March 26, 2016
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Acts: The Gods Must Be Crazy
Acts 14:8-18

As we return to our journey through Acts, let me remind you of where we left off. We were in the city of Iconium, (show map) where Paul and Barnabas experienced great success in sharing the gospel even as the Holy Spirit performed many signs and wonders through their hands. Nevertheless, the unbelieving Jews stirred up a mob whose intention was to stone Paul and Barnabas. So as we concluded our thought unit in Acts 14:1-7 last Sunday, we learned that Paul and Barnabas made a quick escape from Iconium and journeyed about 20 miles south/southwest to the city of Lystra in the region of Lycaonia. Let’s pick up the story beginning with Acts 14:8 and we’ll read through to vs. 18.

As you can see, Lystra is about 20 miles south/southwest of Iconium. What you probably cannot appreciate from this map is how Lystra lies at the foot of the Isaurian mountains. Now I realize that means little to you Kansas flatlanders, but here’s what I can tell you from living in North Carolina for many years: there is a notable difference between people who live in mountains and people who don’t! People who live in mountains look down on other people…get it? They literally look down…never mind.

In all seriousness, there was a significant difference between the relative sophistication of Iconium residents in comparison to the rugged rednecks of Lystra. History remembers the Lycaonians living in Lystra as semi-barbaric, but history remembers the Isaurian mountain residents just to the west of Lystra as 100% barbaric! I give you this history so that you might appreciate that, though Lystra was only 20 miles away from Iconium geographically, it was a million miles away culturally.

Let’s pick up the story in vs. 8, “Now at Lystra there was a man sitting who could not use his feet. He was crippled from birth and had never walked. He listened intently to Paul speaking.”

Now before we move on, did you pick up on what is missing in this description? Look at that passage again, and see if you can guess what is missing. Here’s a hint: where is Paul speaking? Is he speaking in a synagogue? No…he’s not, which leads most biblical scholars to assume there wasn’t a synagogue in that city. Why is that important? I’ll tell you why.

If Paul were speaking in a synagogue, he (and we) could assume many things about his audience. He could assume that his listeners already believed in the One God who is the Creator, and he could assume his audience did not subscribe to idols or some pagan notion of “the gods.” However, because Paul is not in a synagogue, we must assume he is now speaking to pagan
Gentiles who have no concept of a monotheistic worldview. Remember also that he is speaking to tribal people…those who the world would label as “simple people.” We’ll see why all of that is significant in what comes next. Let’s pick up where we left off in vs. 9:

And Paul, looking intently at (the crippled man) and seeing that he had faith to be made well, said in a loud voice, “Stand upright on your feet.” And he sprang up and began walking. 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!” Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. And the priest of Zeus, whose temple was at the entrance of the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds.”

So here’s the situation…Paul and Barnabas come into rugged Lystra, and there is no synagogue in which to set up shop. We learn here in vs. 13 that the temple of Zeus was located just inside the city gates, so it’s likely that Paul and Barnabas are within shouting distance of that temple, engaging the Zeus worshippers in a spiritual conversation. One of the men seated nearby, listening attentively to Paul, is a man crippled from birth. Now we don’t know what Paul is saying at this point, but clearly Paul is proclaiming the power of God to bring hope and healing to the world. We should note that Paul is probably speaking in Greek, although he may have known a little Lycaonian given that he grew up only 200 miles away from Lystra. According to Luke, this crippled man, for whatever reason, is incredibly open to Paul’s teaching. The way he is listening, the way his eyes have teared up, the way he looks at Paul with hope and expectancy, reveals a tender faith and a willing heart. So Paul, prompted by the Holy Spirit, commands the man to stand on his feet, and to the shock and awe of all those in attendance, the well-known crippled man jumps up and begins to dance.

Now we’ve seen paralytics get healed before. Jesus healed a paralytic, and so did Peter. But in both of those stories, the audience was primarily, if not wholly Jewish. Thus the interpretation of the miracle in those instances led the Jewish observers to glorify God and it rendered them open to hear and receive the good news of the Gospel.

But watch what happens when the healing of a paralytic occurs in a non-Jewish, pagan context. Instead of worshipping God for the miracle they had witnessed, the Gentiles worship Paul and Barnabas! They cry out, “The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!”

Now let’s pause here for a minute to make a few observations.

First, notice that Paul and Barnabas have turned the corner in regards to their view of the Gentiles. They understand that the Gospel is for all people…even the redneck mountain people
who are simple and uneducated. God loves them all, and God has sent these Christian missionaries to make Him known to the ends of the earth.

