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The First Journey Completed



HOW DO WE SPELL “SUCCESS”?

How do we determine if something we’ve done was successful? One way is to judge it “by the numbers.” What percentage of correct answers did the student get on the final exam? How many wins did the team accumulate during the season? What was the company’s “bottom line”? The nation’s GNP?

Congregations and pastors often do that. We may not use the word “successful,” but we like to point to numbers to reassure ourselves we are doing a good job. Did we meet the budget? Did attendance hold steady, or even rise a bit? How many members do we have compared to a year ago, five years ago? Numbers we provide on our annual reports can be the source of either joy or gloom.

The Bible does not often use the word “success,” and when it does, numbers aren’t normally involved. Wise Solomon says we will “find... good success in the sight of God and man” if we remember and obey God’s teaching, if we embrace love and faithfulness (Prov. 3:4). God reminded Joshua to adhere to the law that Moses had commanded. If he did, he would have success (Joshua 1:7). Success for God’s servants, of course, may not be measurable in numbers. Jeremiah did what God commanded, but for 23 years practically no one listened (Jer. 25:3). We do not brand him a failure, for he had been faithful. Not a few discouraged pastors have been reminded by loving parishioners that being “faithful” is more important than numerical success. Wise words!

Was the first mission journey “successful”? We can look at numbers like the following: a) it lasted more than a year, b) it covered 1,500 grueling miles, c) the company of missionaries shrank from three to two. Yes, the missionaries saw numerical growth, but they also encountered angry opposition.



In the Book of Acts, however, Luke seems to enjoy making repeated “progress reports,” many of which involve numbers. “Three thousand souls” were added on Pentecost, and the number of the “men” shortly thereafter swelled to 5,000 (4:4). In the face of opposition, he relishes saying, the church kept increasing in number (6:1, 7; 9:31; 11:21, 24; 14:1, 21; 16:5; 17:12). Kept in perspective, numbers can and do matter. At least sometimes.

Was the first mission journey “successful”? We can look at numbers like the following: a) it lasted more than a year, b) it covered 1,500 grueling miles, c) the company of missionaries shrank from three to two. Yes, the missionaries saw numerical growth, but they also encountered angry opposition. Before it was over, Paul was stoned by a mob and dragged out of town. How would the journey be evaluated when (and if!) they got back home? What would YOU have said?

SUCCESS AND OPPOSITION IN ICONIUM

ACTS 14:1-7

The missionaries made their way southeast from Antioch along an excellent road, the Via Sebaste, that Roman engineers had constructed in 6 BC. Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe lay along that road in the southern part of the province of Galatia.

Iconium was 80 miles from Antioch. It was Greek in culture and resistant to Roman influence. Lystra, on the other hand, was a haven for retired Roman army veterans the emperor had sent there to settle. Only 24 miles southeast of Iconium, it was much more distant culturally, and the rest of the populace was mostly uneducated Lycaonians who spoke their own native dialect. The final city, Derbe, was another sixty miles down the Via Sebaste. We know that Derbe was a border city, but little else about it except that one Gaius from that town (20:4) later accompanied Paul on his third mission trip.

Iconium nearly duplicated their experience in Antioch. Once more they began at the synagogue (v. 1). Once more there was a response of faith by many. And once more, as happened at Antioch, a number of “unbelieving Jews” (v. 2, cf. 13:45, 50) stirred up opposition to them. But instead of a quick exit, the team “remained for a long time” teaching the new believers (v. 3). Luke makes special note of the help of the ascended Lord Jesus, who “bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done” (v. 3) by the apostles. Their miraculous deeds, it appears, lent weight to their preaching. Interestingly, “apostles” is in the plural, an indication that Barnabas had come to be reckoned as an “apostle” alongside Paul and the Twelve.

The apostolic qualification mentioned in 1:21–22 (being one who had accompanied Jesus in His earthly mission) had dropped away. Paul had his own encounter with the risen Christ at Damascus, and Richard Longenecker guesses that Barnabas may have been a witness at one of Jesus’ resurrection appearances. Both men were set apart by the Holy Spirit, sent of a mission. The word “apostle,” in fact, means “one sent.”

Eventually there came a “plot” (the Greek *hormee* connotes an impulsive action) against them. This sudden, emotional outburst transformed their opponents into a potential lynch mob and compelled the missionaries to flee the city. They headed to Lystra, where they “continued to preach the gospel” (v. 7).

