

# ANTIOCH BIBLE CLASS

## LESSON SUBJECT

# PREACHING AND PERSECUTION

## SCRIPTURE TEXT: ACTS 14:1-28.

MEMORY VERSE: ACTS 14:22. Confirming the souls of the disciples and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and, that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God.

## INTRODUCTION

Hardships in the preaching of the gospel seemed to be the normal thing in these early days of carrying the gospel to the world. As the memory verse says that, “we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God”. Perhaps we had rather “just believe on Jesus” and not get involved in confrontation and conflict. But then we remember that Jesus said for us to “count the cost” lest there not be sufficient to finish the task.

We (Christians) are so enamored with words such as: “deliverance, peace, blessing, grace, God’s presence, comfort, conquerors, victory, freedom, security, who can harm you if you are followers of that which is good, and many more. We are accustomed to a soft, easy Christianity that for the most part, is not at all like that of the early church. Then when hardships do come to us, we crumble, wondering where God and his promise of help is when we need it.

But that is not “normal” Christianity. Instead hardships are more the normal expectation of the early Christian. That is what Paul faced in this chapter in the areas of Iconium, Lycaonia, Lystra, Derbe, etc. And it certainly is not confined to events of Acts, chapter 14. So far, from the very day the church was founded, and along every step of its path since then, the only “normal” thing about Christianity was that its journey was abnormal.

Fourteen chapters into the story of the church and the gospel, and it has been constantly bombarded with mockery, unbelief, jail, martyrdom, beatings, evil working, disrupted families, threats and so much more. Paul speaks of the perils he faced in I Cor.11, to which refer. And in addition to the dangers of bodily harm and death, were the “normal” hardships of the world in which they lived. We take autos, airplanes, phones, computers, mail, comforts of life, for granted, but they had none of these.

For them to leave the sanctuary of their church at Antioch, and head for Perga, Pamphylia, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe and other locations, was in and of itself a great undertaking. To reach these places where both Jewish tradition and Gentile heathenism were deeply established, with no advance crusade billing or celebrity promotions, and immediately be violently confronted with religious opposition and physical violence, would make the modern day evangelists turn coat and run. There

was nowhere for Paul to run; he was on a mission for God. This chapter is only one highlight of the confrontation they faced everywhere they went to preach the gospel. From righteous Abel until this present day, the true message of the gospel of our salvation for this world has always met with unrelenting hardships and unmitigated cruelty. Much of it has come from those who professed to believe in God, but were staunch enemies of divine truth.

Christianity is paradoxical in this way; that which is abnormal to the world is often normal to Christianity. If you preach, believe, live, fellowship and proclaim the truth of the Bible, you will learn the timeless lesson that “it is not only given unto you to believe on Christ, but also to suffer for him.

### DAILY SCRIPTURES AND THOUGHTS

#### MONDAY. ACTS 14:1-7. PREACHING THE GOSPEL IN THE LIONS DEN.

##### SCRIPTURE.

*V1. And it came to pass in Iconium, that they went both together into the synagogue of the Jews, and so spake, that a great multitude both of Jews and also of the Greeks believed. 2. But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles, and made their minds evil affected against the brethren. 3. Long time therefore abode they speaking boldly in the Lord, which gave testimony unto the word of his grace, and granted signs and wonders to be done by their hands. 4. But the multitude of the city was divided: and part held with the Jews, and part with the apostles. 5. And when there was an assault made both of the Gentiles, and also of the Jews with their rulers, to use them despitefully, and to stone them. 6. They were aware of it, and fled into Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and unto the region that lieth round about. 7. And there they preached the gospel.*

##### COMMENTS

The title harks back to the days of Daniel, when he was literally thrown in the den of lions. But it is a fitting metaphor for the conditions under which the apostles went forth to preach the gospel of Christ. Miraculously, Daniel was delivered from the mouths of the lions, and so also were the apostles delivered from those who did all in their power to stop the preaching of the truth of the gospel of Christ.

In the synagogue in Iconium, they preached Christ and great multitudes, both of Jews and Greeks, believed. The very next verse shows how the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and turned their minds against them. God is working wondrously and sinners are being transformed into God-fearing people, and jealousy and wrath pour out. The attitude of these unbelieving Jews was one of anger and hate. The apostles had done nothing but good, and yet the pattern everywhere seems to be the same. The problem is that the gospel draws a distinct line between good and evil and right and wrong. More than that, it calls people out of a life of carnal lusts and sin, into a life of purity and holiness. The pure, unadulterated message of the gospel calls on all people to change their ways. Everyone who desires to be changed find peace and joy but all who don't seem to become hostile to the message that would change them. It is almost as if it is inevitable.

