeared to those who had come up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are now his witnesses to the people. ³² And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, ³³ this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus, as also it is written in the second Psalm,

"You are my Son,
today I have begotten you.'

³⁴ And as for the fact that he raised him from the dead, no more to return to corruption, he has spoken in this way,

"I will give you the holy and sure blessings of David.'

³⁵ Therefore he says also in another psalm,

“You will not let your Holy One see corruption.”

³⁶ For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep and was laid with his fathers and saw corruption, ³⁷ but he whom God raised up did not see corruption.

³⁸ Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, ³⁹ and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses. ⁴⁰ Beware, therefore, lest what is said in the Prophets should come about:

⁴¹ *“Look, you scoffers,
be astounded and perish;
for I am doing a work in your days,
a work that you will not believe, even if one tells it to you.”* – Acts 13:13-41 ESV

Here we have Luke’s record of the initial leg of Paul and Barnabas’ first of three missionary journeys. And we will see that that it combines the divine will of God working through the lives of men. In verse four of this chapter, Paul and Barnabas are sent out by the leadership of the church in Antioch of Syria, but under the direction of the Holy Spirit. Their first stop was the island of Cyprus, where they ran into a Jewish false prophet named Bar-Jesus. It just so happened that this man, who also was a sorcerer or magician, had a close relationship with the Roman governor, a man named Sergius Paulus. The seemingly chance encounter Paul and Barnabas had with Bar-Jesus led to this man’s blinding and the Roman governor’s salvation. It had been a divine appointment all along. And now, as Paul and Barnabas leave Cyprus, we are told by Luke that they made their way to Pisidian Antioch, located in Asia Minor, in what is now modern Turkey. But what prompted them to go to this seemingly remote location? It is clear, from Luke’s perspective, that they were being directed by the Holy Spirit, but there is no indication that from the text that Paul and Barnabas received a direct order from the Spirit to focus their efforts on this particular city. Recent scholarship has shown that the Roman governor, Sergius Paulus, whom Paul and Barnabas had helped lead to Christ, had connections in Pisidian Antioch. His family owned a large estate there. So, it would seem that he encouraged the two men to carry the good news of Jesus to his family members who lived in Pisidian Antioch. What this reveals is how God orchestrates events, even our relational encounters, in such a way, that we moves, unseen, guiding and directing our steps. When Paul and Barnabas had set out for Cyprus, they had no idea they would meet the Roman governor and see him come to faith in Christ. And they most likely had no hard and fast plans to place Pisidian Antioch on their missionary itinerary. But upon meeting Sergius Paulus and hearing of his concern for the spiritual well-being of his distant family members, Paul and Barnabas made it a priority to go and share the gospel there.

Upon their arrival, they made their way on the Sabbath to the local synagogue, as was becoming their custom. Their arrival had not gone unnoticed, because when the traditional reading of the Scriptures was complete, they were asked to say a few words to the congregation. It seems a bit odd that Paul and Barnabas were giving the privilege of addressing the crowd gathered in the synagogue. If news had reached Pisidian Antioch of all that had

happened on Cyprus, and the ministry Paul had had among the Gentiles in Antioch in Syria, the Jews in the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch would most likely not have welcomed these two men as they did. But given the chance to speak, Paul took full advantage of it. And he presents a sermon that has a very familiar ring to it, echoing what Peter had said in Acts 2 and the message Stephen delivered in Acts 7. Paul started his message by addressing his audience. “Men of Israel and you who fear God, listen” (Acts 13:16 ESV). This would have included native Jews and Gentiles who had converted to Judaism. Then, he proceeded to give them a history lesson. He started by recalling God’s establishment of Israel as a great nation while they were living in the land of Egypt. He reminds them of God’s miraculous deliverance and the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness that their ancestors endured. But eventually, they arrived at the land promised to Abraham, and conquered the nations that lived there. And 450 years later, God gave them a series of judges, then their first king, a man named Saul. He was followed by the great king, David, a man after God’s own heart. And then, Paul gets to the real point of his message. “Of this man’s offspring God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, as he promised” (Acts 13:23 ESV). His goal all along had been to get to the topic of Jesus, the son of David and the Savior of the world. Paul wastes no time, but cuts to the chase, telling his audience “to us has been sent the message of this salvation” (Acts 13:26 ESV). But the Jews living in Jerusalem and Judea had refused to accept the very one who had brought them salvation. They had failed to recognize Jesus as the fulfillment of all the Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah. Even His suffering and death had been predicted and, without even knowing it, the religious leaders in Jerusalem had helped fulfill these prophecies by having Jesus put to death. And Paul makes it clear that “though they found in him no guilt worthy of death, they asked Pilate to have him executed” (Acts 13:28 ESV). But God raised Him from the dead.