Notice also how a simple, uneducated crippled man from the Isaurian mountains can be so quickly moved by the truth of the Gospel that there arises within him a faith that is genuine and open. This has been the observation of Christian missionaries throughout the ages. The gospel speaks to the hearts of human beings because all human beings are spiritual in nature and longing to find their way back to their Creator. A lot of us as American Christians we are tempted to believe that average, ordinary people don’t care about spiritual realities, but that’s simply not true. All human beings were made in the image of God, they are spiritual by design, and the power of the Gospel is always relevant and impactful. Such is why the Word of God will either bring tears of repentance and faith, or it will create anger and hostility—as C.S. Lewis writes, “The only thing the Gospel cannot be is moderately important.”

Notice also how people will inevitably interpret the power of the gospel through their unique cultural, contextual lenses. In the case of the Lycaonians, they interpret this divine healing within the context of an ancient myth that was well known in that area. Just decades before Paul entered into Lystra, a local Roman poet named Ovid had penned a tale about Philemon and Baucis. According to the tale, the Roman gods Zeus and Hermes had appeared in the nearby town of Tyana disguised as ordinary men. They sought shelter from all the residents in town, but nobody would give them a room to sleep in or food to eat “so wicked were the people in that land.” Finally, the two gods in disguise showed up at the rustic cottage of Philemon and Baucis, a peasant couple who lived in the surrounding countryside. Philemon and Baucis welcomed the strangers into their home, gave them what little food they had to eat, and continued to fill up the their guests’ wine glasses until they realized that the pitcher of wine remained full. Upon realizing that their guests had supernatural powers, the old couple fell down on the ground and began to worship Zeus and Hermes, who immediately told them to run as fast as they could away from the city, because Zeus was going to destroy the city due to their inhospitable ways. Once they reached the top of the mountain, Philemon and Baucis turned around and to see that the city of Tyana had been destroyed by a flood. The moral of the story, of course, is that hospitality should always be provided for strangers because you never know when those strangers might just be the gods in disguise.

Now, does that story sound a bit familiar? Sure it does…we already know a much, much older story from the book of Genesis that tells of Lot and his family welcoming in the two angels of God who appear as ordinary men; and of course, God destroys the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah for their wickedness as Lot and his family are running away as directed by God’s angels. This notion of hospitality that comes from the ancient story of Sodom and Gomorrah is also reflected in Hebrews 13:2 which states, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.”
So…given the context of Ovid’s tale and the fact that the residents of Lystra are pagan Gentiles, when Paul heals the crippled man right in front of their eyes, the Lycaonians naturally interpret that supernatural sign as evidence that these ordinary men are actually gods. Because Barnabas was likely older and taller than Paul, they assume Barnabas is Zeus. And because Paul did all the talking, they assume he is Hermes. Luke reports that they all begin talking with great excitement in Lycaonian, and we should assume that Paul and Barnabas likely had no idea what they were saying until suddenly the priest from the temple of Zeus shows up with an ox covered in garland and they realize that the whole town is about to make a sacrifice to them because they think Paul and Barnabas are gods! For us, this scene is a bit comical and it reminds us of *The Gods Must Be Crazy* or *Star Wars* or *Ghostbusters* or other movies who borrow this moment for a bit of comic relief. But for Paul and Barnabas, the thought that these villagers would worship them as gods is horrifying! Look at vs. 14:

But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their garments and rushed out into the crowd, crying out, “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. In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. 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.”

In the Jewish world, people would tear their garments when they heard an utterance of blasphemy against God. You might recall that the Chief Priests tore their garments when Jesus spoke to them in Matthew 26, accusing Him of blasphemy. Here Paul and Barnabas tear their garments and refuse to accept the worship of the Lycaonians. They are quick to point out that they are not gods but simply ordinary men.

Paul will immediately try to teach his way out of this situation, but he now realizes that he must start from the beginning with the Lycaonians. He cannot yet proclaim Jesus as the incarnate Son of God because these people have no concept of GOD at all...they are like so many in the world who will quickly make a “god” out of any person, animal, or concept that impresses them with power or entertainment.

When it comes to these pagan villagers in Lystra, Paul must first appeal to what we might call “natural theology.” Paul will make his case that there is only one God, the One who is the Creator of heaven and earth and the sea and all that is in them. He will write later in Romans 1 For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world in the things that have been made. So they are without
excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

Don’t miss this: the observation that the universe and all of life comes from a good and powerful CREATOR is at the very heart of Christian theology and is a necessary starting point for our faith. Such is why the battle surrounding cosmology and the pseudo-scientific claim that life evolved randomly from impersonal beginnings over billions of years is such a big deal. If we hold to such a view, there is no place for God--only those things which we make into gods for our own purposes. If, however, we concede that life on earth and the nature of the cosmos is the product of Intelligent Design; that life on earth is purposeful and not random; that humans are personal and not impersonal…then we have no choice but to ask, “Who is this Personal Creator?” What can we know about the Designer? What is God’s intentions in creating the world?