## TUESDAY. ACTS 14:8-18. THE INABILITY TO DISCERN THE WORK OF GOD.

*V8. And there sat a certain man at Lystra, impotent in his feet, being a cripple from his mother's womb, who never had walked. 9. The same heard Paul speak; who steadfastly beholding him, and perceiving that he had faith to be healed, 10. Said with a loud voice, stand upright on thy feet, and he leaped and walked. 11. And when the people saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in the speech of Lycaonia, the gods are come down to us in the likeness of men. 12. And they called Barnabas Jupiter; and Paul, Mercurius, because he was the chief speaker. 13. Then the priest of Jupiter, which was before their city, brought oxen and garlands unto the gates, and would have done sacrifice with the people. 14. Which when the apostles, Barnabas and Paul, heard of, they rent their clothes, and ran in among the people crying out. 15. And saying, Sirs, why do ye these things? We also are men of like passions with you, and preach unto you that ye should turn from these vanities unto the living God, which made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are therein. 16. Who in times past suffered all nations to walk in their own ways. 17. Nevertheless he left not himself without witness, in that he did good, and gave us rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness. 18. And with these sayings scarce restrained they the people, that they had not done sacrifice unto them.*

### COMMENTS.

Everywhere you look in society and the world, God gets very little credit for anything he does, from amazing examples of creation to the marvelous mysteries of life. If you listen to a guide explain the Grand Canyon, you won't hear God mentioned as even a possible cause of it being there. The uncanny migration of geese, the march of the penguins from their feeding grounds to their birthing grounds, and the unique reproduction process of the grunion fish, along with millions of other examples, generally, are not thought of with any credit to God. Men try to explain these marvelous acts of God through the prism of evolution, and God is not mentioned or given any credit.

When the impotent man in this lesson was marvelously healed, Paul and Barnabas were acclaimed as popular gods "Jupiter and Mercurius". Instead of giving God the glory, the only ability and reference point they had was their vain, pagan gods. So much of the time in the ministry of Christ and the early church, when a miracle was performed, either they were persecuted or pagan gods were honored. This all points to a total inability of those who take such positions of being able to discern God and the things he does. In such cases people elevate scientific knowledge or praise a false religion and its gods. This same kind of reaction is found in Acts 28, when Paul was not killed by a poisonous snake.

If people had knowledge of the Lord through a proper understanding of his truth, God would be discerned and glorified. This would not be limited to physical miracles but our gratitude and glory would flow to God over every detail of life with its countless blessings, kindnesses and providence. It would especially be true of a discernment of his message of salvation. A good question to ask ourselves about this situation is this: Why are we so reluctant to express, vocally or otherwise, an unrestrained praise and honor to God for every aspect of life. "Praise (to God) is comely".

## WEDNESDAY. ACTS 14:19-20. STONED BECAUSE OF RELIGIOUS PREJUDICE AND HATRED.

*V19. And there came thither certain Jews from Antioch and Iconium, who persuaded the people, and having stoned Paul, drew him out of the city, supposing he had been dead. 20. Howbeit, as the disciples stood round about him, he rose up, and came into the city: and the next day he departed with Barnabas to Derbe.*

## COMMENTS.

There came certain Jews from Antioch and Iconium, who persuaded the people against Paul. Their hatred was so violent that they stoned Paul and left him for dead. Remember, they probably thought that they were only doing what the law would have them do to such “disobedient” people as Paul and Barnabas, but they had completely twisted the law to their own prejudices. Antioch, you remember, was the very place where they went out on this mission, and Iconium was where many already had believed on Christ. It was from these same places that unbelieving Jews came forth, stirring up strife among the people. What you see in these actions is the unmitigated hate and jealousy over the message Paul was preaching about Christ. Wherever they preached the name of Jesus and the resurrection, contemptible hate and hostility resulted from Jewish quarters.

Maybe Paul could have used more “tolerance” and “diversity”; maybe he could have adopted some of their methods or practices; and certainly he could have refrained from telling them that they were instrumental in the murder of Jesus. He could have used the appeasing notion that they were all the “children of God”, and were going to the same place. He could have, but he didn’t because he couldn’t without betraying the Lord and the gospel. One thing you can be sure of was that his adversaries were not about to concede anything to Paul; they were right and he was wrong in their eyes, and they were not yielding anything to him. So often you hear someone say that “we are all serving the same God and going to the same place”. The sequel to that inference is this: I won’t bother your faith if you will accept mine. The problem to this is twofold: (1) you can be sure the Jews did not think that Paul was going to the same place they were; (2) they were not about to really concede in their hearts that what Paul believed was okay.

As proof of their attitude, intent and total hate for Paul and his message, they stoned and thought they had killed him. Maybe you have not been literally “stoned” like Paul was in the defense of the faith of Christ. But about all you have to do to be stoned to death “religiously”, is to dare preach that there is no eternal torture of the wicked. The “rulers of religious orthodoxy” will stone you, thinking that they are doing God a great service. And while they expect acceptance, justification and tolerance from you, they won’t give one scintilla to you if you don’t believe in eternal torture (along with other orthodox doctrines also).

