



From Applause to Assault

Acts 14:1-22

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Apr. 12th, 2026

**This original sermon was not composed by A.I.*

We're continuing through the Book of Acts and we're looking at chapter 14:1-22. Paul and Barnabas have been traveling around modern-day Turkey preaching the Gospel in the Jewish synagogues. They're quite successful, able to gain hundreds and even thousands of converts. At the same time, the devout Jews were following them around, stirring up all the people against them, and they eventually kicked them out of Antioch. We begin to see this pattern of crowds initially believing the Gospel only to have Pharisees come in and sow contradiction and unbelief to turn the people against them. Things start to go haywire.

Have you ever had times where everything seemed to be going right... and then suddenly everything went wrong? You're winning one minute, doors are opening, things are clicking, you can feel the momentum build—and “BAM!”, it all turns on you. The people who were for you have turned against you. A breakthrough becomes a breakdown.

That's one of the most confusing experiences in the Christian life. We often tend to think: If God is in it, everything should go right. If I'm following God's will, I should see consistent success. If the Spirit is moving, victories should abound!

But what happens when it doesn't? What happens when God is clearly working— there's response, change, answered prayers—and at the very same time, opposition and confusion jump in, and everything starts to fall apart?

Acts chapter 14 gives us that picture. Paul and Barnabas walk into a city and preach the gospel to great success. And then, in a New York minute, the applause turns into assault.

What we'll see this morning is this: Spiritual effectiveness doesn't always look like success. In fact, sometimes the clearest evidence that God is working is that everything starts to go wrong.

With that, I invite you to turn to Acts 14:1-22.

Scripture: Acts 14:1-22

14 At Iconium Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue. There they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Greeks believed. 2 But the Jews who refused to believe stirred up the other Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. 3 So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to perform signs and wonders. 4 The people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews, others with the apostles. 5 There was a plot afoot among both Gentiles and Jews, together with their leaders, to mistreat them and stone them. 6 But they found out about it and fled to the Lycaonian cities of Lystra and Derbe and to the surrounding country, 7 where they continued to preach the gospel.

8 In Lystra there sat a man who was lame. He had been that way from birth and had never walked. 9 He listened to Paul as he was speaking. Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed 10 and called out, “Stand up on your feet!” At that, the man jumped up and began to walk.

11 When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, “The gods have come down to us in human form!” 12 Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes because he was the chief speaker. 13 The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought bulls and wreaths to the city gates because he and the crowd wanted to offer sacrifices to them.

14 But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting: 15 “Friends, why are you doing this? We too are only human, like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them. 16 In the past, he let all nations go their own way. 17 Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.” 18 Even with these words, they had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them.

19 Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. 20 But after the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city. The next day he and Barnabas left for Derbe. 21 They preached the gospel in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, 22 strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,” they said.

The New International Version (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Ac 14:1–22.

The Word of God for the people of God.

In Iconium, Paul and Barnabas are so effective that a large number of both Jews and Greeks believe the gospel. This prompts the unbelieving Jews to poison the minds of the unbelieving Gentiles against the Christians. Verse three says, “So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the message of his grace, by enabling them to perform signs and wonders.” The result was division in the city. The unbelievers set up a plan to abuse and stone Paul and Barnabas.

Spiritual Effectiveness Breeds Division and Persecution

So there in Iconium, Paul and Barnabas are experiencing amazing spiritual success. They are speaking with boldness and courage. The Lord is powerfully showing up, confirming their message with signs and wonders. People are getting healed. People are getting set free. People are getting saved. Change is happening. The kingdom of God is spreading. The Spirit is moving. The Lord's presence is unmistakable.

Imagine how they must have gone to bed each night beaming with joy. They hit the spiritual jackpot, and God was confirming that they were doing everything right. And yet, look at what was boiling up alongside all of their successes. Division and persecution. For as many souls set free, there were as many souls poisoned by unbelief.

As we get into Acts and the rest of the New Testament, there's a common thread that we begin to see woven throughout. Despite the good news of the gospel and its wonderful message of the love and grace of God, it causes division and persecution. Minds are going to accept it, and minds are going to be poisoned against it. The greater the success of the gospel, the greater the opposition that rises against it. It will continue that way until the day the Lord comes back.

In the modern-day church, we tend to gauge our success on how well the message of Christ's grace and love is able to transform a city. When big revivals happen, it is too common for the church to point to crime rates as proof of transformation. It's as if the gospel is expected to create a utopia. A common thought is that if the gospel does its job, it's going to bring peace to entire cities.