At this point, Paul had them. They were either incensed or totally intrigued by what he had to say. Because of their distance from Jerusalem and the events surrounding Jesus’ crucifixion, this may have been the first time many of them had heard this news. But as Jews and God-fearing Gentiles, they would have known about the Messiah and would have found the words of Paul, if nothing else, fascinating. And Paul let’s them know why he and Barnabas are there: “...we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus” (Acts 13:32-33 ESV).

Paul wants them to understand that the Scriptures they revered and read each and every Sabbath day in the synagogue, spoke of Jesus. He uses the psalms of David to show them that these passages were prophetic, speaking of the coming Messiah. Jesus, because He died and was raised back to life, did not undergo any decay. His body was spared the normal and natural effects of death. This was not true of King David, who had written, “You will not let your Holy One see corruption” (Acts 13:35 ESV). David had not been speaking of himself, but of one to come. And Paul lets them know, in no uncertain terms, that Jesus had been that one. He had come. He did die. But He was raised back to life. And Paul and Barnabas were witnesses of that reality. And the truly good news was that “through this man Jesus there is forgiveness for your sins. Everyone who believes in him is made right in God’s sight—something the law of Moses could never do” (Acts 13:38-39 NLT). There’s the crux of Paul’s message: Justification. How are sinful men made right with a holy God? Not by keeping the law. That was an impossible task. It

always ended in failure, because the law was always intended to show man his sin. Paul would later write a letter to the people living in this part of the world, telling them, “Why, then, was the law given? It was given alongside the promise to show people their sins. But the law was designed to last only until the coming of the child who was promised” (Galatians 3:19 NLT). And one day, he would also write to the believers in Rome, telling them, “The law of Moses was unable to save us because of the weakness of our sinful nature. So, God did what the law could not do. He sent his own Son in a body like the bodies we sinners have. And in that body God declared an end to sin’s control over us by giving his Son as a sacrifice for our sins” (Romans 8:3 NLT).

Paul was offering this devout Jews and God-fearing Gentiles an opportunity to be made right with God, through faith in Jesus Christ. But he warns them to not repeat the sins of their ancestors, who had scoffed at the words of God. Quoting from the book of Habakuk, Paul repeats the words God had spoken to the people in Habakuk’s day. “I am doing a work in your days, a work that you will not believe, even if one tells it to you” (Acts 13:41 ESV). Paul warns his audience to not treat God’s words with disbelief. He wants them to understand that God was doing a work in their day. He had sent His Son, Jesus, to die for the sins of mankind, so that the penalty for sin could be paid for and the consequences of death eliminated once and for all. But they must believe. They must trust that what Paul is saying is true and that Jesus was the promised Messiah and Savior of the world.

God was doing a work among them, but they ran the risk of missing it if they refused to see it for what it was: God’s plan of salvation made possible through the death and resurrection of His very own son.

Unworthy of Eternal Life

Acts 13:42-52

⁴² As they went out, the people begged that these things might be told them the next Sabbath.

⁴³ And after the meeting of the synagogue broke up, many Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who, as they spoke with them, urged them to continue in the grace of God.

⁴⁴ The next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. ⁴⁵ But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began to contradict what was spoken by Paul, reviling him. ⁴⁶ And Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, "It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. ⁴⁷ For so the Lord has commanded us, saying,

*"I have made you a light for the Gentiles,
that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth."*

⁴⁸ And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed. ⁴⁹ And the word of the Lord was spreading throughout the whole region. ⁵⁰ But the Jews incited the devout women of high standing and the leading men of the city, stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district. ⁵¹ But they shook off the dust from their feet against them and went to Iconium. ⁵² And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit. – Acts 13:42-52 ESV

Paul and Barnabas enjoyed a surprisingly positive response from the little speech Paul had given in the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch. Unlike previous occasions, like the one when Stephen preached a similar sermon, but was met with anger and stoning; Paul and Barnabas were begged to come back the following Sabbath. The people were intrigued by all that Paul had to say and wanted to hear more. When the meeting broke up, Paul and Barnabas found themselves surrounded by a crowd of Jews and Gentile converts to Judaism, who had, most likely, been moved by Paul's closing words:

³⁸ *"Brothers, listen! We are here to proclaim that through this man Jesus there is forgiveness for your sins. ³⁹ Everyone who believes in him is made right in God's sight—something the law of Moses could never do. – Acts 13:38-39 NLT*

They were intrigued. They had never heard anything like this before. And before parting ways with these highly inquisitive people, Paul and Barnabas urged them "to continue in the grace of God." The Greek word translated as "continue" actually carries the meaning of abiding or remaining in something. Paul and Barnabas clearly recognize that the grace of God has been extended to these people and encouraged them to remain in that grace – willingly open to

what God may have to show them in the days ahead. One of the worst things these people could do was to harden their hearts and resist the good news that Paul and Barnabas were sharing. They had heard the message of salvation made possible through Christ's death and resurrection, but they had not yet accepted it. But Paul and Barnabas knew that God was not done yet. They wanted their audience to remain open to what God was planning to do in their midst.