That’s where Paul is attempting to go in his message to the Lycaonians. He will make his case that there is only one God, the Creator God, and even prior to the arrival of Jesus, that the one God who is there has left for Himself a witness to all the nations. That witness, says Paul, is the GOOD every human being experiences from God’s provision of rain, fruitful seasons, and the satisfaction that comes with food and times of gladness.

Paul’s argument here is actually a very powerful apologetic for the existence of God. In fact, it was precisely this witness of JOY…the inexplicable “goodness” that all of nature pointed to, which finally conquered the intellect of C. S. Lewis and led him to resign that God was most surely there. You can read more about the testimony of C.S. Lewis in his book, Surprised by Joy.

Now take a moment to think about this: if all that is comes from impersonal beginnings…if, as the materialists would have us believe, there is no design in living things but only the uncanny appearance of design…if everything is random and accidental…how then could we ever account for joy--or love, or times of gladness or satisfaction? How could we account for evil? In the end, there would be only blind necessity…a cold and meaningless world void of anything good or bad, right or wrong, loving or hateful, beautiful or harsh…there would be nothing but cruel, impersonal coincidence.

Paul says, “Nonsense. Every human being is without excuse. God’s majesty and nature has always been and will always be clearly revealed to every living human being. God’s goodness is poured out upon every human life in the day-to-day blessings of sunshine and rain, good food and the fellowship of friends. We all know God is there, and we are all accountable to Him.”
Unfortunately, Paul doesn’t get very far with his sermon because the Lycaonians are determined to interpret the power of God’s miraculous healing work within their predetermined frame of reference. Luke reports in vs. 18, “Even with these words they scarcely restrained the people from offering sacrifice to them.”

We’re going to stop here for today, but let me leave you with a few nuggets to think about before we go, and I’ll unpack them a bit more next Sunday.

First, we must always be aware that all of us are inclined to assimilate any information about God into a frame of reference that fits comfortably into our self-serving lifestyles and our religious presuppositions. In other words, we are all inclined to put God in a box such that God “fits” into the definitions we determine must be true about God, with only as much influence in our lives as we deem “helpful” toward our personal ambitions. In essence, we limit and define God instead allowing God to limit and define us.

Lloyd Ogilvie once wrote: When Jesus was born, there was no room at the inn. But today we not only have room in our inn, but a penthouse suite away from reality. Jesus is a V.I.P. to be honored but not believed or followed. In America, he is a custom but not the true Christ; a captured hero of a casual civil religion, but not the Lord of our lives.

Listen: we cannot make God into what we want Him to be. We cannot sequester Jesus to some safe and generally isolated room in our basement. We cannot add Jesus to our collection of self-help books and resources. Every time we try to force Jesus to fit into our religious and social presuppositions, we are engaging in idolatry.

We’ll see this tendency in a few weeks when we consider the triumphal entry on Palm Sunday. The adoring crowds who welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem knew exactly how they wanted their Messiah to behave. But when Jesus began speaking of his coming death…when Jesus refused to raise a sword and spark the revolution against Rome…they turned on Him. That’s exactly what will happen with Paul next week.

Which brings me to my last point: people all over the world are still inclined to “exalt the messenger” instead of the Message. We want to make men and women, rather than God, our sense of security. And what happens then? What happens when we trade in God for a husband, or our children, or our position at work, or our good looks? What happens when we place our trust in a pastor instead of the Messiah he preaches about?

I can tell you what happens: disillusionment and stoning! Anytime we exalt people over God, those whom we exalt we will eventually destroy…just look at any Hollywood movie star, rock star, or sports icon. We will crucify them all.
Listen Christians, particularly those entrusted to lead and to teach: No matter how tempting it may be, those of us who represent Christ may never, ever, ever accept one ounce of God’s glory…not one ounce. All the glory belongs to God…all our allegiance is owed to our King, our Savior, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

Church…Jesus Christ is Lord. Allow Him to define YOU…surrender to His Lordship in your life…pledge your allegiance to Jesus and put nothing…and no one…above Him in your life. He alone is worthy of your worship. More to come next week.

Let’s pray.