I'm not going to say the gospel is not a message that ultimately brings peace. The angels proclaimed at Christ birth, "Peace on earth; good will toward men." Jesus said, "My peace I give to you; not as the world gives." The gospel brings peace for all who believe, but the gospel doesn't guarantee peace wherever it goes. It can be just the opposite. Jesus said to all his disciples, "in this world you will have trouble." Also, in talking about the cost of true discipleship, Jesus said, "do not suppose that I've come to bring peace to the Earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword." He also said, "but be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world."

My friends, what that means is that we shouldn't be surprised when our devotion to Christ becomes a magnet for division and persecution. Show me a church that unbelievers absolutely hate and wish to shut down, and I'll show you a church that is setting people free from Satan's grip. Wherever and whenever the gospel truth is proclaimed boldly and loudly and with the power of God, the forces of darkness are going to show up with poisonous darts.

Paul and Barnabas Flee To Lystra

Back to Iconium. Minds are so poisoned that a plan is hatched to abuse and stone the apostles. Paul and Barnabas hear about it and flee to the backcountry, where they continue preaching the gospel. They end up in a village called Lystra.

Lystra was a backwoods town, situated far off the trade route. There was a small Greek educated population there, but the majority were uneducated, knowing very little Greek. There was no Jewish synagogue there. Recent archaeological discoveries dated to the first century uncovered an inscription citing the Greek gods Zeus and Hermes.¹ These gods were worshiped by the locals and played a huge part in how they treated Paul and Barnabas.

While Paul and Barnabas were doing open air evangelism, Paul heals a lame man. It's a very similar story to Peter's healing of the lame man back in chapter 3. Here, when the locals see the lame man walking, they scream out in their own dialect, "the gods have come down to us!" They called Barnabas, 'Zeus,' and Paul, 'Hermes.'

Now, Paul and Barnabas did not know this dialect. So, initially they had no idea what was happening. They likely assumed that all the clamor and excitement was for the gospel and the

¹ Ramsay, *Cities of Paul*, 407 ff. On the new inscriptions, see Calder, *The Expositor*, 1910, 1 ff, 148 ff; id, *Classical Review*, 1910, 67 ff. Inscriptions of Lystra are published in Sterrett, *Wolfe Expedition*, and in *Jour. Hell. Stud.*, 1904 (Cronin).

Lord Jesus. They might've been ecstatic at the ecstatic reaction of the people. Until they started bringing sacrifices and worshiping them!

Paul and Barnabas do everything they can to stop them. In a clever adaptation, they use nature to try to point the people to the living God, but they still cannot stop them. The people had already propped them up as stars. They were heroes. Superstars. Rockstar evangelists!

Spiritual Effectiveness Breeds Misplaced Adoration

So, there in Lystra, God is powerfully showing up with signs and wonders. A man is healed. Again, it looks and feels like the gospel is winning, a great revival is happening, the whole town is fired up and about to become one big church. Paul and Barnabas, at first, sense the approval of the crowd; they feel they've won them over. Change is happening. It's a great spiritual success. Until... It isn't. Were it not for the fact that Timothy came from Lystra, this whole evangelistic venture might've been nothing but a colossal failure.

On a side note, this is what I love about these Bible stories and what tells me that they're true. The stories never follow the line you would expect with God being the One in charge. You would expect to see conquering victory after conquering victory, but what you often see is crushing defeat and everything falling way off course. The stories always seem to have a way of self-destructing. But in those crazy self-destructions, deep spiritual truths always shows up.

A deep spiritual truth here is spiritual effectiveness breeds misplaced adoration— especially in a world given over to idolatry. Rather than seeing God in the apostles, the locals saw the apostles as gods. A life of idolatry blinded them to the truth. We may not be as extreme as the locals of ancient Lystra, but how often do we give misplaced adoration to spiritual superstars? How often do spiritual leaders fall into the temptation of exalting themselves with the power and influence they've gained? Instead of turning people toward God, people are turned toward their wallets to give more money. Sacrifice, sacrifice, sacrifice, so the spiritual work can continue on. I saw a clip of a pastor telling his mega-congregation that he won't pray a blessing over them until they open their wallet and give. What a sad spiritual state to be in. Don't fall for the spiritual leader that forces you to put them on a pedestal.

Spiritual effectiveness breeds misplaced adoration, and it is our job as Christians to turn misguided people away from worthless things to the living God. As the Lord begins to work powerfully through you, people will begin to put you on a pedestal. With the Lord's power comes misplaced adoration. To claim even an ounce of glory is idolatry.