A week later, Paul and Barnabas made their way to the synagogue again. But this time they were met by a larger-than-capacity crowd, because virtually everyone in the city had shown up to hear what these two men had to say. Word had gotten out and the curiosity level was high. And, evidently, there were non-Jews or Gentiles in the crowd. They would not have been allowed into the synagogue, but they showed up anyway, hoping to catch a glimpse of these two strangers who were teaching about freedom from sin. But the Jews, angered by and jealous of the amount of notoriety and popularity Paul and Barnabas enjoyed, began to push back and refute their teaching. Luke records that they slandered Paul, most likely hurling all kinds of false accusations against him, in an attempt to undermine his credibility among the rest of the Jews.

But Paul and Barnabas refused to back down, instead speaking out boldly in their own defense by declaring that they were only doing what they had been told to do: Sharing the good news of Jesus Christ, the Messiah, with the Jewish people. That is why they had originally showed up at the synagogue in the first place. But Paul lets these incensed Jews know that, in rejecting the gospel message, they were turning their backs on eternal life. Not only that, they were freeing Paul and Barnabas to take the very same message of salvation to the Gentiles. And Paul uses an Old Testament Messianic prophecy from the Book of Isaiah to make his point.

*"I have made you a light to the Gentiles,
to bring salvation to the farthest corners of the earth."* – Isaiah 49:6 NLT

This was God speaking of His own Son, proclaiming that He had entered the world in order to bring the light of the gospel to the whole world, to the farthest corners of the earth. This meant that Jesus had come in order to die for all mankind, not just the Jewish people. In fact, in that same passage in Isaiah, the voice of the Messiah Himself is heard:

⁵ *"...the one who formed me in my mother's womb to be his servant,
who commissioned me to bring Israel back to him.
The Lord has honored me,
and my God has given me strength.*

⁶ *He says, "You will do more than restore the people of Israel to me."* – Isaiah 49:5-6 NLT

From the very beginning, Jesus had come to do far more than simply establish Israel as a great nation once again. He was not a Messiah who was going to come and set up an earthly kingdom and restore to Israel the glory and grandeur they had enjoyed during the days of David and Solomon. That day will come, but it is in the far-distant future. First, Jesus came to die as a

payment for the sins of mankind. He came to offer Himself as a sinless sacrifice, an unblemished lamb, capable of satisfying the just demands of a holy and righteous God.

The apostle John opens up his gospel with these sobering words:

⁹ The one who is the true light, who gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.

¹⁰ He came into the very world he created, but the world didn't recognize him. ¹¹ He came to his own people, and even they rejected him. ¹² But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. ¹³ They are reborn—not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God.

– John 1:9-13 NLT

Jesus came to the Jewish people. He was born a Jew, a descendant of King David himself. He was raised by Jewish parents and circumcised as an infant, just like every other Jewish boy. He grew up going to synagogue with His parents. He made the annual trips to the city of Jerusalem for the celebrations of Passover and Pentecost. And all during His life, He had kept the law of God perfectly, having never sinned or violated a single command of His heavenly Father.

But John tells us Jesus was rejected by His own. He was the very Light of God, the reflection of God's own glory and character, but the Jewish people, for the most part, refused to see Him for who He was. They rejected the Light, preferring to live in darkness. John expands on this very thought later on in his gospel.

¹⁸ "There is no judgment against anyone who believes in him. But anyone who does not believe in him has already been judged for not believing in God's one and only Son.

¹⁹ And the judgment is based on this fact: God's light came into the world, but people loved the darkness more than the light, for their actions were evil. ²⁰ All who do evil hate the light and refuse to go near it for fear their sins will be exposed. ²¹ But those who do what is right come to the light so others can see that they are doing what God wants."

John 3:18-21 NLT

And we see this lived out in the pages of Luke's account. The Jews who were verbally assaulting Paul and Barnabas, were rejecting the Light as expressed in the gospel message these two men had preached. Rather than rejoice in the news that they could have forgiveness for and freedom from their sins, they balked, fearing the very idea of having their sins exposed. They were self-righteous hypocrites, who would rather have men think well of them, than have confess their sin so that God would forgive them.

And when the Gentiles, who had gathered to hear what Paul and Barnabas had to say, heard them say that the gospel was now available to them, they were ecstatic. Luke writes that "they were very glad and thanked the Lord for his message; and all who were chosen for eternal life became believers" (Acts 13:48 NLT). Rather than reject the Light, they gladly received it, having the darkness in which they had lived for so long, illuminated by the glory of the grace of God.

They came to the light and they were saved. Unlike many of the Jews in the crowd that day, the Gentiles willingly and gladly exposed their sinfulness to the bright light of Christ and found that they received forgiveness, cleansing, acceptance and salvation. Not condemnation. Not rejection.

