

Thoughts on Acts Fourteen

As chapter 13 ends and 14 begins, the fulfillment of Jesus' words to Ananias comes to mind, Acts 9:15-16. After a brief time, giving the listeners time to think about the Gospel message, disbelief and envy produce persecution of the messengers. *"The Jews stirred up the devout and prominent women and the chief men of the city, raised up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region"* (Acts 13:50). Paul's response to the persecution was *"They shook off the dust from their feet against them"* (Acts 13:51), just as Jesus instructed His disciples when He sent out the twelve (Mark 6:11).

Because Paul is an apostle of Christ, he gave testimony and witnessed that Jesus was raised from death. Witnessing was a primary duty of the apostles (Acts 1:22, 8, 4:33) and, subsequently, to all disciples. The result of the evidence presented varied between joyful belief and obedience, to a refusal to believe and hatred. We read of this acceptance and rejection again in Iconium. *"Now it happened in Iconium that they went together to the synagogue of the Jews, and so spoke that a great multitude both of the Jews and of the Greeks believed"* (Acts 14:1). *"But the multitude of the city was divided: part sided with the Jews, and part with the apostles. And when a violent attempt was made by both the Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to abuse and stone them"* (Acts 14:4-5). This scenario is repeated, with minor changes, throughout Paul's travels until he is eventually put to death in a Roman prison around 68 CE.

Miracles confirmed that Paul's teaching came from the one and only God. But the idolaters who only knew Greek and Roman mythology believed Paul and Barnabas were two of their mythical gods who came to earth. *"And Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker"* (Acts 14:12). Barnabas, the older they called Zeus, the chief Greek God, and the younger speaker and healer they called Hermes, the herald and messenger of Mt. Olympus. The priest from the temple of Zeus tried to lead the people in sacrifices and worship. Paul and Barnabas had some trouble stopping them. Unfortunately, Paul would have greater trouble with idolaters and idle makers later.

The reasoning of society today is similar to that of the temple priest that tried to sacrifice for what he thought was true. There are modern idols that people serve without investigating to see if they are valid things to be worshiped. The one thing various forms of modern idolatry have in common is "self." There may be multiple forms of idolatry today, but they all are founded on human desire. Just like the Jews wanted their way and rejected Christ's way, people today select their way and ignore the Bible's written way. Faith only, instrumental music, social drinking, dancing, etc. And as the pagan priests sacrificed to mythological beings, moderns devote themselves to the images displayed by the current media trends and fashions.

Another common idol today is science. Many people believe that studying our environment can teach us how to control our future. Knowledge makes them feel like gods, like Satan told Eve in the garden (Genesis 3:5), and build self-esteem to godlike proportions. People reject God's Word describing how He created the heavens and accept the nonsense of atheistic evolution. The new naturalism is like the old idol Pan worshiped in Pantheism. We are encouraged to think of the goddess Mother Earth and believe we can preserve the earth indefinitely when God has declared that this current age will end. *"Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat?"*

Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells" (2 Peter 3:11-13).

As chapter 14 draws to a conclusion, we read that Paul and Barnabas continued to preach in the face of persecution and the threat of their death, and the church grew. The messenger may be stricken, but the message will have God's intended effect. Also essential is the follow-up to the preaching. After preaching in Derbe and making many disciples, Paul began in Derbe and returned to each new congregation along the way they had come. Just as Peter did in Samaria, Paul encouraged them with the Spirit and appointed overseers to lead them in the Word. Paul's words to them as he departed apply equally to us today. *"We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God." So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed" (Acts 14:20-23).*

We ask ourselves, "Do we follow The Way or our ego's selfish desires?"