Paul Stoned And Miraculously Revived

Let's look at the final part of the story. This is where it goes off the rails. Verse 19, some Jews come and win the crowd over. In a stunning reversal, the locals stone Paul and drag him outside the city, supposing he is dead. The church gathers around him, and miraculously, he gets up and goes back into the city. He courageously continues preaching the gospel and encouraging the church in Lystra, and he tracks all the way back to Iconium and Antioch. In vs. 22, the apostle finishes this story with these words, "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God."

Spiritual Effectiveness Ultimately Breeds Hardship

Between the division and persecution, the misguided application and stubborn idolatry from an adoring crowd who turn on a dime, getting pelted with stones, dragged outside the city and left to die, most would hardly believe God was working through any of it. Most might say this has been a complete failure; God is not in it... time to give up!

The fruit of the Spirit is not always immediately evident. Spiritual effectiveness ultimately breeds hardship. If we want to move the needle of our spiritual success, we must endure hardships. I've seen many Christians who get knocked down right when they begin to walk in the call of God. They get frustrated and give up before they even get started.

In second Timothy 3:10-14, Paul said, “you know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings – what kinds of things happen to me in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

With godliness comes persecution. Paul experienced that persecution physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Most of us here in America have never faced physical persecution, maybe some have faced personal, emotional persecution. All of us face spiritual persecution.

As soon as you turn your face to the Lord and make a commitment to walk in godliness with him, spiritual opposition will show up. As soon as you commit your life to the spiritual things of the Lord, the spiritual attacks will come. It might come in the form of depression. It might be sudden turmoil in your own family or life. Things might start to fall apart all around you. You might sense a dark demonic oppression that won't leave.

None of that means that the Lord is not with you. None of that means that the Lord is not working powerfully within you. None of that means that you are a spiritual failure. Do not lose heart. Persevere like Paul did. Continue in faith. Continue stepping out for God. We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God, but in time, the long-lasting fruit will show up. Amen.

Three Key Takeaways

In closing, here are three key takeaways from this message:

1. Spiritual Effectiveness Brings Opposition

When the gospel begins to truly impact people, opposition follows. In Iconium, many believed, but unbelieving Jews stirred up hostility and persecution against Paul and Barnabas. This pattern shows that success in God's kingdom does not always produce peace—it often provokes resistance. Jesus warned that His followers would face trouble in the world. Therefore, believers should not interpret opposition as failure, but often as evidence that God is working powerfully.

2. Spiritual Success Can Lead to Misplaced Adoration

In Lystra, after Paul healed the lame man, the crowd tried to worship Paul and Barnabas as gods. Instead of giving glory to God, they exalted the human messengers. This reminds us that when

God works through people, there is always a temptation for others to elevate leaders or for leaders to accept that praise. Faithful servants must redirect all honor and glory back to God, reminding others that the power belongs to Him alone.

3. Following Christ Requires Perseverance Through Hardship

The story ends with Paul being stoned and left for dead, yet he rises and continues preaching the gospel. His message to the new believers is clear: “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.” Spiritual fruit often grows through suffering, endurance, and perseverance. Hardship does not mean God has abandoned His people—it is often part of the path of faithful discipleship.

Amen.

Let’s pray.

Study Questions
Read Acts 14:1-22

Observation Questions:

1. In Acts 14:1–7, what happens as a result of Paul and Barnabas preaching in Iconium, and how do different groups of people respond?
2. What specific actions do the unbelieving Jews take in verse 2, and what effect does that have on others?
3. In Acts 14:8–13, how do the people of Lystra respond to the healing of the lame man, and what do they believe about Paul and Barnabas?
4. In Acts 14:19–22, what drastic change occurs in the crowd’s behavior toward Paul, and what does Paul do immediately after being stoned?

Interpretation Questions:

1. Why does the same gospel message in Iconium lead to both belief and hostility—what does this reveal about the nature of the gospel?
2. What does the crowd’s reaction in Lystra teach us about how easily people can misattribute God’s power to human leaders?
3. Why do Paul and Barnabas respond so strongly (tearing their clothes, redirecting worship) when the crowd tries to honor them? What does this reveal about true spiritual leadership?
4. What does Paul’s return to the city and his statement in verse 22 (“We must go through many hardships...”) teach us about how God works through suffering?

Application Questions:

1. When you face opposition or resistance in your faith, do you tend to see it as failure—or could it be evidence that God is working? How should this passage reshape your perspective?
2. In what ways do we today place spiritual leaders, influencers, or even ourselves on a pedestal instead of giving full glory to God? Where do you see this in your own life?
3. Have you ever experienced a moment where something felt like a spiritual “win,” but quickly turned into confusion or difficulty? How did you respond, and what might this passage say about that situation?
4. What hardship are you currently facing (or avoiding) in your walk with Christ, and how might God be using it to produce deeper faith and lasting fruit in you?