But those living in darkness did what they naturally do: They tried to hide their sin by getting rid of the light. They stirred up others in the city, influential others, to come to their cause and oppose the teaching of Paul and Barnabas. And they were successful, inciting a mob to chase Paul and Barnabas out of town. But these two men simply did as Jesus had instructed the disciples when He had sent them out. "If any household or town refuses to welcome you or listen to your message, shake its dust from your feet as you leave" (Matthew 10:14 NLT). But when they walked out of the city of Pisidian Antioch, they left behind a vibrant group of energized Gentile believers, who Luke describes as "filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 13:52 NLT). These men and women became lights in the midst of the darkness of Pisidian Antioch, and their presence would continue to have a cleansing, purging and transformative impact on that city for years to come.

Some Were Saved

Acts 14:1-7

¹ Now at Iconium they entered together into the Jewish synagogue and spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed. ² But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. ³ So they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord, who bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands. ⁴ But the people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews and some with the apostles. ⁵ When an attempt was made by both Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to mistreat them and to stone them, ⁶ they learned of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding country, ⁷ and there they continued to preach the gospel. – Acts 14:1-7 ESV

After the Jews incited the wealthy and influential citizens to turn against Paul and Barnabas, they departed the city and made their way east, to Iconium, located on the easternmost border of the region known as Phrygia. Iconium was a Greek city-state, that due to its more distant location, had allowed its citizens to resist the influences of Rome, and maintain their more Grecian way of life and thinking. The city benefited from its location along a major trade route that linked Ephesus with Syria and the rest of the Mesopotamian world. Iconium was a virtual island of green in a sea of desert. It was lush and filled with vineyards, orchards and farms. And according to Greek mythology, it was the place where the gods, Prometheus and Athena, after a devastating world-wide flood destroyed all of mankind, made a race of new human beings by forming them out of mud and then breathing life into them. It was an eclectic city, made up of all kinds of people and, therefore, willing to tolerate a wide range of religious beliefs and practices.

When Paul and Barnabas arrived in town, they followed their usual pattern, and made their way to the local synagogue. As before, they found a congregation made up of ethnic Jews as well as God-fearing Jews or converted Gentiles. Luke tells us that, as a result of their ministry at the synagogue, “a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed” (Acts 14:1 ESV). They found a receptive audience. These people responded positively to the message of forgiveness of sin and eternal life proclaimed to them by Paul and Barnabas. But, as usual, there were those who stood opposed to what they were saying and doing. Luke records that unbelieving Jews, or those Jews who resisted the message of Jesus as the Messiah and Savior of the world, “spurned God’s message and poisoned the minds of the Gentiles against Paul and Barnabas” (Acts 14:3 NLT). The message of the gospel was met with receptivity *and* animosity, acceptance *and* resistance. There were those who had their eyes opened and their hearts softened, while others remained blinded and hard-hearted, completely resistant to what they had heard. One of the things we should notice here is that both groups heard the very same message, spoken by the very same individuals. So, why did some respond positively while others reacted negatively. Were some more spiritual than others? Was it because some were more intelligent and able to comprehend what Paul and Barnabas were saying? Or could it be that some were just worse sinners than others and, therefore, harder to reach? You see, if we’re not careful, we

can easily make salvation a man-focused event. In other words, we subtly and unknowingly, make it a decision that is completely man's choice. But Paul would see a repetitive pattern take place as he ministered. He would see those who believed in Jesus, and those who stood opposed to the offer of salvation. And he would later write, "So you see, God chooses to show mercy to some, and he chooses to harden the hearts of others so they refuse to listen" (Romans 9:18 NLT). And Paul, anticipating the shocked response of those who question the fairness of this kind of divine, seemingly arbitrary decision making, wrote:

¹⁹ *Well then, you might say, "Why does God blame people for not responding? Haven't they simply done what he makes them do?"*

²⁰ *No, don't say that. Who are you, a mere human being, to argue with God? Should the thing that was created say to the one who created it, "Why have you made me like this?"* ²¹ *When a potter makes jars out of clay, doesn't he have a right to use the same lump of clay to make one jar for decoration and another to throw garbage into?* ²² *In the same way, even though God has the right to show his anger and his power, he is very patient with those on whom his anger falls, who are destined for destruction.* ²³ *He does this to make the riches of his glory shine even brighter on those to whom he shows mercy, who were prepared in advance for glory.* ²⁴ *And we are among those whom he selected, both from the Jews and from the Gentiles. – Romans 9:19-24 NLT*

The belief of some and the disbelief of others is not due to the communication skills of the messenger or the intelligence or comprehension levels of the hearer. It is all due to the mercy and grace of God. And while it would be easy for us to question God's fairness or wonder about the rightness of His methodology, Paul would remind us that "it is God who decides to show mercy. We can neither choose it nor work for it" (Romans 9:14 NLT). Paul, through his ongoing experience of sharing the gospel in all kinds of locations to all kinds of people, began to see and understand that what was happening was completely the work of God, not men. The fact that anyone came to faith in Christ was not because of Paul's powers of persuasion or oratory skills. It was due to the grace and mercy of God. Those who believed in the message of the gospel did so, not because they were smarter, more spiritual, or somehow more receptive, but because God chose for them to do so. Here is how Paul came to understand what he was seeing happen in the various cities in which he and Barnabas ministered.