ADULATION AND STONING IN LYSTRA

ACTS 14:8–19

Now comes a strange turn in this story. After nearly being lynched in one place, they are deified in the next! It began with the healing of a man “crippled from birth” (v. 8), an incident that immediately brings to mind the earlier healing of a man lame from birth by Peter (3:1–8) and another by Jesus Himself (Luke 5:18–26). Luke’s description is riveting. We see Paul’s intense look, we hear his loud command, then witness a sudden, startling response by the man: “he sprang up and began walking” (v. 10). It was, says Smith, “too much for the crowd that had gathered.” Abandoning their accustomed Greek, they began shouting in their native tongue, “The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!” (v. 11). The dumbfounded missionaries heard the crowd hailing Barnabas as Zeus, the chief Greek god, and Paul as Hermes, the divine messenger. Before they knew it, the local “priest of Zeus” was bringing oxen adorned with garlands for a public sacrifice (v. 13)!

Lest we laugh at the naivete of the Lystrans, we should know that there was a simple, compelling

reason behind the crowd’s worshipful response. Many of the Lycaonians had grown up hearing an old legend, retold fifty years earlier by Roman poet Ovid, that Zeus and Hermes once visited “the Phrygian hill country” (“our own neighborhood”) disguised as mortals seeking lodging. No one paid them any heed until one poor old couple, Philemon and his wife Baucis, welcomed them with a banquet beyond their means. After destroying the homes of the inhospitable folks, the gods transformed the old couple’s home of straw into a temple and transformed the couple into two beautiful trees that would live on there.

Seeing the miraculous healing, the people of Lystra wondered if perhaps lightning had struck twice in the same place. Since they didn’t want their homes destroyed too, they determined to get it right this time and give these “gods” a proper welcome! That the people shouted in Lycaonian (v. 11) explains why the apostles were slow to understand their intent. But the sight of the oxen and their garlands, and possibly of knives being sharpened for the sacrificial slaughtering, brought home to Paul and Barnabas what was about to happen.

Their reaction was unmistakable. They “tore their garments” and rushed out into the crowd in a desperate bid to halt the proceedings. Luke’s readers knew very well the meaning of that symbolic gesture by which Reuben grieved the selling of Joseph to slavers (Gen. 37:29), David lamented the death of Saul in battle (2 Sam. 1:11–12), and Job responded to reports that he had lost his possessions and children in a single day (Job 1:20). To tear one’s clothes was to cry out with unmistakable emotion, “This is awful!”

They erupted with an extemporaneous but eloquent appeal that fit the hearers, who knew little or nothing of Jewish history and the scriptural prohibitions against idolatry Paul and Barnabas knew by heart. So instead of quoting

Scriptures, they entreated the people using things they could see every day: “Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men of like nature with you... turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea” (v. 15). Their appeal was to nature rather than to Scripture. They reminded the people that God did not show up in disguise and then demolish homes. Instead He made His witness by leaving a trail of blessing in their lives, “giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness” (v. 17). The assertion of God’s patience with past generations before the present day’s “good news” was meant to prepare them for hearing more about the new life Jesus would bring, but the apostles did not get the chance to say more, for once again their adversaries burst on the scene. There comes a dramatic mood swing in a single verse: “Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul” (v. 19)!

“Was it frustration at their misidentification that helped the crowd lend ready ears to adversaries who had just made a special trip... to denounce the apostles?” asks Paul Maier. How much time elapsed between deification and mob violence we are not told, but the crowd succeeded in surrounding Paul (where was Barnabas?) and stoning him. One rock found its mark and bashed him into unconsciousness. Supposing him dead, the crowd “dragged him out of the city” (v. 19). But it was not so. A handful of grieving “disciples,” presumably earlier converts from

Lystra, gathered around him and discovered that he was still alive.

In what must have appeared almost a resurrection, Paul “rose up and entered the city” once more. Astonishing boldness on his part, following an astonishing deliverance on God’s part! The next day, without missing a beat, he and Barnabas continued down the road to Derbe. The 60-mile journey gave him plenty of time to realize what Stephen had endured at his own hands (7:58) and to ponder the words Jesus had spoken to Ananias: “I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name” (9:16). Later Paul would write to the Galatians, the people of that same area, “I bear on my body the marks of Jesus” (Gal. 6:17). Were some of those the scars from his stoning?

Something else may have happened at Lystra that Luke does not here report. There was a young man living there named Timothy (16:1) who likely witnessed the drama we have just described. Timothy became a disciple and eventually one of Paul’s trusted companions. Paul wrote to him years later, “You... have followed my teaching, my conduct... my steadfastness, my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra... yet from them all the Lord rescued me” (2 Tim. 3:10–11). Paul’s courage, along with his words, made a powerful impression on Timothy and others, as once again God brought good from evil — blessing from what was suffered for the name of Jesus.