## THURSDAY. ACTS 14:21-23. BUILDING UP THE CHURCHES.

### SCRIPTURE.

*V21. And when they had preached the gospel to that city, and had taught many, they returned again to Lystra, and to Iconium, and Antioch. 22. Confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God. 23. And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed*

### COMMENTS.

On this first missionary journey they have reached cities of Asia Minor, near the northern border of

the Mediterranean Sea. These included: Seleucia, Cyprus, Salamis, Paphos, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe, Lycaonia, Antioch of Pisidia, Pamphylia, Perga, Attalia, and the outlying regions near these locations. They are now taking a second opportunity to re-visit some of these places, “confirming the souls of the disciples”, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and telling them that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God”. They ordained elders in every church to continue the work of the Lord and provide continual leadership. Then with prayer and fasting they commended them to the grace and providence of God. In each of these actions described in verses 21-23, Paul is concerned about the spiritual well being of the church. Even after Paul and Barnabas leave them, they will no doubt still be troubled by the unbelieving Jews. Obviously, they will not be as prepared to deal with this as Paul would if he were there still.

#### FRIDAY. ACTS 14:24-28. A REPORT OF WHAT GOD HAD DONE.

##### SCRIPTURE.

*24. And after they had passed throughout Pisidia, they came to Pamphylia. 25. And when they had preached the word in Perga, they went down into Attalia. 26. And thence sailed to Antioch, from whence they had been recommended to the grace of God for the work which they fulfilled. 27. And when they were come, and had gathered the church together, they rehearsed all that God had done with them, and how he had opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles. 28. And there they abode long time with the disciples.*

##### COMMENTS.

Paul and Barnabas now pass through Pisidia, Pamphylia, Perga and Attalia, preaching the word of the Lord on their way back to Antioch where they originally went out from. When they arrive at Antioch, they called the church there together and rehearsed all that God had done and how that the door of faith had opened in a great way to the Gentile population they encountered. This was a work and a mission endorsed and supported by the church at Antioch, and now they could receive the glorious news of all they had done and witnessed. Antioch seems to have become a kind of headquarters for the gospel to go forth to the Gentile world, much like Jerusalem was to the Jews.

It must have been a very exciting meeting, as they listened to the details of the gospel which had essentially gone out from their “home base”, reaching so many areas that had never heard the saving message of Jesus Christ. They also must have marveled as to how they had been sustained and protected by the providence of God along with the miracles God wrought among the people. In spite of the hardships and opposition, they must have been rejoicing and praising God to have had a part in so great a work. Surely they were wondering just when the next venture into the regions beyond would commence.

##### SUMMARY

It is uncertain just how long this missionary journey lasted, but it surely was much more than just a two week venture. When you consider the many places they preached and planted the gospel in sufficient foundational depth to remove people from their old way of life and see them transformed, while also teaching them the rudiments of the doctrine of Christ and all the while dealing with

constant opposition, you have to conclude that it took one to two years. The island of Cyprus, the provinces of Pisidia, Galatia and Cappadocia have now become beachheads for the gospel to reach other provinces around the Mediterranean and Aegean seas. As it advances to these other territories, there also, it will be that with much tribulation they will enter the kingdom of God.

They were true pioneers for the gospel in these areas that were populated with Jews and Grecians. On the one hand the Jews were deeply entrenched in Judaism and they, along with the Jewish priesthood from all over, were not an easy sell on the merits of Jesus Christ and his gospel. Tradition long held and by now hardened into a ritualistic religion, as well as having eyes that could not see and ears that could not hear, was very much like the parable of the sower: some by the wayside, some in thorny ground, some on stony ground and some, thankfully, on good ground. On the other hand there were the Grecians, which were ruled by philosophies, paganism and a multitude of gods in every household. But it was not just two missionaries going to try to establish a church or to witness to a few people and then return home. They were going forth to the work whereunto God had called them. And just as God had worked on both ends of the line with Peter and Cornelius, he also worked with both Paul and Barnabas on one end and the people they reached out to on the other. That was the framework in which they were able to continue their labors in the face of daunting opposition and much suffering.

When they finished their work for that initial endeavor, they went about confirming the churches they had established and ordaining elders in each one. Then it was on to Antioch with their wonderful report of what God had done and what he was continuing to do. Now Antioch was able to rejoice in the spread of the gospel of which they were a part.

### QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the differences you can see between Christianity of the early church and that which we have in the world today, as they relate to the area of suffering and hardships.
2. How did Paul and Barnabas have an upbeat spirit, looking forward to the next service and the next town, knowing that they were going to face physical hardships?
3. Under what grounds and legal conditions could Jews stone Paul at Lystra and not be brought to a criminal court for it?
4. Why was it necessary for Paul and Barnabas to go back to the churches where they had preached Christ and see how they were doing?
5. What denomination of Christianity did they convert the people to in the various cities where they went?