²⁵ *Concerning the Gentiles, God says in the prophecy of Hosea,*

*"Those who were not my people,
I will now call my people.
And I will love those
whom I did not love before."*

²⁶ *And,*

*“Then, at the place where they were told,
‘You are not my people,’
there they will be called
‘children of the living God.’”*

²⁷ And concerning Israel, Isaiah the prophet cried out,

*“Though the people of Israel are as numerous as the sand of the seashore,
only a remnant will be saved.” – Romans 9:25-27 NLT*

It was Jesus Himself who said, “no one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them to me, and at the last day I will raise them up” (John 6:44 NLT). And later on, in that same conversation with His disciples Jesus had said:

⁶⁴ But some of you do not believe me.” (For Jesus knew from the beginning which ones didn’t believe, and he knew who would betray him.) ⁶⁵ Then he said, “That is why I said that people can’t come to me unless the Father gives them to me.” – John 6:64-65 NLT

Salvation is the work of God, not man. Paul and Barnabas were nothing more than tools in the hands of God. They spoke, but it was God who chose to open the ears of those who heard so they could respond. It was God who chose to show His mercy on some and not others. And while we may find this hard to accept, we must rest in the sovereign will of God, trusting that He knows what He is doing. That is exactly what Paul and Barnabas did. When their message met with resistance, they didn’t wring their hands and wonder what they had done wrong. You don’t see any sign of them questioning their tactics or making a concerted effort to make their message more user-friendly and appealing. They trusted that they were doing what Jesus had commanded them to do, and that God was doing what only He could do: draw men to Himself. And Luke records that “the apostles stayed there a long time, preaching boldly about the grace of the Lord. And the Lord proved their message was true by giving them power to do miraculous signs and wonders” (Acts 14:3 NLT). They didn’t worry about the number of converts. They didn’t despair over the ones who refused to hear. They simply did their job and left the results of up to God. And Luke tells us that “the people of the town were divided in their opinion about them. Some sided with the Jews, and some with the apostles” (Acts 14:4 NLT).

It wasn’t until Paul and Barnabas learned of a plot on their lives, that they finally departed the city and headed for Lystra and Derby. But when they left the city of Iconium, it was far different than when they had arrived. There were new believers there. A congregation of born-again Jews and Gentiles had been formed, and it had been the work of God. And Luke tells us that the pattern continued as Paul and Barnabas began the process all over again, sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with the citizens of Lystra and Derby. They were being led by the Spirit of God. They were obeying the command given to them by the Son of God. And they were watching many come to faith because of the sovereign work of God.

Worthless Things

Acts 14:8-18

⁸ Now at Lystra there was a man sitting who could not use his feet. He was crippled from birth and had never walked. ⁹ He listened to Paul speaking. And Paul, looking intently at him and seeing that he had faith to be made well, ¹⁰ said in a loud voice, "Stand upright on your feet." And he sprang up and began walking. ¹¹ And when the crowds saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in Lycaonian, "The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!" ¹² Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. ¹³ And the priest of Zeus, whose temple was at the entrance to the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds. ¹⁴ But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their garments and rushed out into the crowd, crying out, ¹⁵ "Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. ¹⁶ In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. ¹⁷ Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness." ¹⁸ Even with these words they scarcely restrained the people from offering sacrifice to them. – Acts 14:8-18 ESV

After having to leave Iconium due to the Jews stirring up a mob against them, Paul and Barnabas made their way to Lystra, another Roman colony about 20 miles or a day's journey away. Upon their arrival in Lystra, Paul and Barnabas have another one of those "chance" encounters that were becoming an everyday part of their lives. They were speaking somewhere in Lystra to a crowd that had gathered. There is no mention of them attending the synagogue, as had become their custom. So, it may be that there were not enough Jews in Lystra to warrant a synagogue. But, as usual, Paul and Barnabas had no problem attracting attention to themselves. They simply began to speak to any who would listen. And, in the crowd that day, there happened to be a man who had been lame since birth.

Luke makes note of the fact that the man was listening to what Paul was saying, and that Paul, spotting the man in the crowd, could tell that the man "had faith to be made well" (Acts 14:9 ESV). Luke provides no insight into how Paul knew this. Most likely, Paul was given a kind of spiritual intuition from the Holy Spirit. He was somehow able to see into the man's heart and perceive in his eyes that this man had faith that God could heal him. He believed. We are not told what Paul said to the crowd, but whatever it was, it produced in this man a believing faith that the God of whom Paul spoke was powerful enough to restore the use of his limbs. Now, it is important that we consider not only this event is included by Luke, but why this man was in the crowd. By this time in the story, we should be recognizing that nothing that is taking place is happenstance or the result of fate. This man's presence in the crowd was according to the sovereign will of God. The very fact that Paul made eye-contact with this man had not left to chance. God had been the one to orchestrate the entire situation. Either God had directed Paul