RETURNING AND REPORTING IN ANTIOCH

ACTS 14:20–28

Paul and Barnabas had run a veritable gauntlet, facing a false prophet, verbal abuse, a deadly plot and stoning by an angry mob. They had finished their preaching work on a high note in Derbe, where they “won a large number of disciples” (v. 21 NIV). No one would have blamed them for singing a hearty “hallelujah,” packing up, and heading east for home down that Roman road. Instead, they made an about-face and began retracing their steps westward, a decision that must have taken considerable courage, given what they had just endured.

Back through Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch they journeyed, “strengthening the disciples” in each place (v. 22 NIV). It wasn’t enough, they knew, simply to plant the Gospel seed and wish the believers well. The baby churches needed care if they were to grow up to maturity. So they took the step of appointing “elders” (Greek *presbyterous*) in each place to provide shepherdly care (note his words later to the “elders” of the church in Ephesus, 20:17, 28). Because the believers were neophytes, the apostles took the step of doing the appointing. Later, as they matured, these congregations would be ready to choose their own leaders. Along with new leaders, the apostles left an important reminder: “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.” We MUST! Such suffering was not merely normal, but even “necessary” in a hostile world, as Jesus Himself proved. The apostles had been a living demonstration of that.

On their homeward journey, there came one more stop in Perga. This time they took opportunity to speak the Word there, though Luke furnishes no further details about it. Their work finally completed, they sailed the 300 miles home to Antioch, where they made their report to the church.

Their report, as Luke narrates it here, contains neither mileage totals nor the number of souls added to the church, though he has done so in other places (2:41 and 4:4). Though doubtless they told the story in captivating detail to the gathered listeners, Luke chooses to summarize how they viewed the journey in a single sentence: “They declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.” That, after all, is the great story unfolding in Acts — how the Gospel traveled from Jerusalem to Rome, from Jew to Gentile.

Of special importance for us today is that we keep the Subject of their report the Subject of our church’s life and work. Not what “we did,” but what “God did”! We take a lesson from this journey and their report about it. Let God be God, trust that He will be at work in what we venture for His sake (1 Cor. 15:58), and give Him the glory for the good things that happen. That’s what makes for “success” in our life and work together, isn’t it? Not finally the numbers, but the presence and activity of the Lord through His Word.

PERSONAL APPLICATION

ACTS 15:1–35

Lord God, as I study the Word in this chapter, remind me that the church will always face conflict. But help me also to see that conflict brings opportunity for You to be at work, so that we may finally give You glory. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Review

1. List the positive and negative responses the missionaries received in Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. What does the list teach us?

2. What attitudes or actions of the apostles would you like to imitate? Be specific.

Acts 15:1–5

3. COUNCILS form a significant part of the history of the church. Choose one of the following and find out what you can about it online:

Nicea Trent Vatican II

(e.g. **Where** did it meet? **When**? **What** was the chief issue before it?)

4. What is meant by “the church” in verse 3? In verse 4? How are “apostles and elders” to be distinguished from “the church”?

5. Have you ever been to a larger church gathering (a district/synod convention, perhaps) where some contentious issues were raised? How did the issues get resolved?

6. What’s the big issue before the church in this section?

7. If you were a new Gentile believer, how would you have felt about the proposed requirement in v. 1?

Acts 15:6–21

8. Who is meeting in this section? (contrast verse 6 with verse 22)

9. What testimony is offered by Peter (7–11)? How is this significant, given his background (recall 10:14!)

10. What testimony is offered by Paul and Barnabas (12)? How is this significant, given Paul’s history as a Pharisee and Barnabas’ as a Levite?

11. What does James add to the discussion?

12. What proposal does he offer to help “clear the logjam”?

List the four specifics:

1) _____

2) _____

3) _____

4) _____

Can you locate any footnoted references to help explain what these meant?

13. How would this proposal appeal to Jewish believers? To Gentiles?

14. One writer suggested that the council was trying to preserve two things:

(1) The **Unity** of the church... (2) The **Holiness** of the church...

Which of these has more weight for you?

Acts 15:22–35

15. The council decides to send a delegation with a letter. Who are the four men who will make the trip? Why these?

16. Take a closer look at the letter. From whom? To whom? Does the letter strike you as

a) too long? b) too short? c) just right?

If you chose a) or b), how would you change it?

17. How was the letter delivered? With what spirit was it received?

18. Let’s apply this study to our own day. What are a few of the more significant issues that face the church just NOW? If you had authority to summon church leaders worldwide to discuss any of them, which one would you address?

Memory Challenge

Review what you have learned thus far.