and Barnabas to the very spot where this man was sitting, or this man was able to find help in being carried to where the two men were speaking. God had preordained that this encounter would take place. But why? Because Paul and Barnabas were now entering the frontier, the furthest edges of the world as they knew it. They were in uncharted territory, speaking to people who were primarily Gentiles and who had no knowledge of Jesus at all. They most likely had heard nothing about the events that had taken place in Jerusalem back during the Feast of Pentecost. These two men, Paul and Barnabas, were strangers to them and, their message about Jesus as the Messiah and Savior, would have been alien and foreign to them. So, God arranged for a way to validate the message of His two messengers. They had been given sign gifts, just as Peter and the other apostles had received. These gifts allowed them to perform signs and miracles, providing their message with credibility and their claim to be speaking for God with visible, tangible proof. This man's presence was going to prove critical. You can almost sense the building sense of anticipation that precede Luke's description of what happened next. Luke records that Paul, speaking in a very loud voice, cried out, "Stand upright on your feet." The crowd had no idea what was about to happen, but we do. We have seen this kind of thing happen before. All the way back in chapter three, we have the story of Peter saying to the blind beggar, "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!" (Acts 3:6 ESV). And the man did, leaving the crowds looking on in wonder and amazement. That had happened all the way back in Jerusalem. Now, we find Paul and Barnabas hundreds of miles away, ministering in a far-flung Roman colony, filled with pagans who knew nothing of Yahweh, had no idea who Jesus or any reason to believe that what these two men had to say was true. And that was where the lame man came in.

His healing by God will validate Paul and Barnabas' claims to be speaking for God. And not only that, it will go a long way in establishing Paul as a co-equal with Peter, the recognized spiritual leader of the church at that time. Paul had been a late comer to the party. He had not been one of the original 12 disciples but had come to faith in Jesus long after Jesus' death, burial and resurrection, having had a one-on-one encounter with the risen Christ along the road to Damascus. For the rest of his life, Paul would battle with those who would try to question the validity of his apostleship. They would continually attempt to paint him as a charlatan, questioning his authority and raising doubts regarding his teaching. But here on this occasion, God sovereignly reveals Paul's impeccable credentials as one of His messengers by providing Paul with the very same powers Peter possessed.

And to say that Paul's actions got the attention of the crowd would be an understatement. Luke writes that the people cried out, "The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!" (Acts 14:11 ESV). They knew no better than to attribute what they had just seen to the work of gods – the gods with which they were familiar. They called Barnabas, Zeus, and Paul, Hermes. The Greeks had a pantheon of gods they worshiped, so we can only speculate why they happened to choose these two particular gods as being the ones standing before them. But whatever their reasoning, these people were strong enough in their convictions that they were dealing with deities, that the priest of the local temple, dedicated to Zeus, showed up with oxen and garlands to make a sacrifice. We are left to imagine what this seen must have looked like. Try and picture the confusion and chaos going on as these people shouted out their praises to Paul

and Barnabas, bowing in reverence before them. And just imagine what was going through the minds of these two men as they found themselves the mistaken, but unmistakable focus of the crowd's worship.

We do know that Paul and Barnabas were appalled at what they witnessed, because Luke tells us they tore their clothes in a outward display of grief and remorse. They wanted no part of what was going on. And Paul spoke up, saying, "Friends, why are you doing this? We are merely human beings—just like you! We have come to bring you the Good News that you should turn from these worthless things and turn to the living God, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them" (Acts 14:15 NLT). What Paul said here was dangerous and risky. He was blatantly denying any claim to deity. But more than that, he was attacking their worship of false gods. When he mentions "worthless things", he was speaking of Zeus and Hermes. He compared them to the living God, the one true Creator of heaven and earth. Paul was treading on very thin ice here. He was surrounded by a crowd of very passionate devotees to the Greek gods. They were excited and convinced that their deities had come to visit them. And Paul was not only shattering any notion that Zeus and Hermes had come to earth, he was describing two of their most revered gods as nothing more than worthless things.

And Paul made it perfectly clear that it was Yahweh, the God of the Jews, who was the source of any and all things they enjoyed in life, not the Greek gods. It was He who provided them with food, crops, rain and joyful hearts. This would have been unexpected and unwanted news to the people of Lystra. It would have been seen as a case of slander and blasphemy, treating their gods with disdain and disrespect. But, surprisingly, instead of infuriating the crowd, the words of Paul and Barnabas seemed to have the opposite effect. The people tried to worship them all the more.

What we seem to have here is a clear example of the spiritual hunger of lost mankind. These people were spiritually starving to death. They had plenty of gods, but no real proof that their gods actually existed. Like all false gods, theirs were distant and disconnected from everyday life. They never really knew if their gods were engaged with or even interested in their daily lives. Which might explain why they were so excited when they thought that Paul and Barnabas were gods come to earth. They greatly desired an intimate relationship with their gods, but to date, their experience had been the same as every other people group who has set its desires and affections on "worthless things." Years later, Paul would write to believers living in nearby Galatia, reminding them of their former love affair with false gods: "you were slaves to so-called gods that do not even exist" (Galatians 4:8 NLT). The people in the crowd that day had no idea that their gods were false. They were blind to the fact that their gods were helpless and hopeless to assist them. Their gods could not save or protect them. In fact, the psalmist eloquently and unapologetically described the true nature of false gods when he wrote:

*⁴ Their idols are merely things of silver and gold,
shaped by human hands.*

*⁵ They have mouths but cannot speak,
and eyes but cannot see.*

- ⁶ *They have ears but cannot hear,
and noses but cannot smell.*
- ⁷ *They have hands but cannot feel,
and feet but cannot walk,
and throats but cannot make a sound.*
- ⁸ *And those who make idols are just like them,
as are all who trust in them. – Psalm 115:4-8 NLT*

Paul and Barnabas had struck a nerve. They had performed a sign among a people who were desperately in search of proof that their religion was relevant, and their gods were real. The world, then as now, was cloaked in deep darkness, and filled with spiritually blind people staggering about looking for any glimmer of hope and help. They were deceived. And Paul would later write to the believers in Corinth, clarifying the source of the world's deception, and the only means of hope.

⁴ Satan, who is the god of this world, has blinded the minds of those who don't believe. They are unable to see the glorious light of the Good News. They don't understand this message about the glory of Christ, who is the exact likeness of God.

⁵ You see, we don't go around preaching about ourselves. We preach that Jesus Christ is Lord, and we ourselves are your servants for Jesus' sake. ⁶ For God, who said, "Let there be light in the darkness," has made this light shine in our hearts so we could know the glory of God that is seen in the face of Jesus Christ. – 2 Corinthians 4:4-6 NLT

The light was spreading. But as we will see, the darkness was great. The enemy had blinded the spiritual eyes of those living in Lystra, leaving them in a state of perpetual darkness, desperately longing for relief and redemption, but unable to see the truth when it stood right in front of them.

An Open Door of Faith

Acts 14:19-28

¹⁹ But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead. ²⁰ But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city, and on the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe. ²¹ When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, ²² strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. ²³ And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

²⁴ Then they passed through Pisidia and came to Pamphylia. ²⁵ And when they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia, ²⁶ and from there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had fulfilled. ²⁷ And when they arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. ²⁸ And they remained no little time with the disciples. – Acts 14:19-28 ESV

Popularity is a fickle and fleeting thing. Paul and Barnabas had found themselves the unwilling recipients of the worship of the people of Lystra. After having seen Paul and Barnabas restore a lame man's ability to walk, the crowds had mistakenly declared them to be gods come to earth. They even tried to offer sacrifices to them. And, even though Paul and Barnabas vehemently denied any claim to deity and tried to point the people to Yahweh, it did no good. But then, a contingent of Jews from Pisidian Antioch and Iconium, who stood opposed to the teaching of Paul and Barnabas, convinced the crowd that they had been deceived. They pleaded with the people of Lystra to see Paul and Barnabas as what they were: Fraud. These individuals had traveled a long way, just to keep Paul and Barnabas from doing what God had called them to do. They so opposed the message of these two men that they had plotted to stone them when they had been in Iconium, but Paul and Barnabas had left before they could do it. So, these men had followed them all the way to Lystra and now, they turned the crowds against them. We are not told how long it took them to persuade the people of Lystra that Paul and Barnabas were dangerous heretics and not gods, but they must have been convincing. The very same people who had lauded praise and honor on Paul and Barnabas and tried to lay wreaths at their feet, picked up stones and hurled them at Paul. Luke tells us that their efforts were so thorough that they believed Paul to be dead. And yet, Paul miraculously survived. Luke states that "he rose up and entered the city, and on the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe" (Acts 14:20 ESV). Luke's description of this entire scene comes across as so matter-of-fact, almost flippant. It begs for more detail. We want to know more. Did God somehow heal all of his wounds? When Luke says that some of the disciples gathered around Paul's broken body, had they prayed for his healing? Did they lay hands on him? Luke doesn't elaborate. He simply tells us that Paul stood and went back to work. He entered the city, and then he and Barnabas went on to Derby. There's a question that naturally arises out of this story. Why did Stephen have to die as a result

of his stoning, while Paul was allowed to live? Neither Luke nor God provide us with an answer. But we have seen time and time again, that God always has a reason for what takes place. Obviously, God was not done with Paul. He had more for him to do. And Paul would learn a great deal from this experience. In fact, after having ministered in Derby, Paul and Barnabas would make a return trip through Lystra, Iconium and Pisidian Antioch, where they gathered all the believers and encouraged them “to continue in the faith, reminding them that we must suffer many hardships to enter the Kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22 NLT). Paul would become a living example of the trials and tribulations that come with faithful service to God. He would even provide a detailed description of his many sufferings on behalf of Christ.

²³ “I know I sound like a madman, but I have served him far more! I have worked harder, been put in prison more often, been whipped times without number, and faced death again and again. ²⁴ Five different times the Jewish leaders gave me thirty-nine lashes. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. Once I spent a whole night and a day adrift at sea. ²⁶ I have traveled on many long journeys. I have faced danger from rivers and from robbers. I have faced danger from my own people, the Jews, as well as from the Gentiles. I have faced danger in the cities, in the deserts, and on the seas. And I have faced danger from men who claim to be believers but are not. ²⁷ I have worked hard and long, enduring many sleepless nights. I have been hungry and thirsty and have often gone without food. I have shivered in the cold, without enough clothing to keep me warm.” – 2 Corinthians 11:23-27 NLT

And Paul would go on to conclude that all of this, the pain, the suffering, beatings, and deprivations, were valuable because they revealed his own weakness. Which is what led him to say, “I would rather boast about the things that show how weak I am” (2 Corinthians 11:30 NLT). And in the very next chapter of that same letter, Paul would clarify his thought even further:

⁹ “So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me. ¹⁰ That’s why I take pleasure in my weaknesses, and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” – 2 Corinthians 12:9-10 NLT

Paul would suffer greatly, but he would also believe strongly. He would find strength in his weaknesses. He would discover the reality that His God was greater than anything he might have to suffer or endure. Paul was not motivated by success or popularity. He didn’t measure his effectiveness by how big the crowds were or how well his message was received. What is really fascinating about this story is that Paul never asks God the “why” question. He doesn’t shake his fist at God and demand an explanation for why he had to be stoned almost to death just for doing what he had been told to do. You don’t hear Paul complaining or whining about his circumstances or wondering why Barnabas escaped without a mark. No, instead, Paul saw his suffering as a privilege. Which is why he could tell the Philippian believers: “For you have been given not only the privilege of trusting in Christ but also the privilege of suffering for him”

(Philippians 1:29 NLT). No doubt, Paul had been told by his fellow apostles about Jesus' sermon on the mount and had heard the words He spoke that day.

¹¹ "God blesses you when people mock you and persecute you and lie about you and say all sorts of evil things against you because you are my followers. ¹² Be happy about it! Be very glad! For a great reward awaits you in heaven. And remember, the ancient prophets were persecuted in the same way. – Matthew 5:11-12 NLT

And Paul, who would go on to suffer a great many trials and tribulations on behalf of Christ, would become an expert on the topic, providing him with the right and responsibility to instruct other believers about this vital topic.

³ We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. ⁴ And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation. ⁵ And this hope will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love. – Romans 5:3-5 NLT

When Paul told the disciples in Lystra, Iconium and Pisidian Antioch, that "through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God", he knew what he was talking about. But what was he teaching? Is he saying a person must undergo suffering before they can become a Christian? Is he teaching that suffering is a necessary part of our salvation? The answer to these questions would be, "No." Paul believed in salvation based on God's grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone. There was nothing we were required to bring to the table. Our salvation is, completely and entirely, the work of God, but between the point at which we come to faith in Christ and when we stand before Him in heaven, there is that period in which we are required to live out our faith in this world. At the point of our conversion, we become citizens of heaven, but we remain inhabitants of this earth. We have an inheritance reserved for us in heaven, but are required to live as aliens, strangers and sojourners in this land. And Jesus Himself told us, "Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world" (John 16:33 NLT).]

Living as a believer in this world is not easy. Paul knew that truth well. And he wanted all those who came to faith in Christ to understand that this world is not our home. We are on loan here by God, with an important task to perform: To share the good news of Jesus Christ with all those who find themselves living in darkness. We are to be ambassadors and witnesses to the resurrection power of Jesus Christ.

⁶ So we are always confident, even though we know that as long as we live in these bodies we are not at home with the Lord. ⁷ For we live by believing and not by seeing. ⁸ Yes, we are fully confident, and we would rather be away from these earthly bodies, for then we will be at home with the Lord. ⁹ So whether we are here in this body or away from this body, our goal is to please him. – 2 Corinthians 5:6-9 NLT

Our goal is to please Him, not ourselves. Our ambition should be to do His will, not our own. Paul saw clearly that God “had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles” (Acts 14:27 ESV). And he realized that God had chosen to use Barnabas and himself to lead countless Gentiles to that open door. If they had to suffer in the course of doing their part, so be it. If it meant they had to endure some pain and rejection along the way, it was worth it. Paul had a long-term perspective. He was in it for the long-haul and realized that his reward would come in the future, not the present. He didn’t seek or expect accolades and rewards in this life, but in the one to come. He wasn’t surprised by trials and tribulations, but fully expected them. In fact, he actually rejoiced in them. They became proof that his efforts were not in vain. He had the enemy’s full attention. He had smacked the beehive and upset the order of things. And he would gladly do it again.