

### THE BOOK OF ACTS

#### Lesson 32, chapters 14 and 15

Our study of Acts chapter 14 today puts us at the halfway point in our study of Acts, but it also essentially completes the contextual background for understanding what comes next in pivotal chapter 15. So we'll look at a few things closely today to make sure we have a good handle on that all-important context. Chapter 15 is usually described as the convening of the Jerusalem Council when Peter, Paul, and James meet with others of the Jerusalem leadership of The Way to expressly deal with the contentious and thorny issue of including gentiles into the movement. I don't think it was Luke's purpose, necessarily, to write Acts in such a way as to create a build-up into this decisive moment; but rather because his writings are divinely inspired, that is how it turned out in hindsight.

Let's waste no time and jump right in to this chapter by re-reading it in its entirety.

#### **RE-READ ACTS CHAPTER 14 all**

Barnabas and Paul are now in Iconium, having been forcefully ushered out of town from Pisidian Antioch. Following their usual pattern, they went immediately to the local synagogue and had a measure of success in persuading some members of the congregation (both Jews and gentile God-fearers) to believe in the Gospel message. However those Jews who rejected the message (the majority) went to local gentiles in hopes of gaining their support to increase the pressure against Paul and Barnabas so that they would leave.

It seems that as modern readers of this account we are always left in the lurch in trying to understand exactly what it was about Paul's message that caused such a fury among Jews and gentiles, generally everywhere he went. We discussed that a bit last time, but I want to bring it up again because it is important that as thinking human beings, and particularly as Believers, we contemplate the "why" behind the anger and violence that was leveled especially against Paul (but that others of the disciples suffered as well). The "why" of it plays a significant role in the outcome of the Jerusalem Council that follows in the next chapter. And I can assure you that the "why" wasn't merely one thing; and also that who exactly the upset parties were was largely dependent on whether those parties were Jews, or God-fearing gentiles, or pagan gentiles. That may sound like a lot for us to take on; but I think it is important because as followers of Messiah each one of us has been commissioned to spread the Gospel. We're not to leave it up to others. And as such, we need to realize that different people will respond differently to our message depending on their background, their current religion, their age, their ethnicity, and even the current politically correct societal mindset. In America about the only real danger we face in evangelizing our family or our community is to be shunned. But in other parts of the world, to evangelize brings the likelihood of being attacked and perhaps even killed.

So the first thing I ask myself is: why if these folks didn't like Paul's message didn't they just

walk away or tell him he's wrong or merely ignore him? First of all, the local pagan gentiles of the Roman Empire proudly held a religiously tolerant attitude. Our modern Interfaith movement would have loved them; they counted all religions, all gods, and all holy books as equally valid and worthwhile. But Jews seemed to the pagan gentiles as embodying the opposite of all their Roman values. The Jews showed no respect for the other religions and their many gods, and insisted that there was only one God in existence, and that was their own: the God of Israel. Everything about the Jews reeked of exclusivity; they had their own way of eating, their own special day of the week in which they refused to work; they didn't have home altars or make sacrifices; they didn't participate in the popular and customary national festivals to the gods, and they even had visible success in getting not just a few gentiles to abandon the mainstream religions and to join Judaism. The Diaspora Jewish community had learned how to balance the dual needs of operating peacefully within a gentile-dominated society and observing their Judaism. So for the pagan gentiles, Paul was a Jew who seemed quite radical and irritating. He represented the epitome of intolerance and contempt for anything other than what he believed in; and this hateful attitude threatened the local civil stability and peace of the ethnically diverse Roman Empire. So the solution was to silence him or drive him out of town.

For the gentile God-fearers, they had been taught by their Jewish teachers to obey and rely on **Halakhah**: Jewish Law. In some cities they were allowed to join in the local synagogue even without undergoing a circumcision and thereby becoming Jews, so they greatly valued this privilege and the accompanying relationship with the Jewish community. While younger people today might not realize it, it was only a few decades ago in America that a substantial part of one's identity depended upon where you attended Church. Thinking back to my youth, I cannot recall ever hearing of a person in whatever community I lived that was an atheist. In fact a person who claimed Christianity but didn't attend a Church was looked down upon with suspicion. And which Church you attended had much to say about your socio-economic status, and whether you were part of the in-crowd or operated on the fringes of local society. This same social dynamic applied to an ever greater extent in the Roman Empire in New Testament times. So God-fearing gentiles who abandoned their mainstream pagan religions and joined the Jews put their social status and relationships, especially with family and friends, at great risk; a gentile adopting the Jewish faith brought real and tangible costs along with it.

Now along comes this fellow, Paul, telling the synagogue congregation that at least some of their theology was wrong. Even more, while Paul said that the God-fearers didn't have to become Jews to be saved by Yeshua, the Circumcision faction among the Believers told them the exact opposite. Whichever way these God-fearer gentiles decided on the subject, and which way the Jews among their congregation felt the gentiles must choose to remain in fellowship with them, would have a great effect on their relationship with their Jewish friends as well as with their gentile friends. It was a Catch-22 for God-fearers; no matter which way they chose, there would be negative repercussions.

For the Jews, they too adhered to **Halakhah** (that fusion of Torah Law, Traditions and customs) but at a far higher level than the God-fearers. So Paul's message was difficult for the Jews to hear. The issue of the Messiah was hugely contentious; there was a regular stream of self-proclaimed Messiahs who came and went in those days. And very little about this Yeshua, who had lived so far away in the Galilee, measured up to what Jews were taught to believe a

Messiah would be and do. But without doubt the part of the Gospel message that turned so many Jews to violence against Paul and other followers of The Way was their insistence that this Yeshua was not only Messiah, He was God. This, to most Jews, was blasphemy and idolatry at an almost unimaginable level.

It is common today, especially in Israel and among the Orthodox, to characterize a Christian who evangelizes Jews as attempting to steal their souls. The Jews are quite serious about this accusation. Thus in Israel to even speak about Yeshua to a child under 18 years old is a serious crime for which you can be arrested and sentenced to prison. This would have been the same mindset that the majority of the Diaspora Jewish community would have had against Paul and the other evangelists: to their thinking if they accepted what was proposed about worshipping a deceased carpenter from Nazareth it would have destroyed their relationship with Yehoveh. And since blasphemy and idolatry were punishable by death according to the Law of Moses, it seemed perfectly justifiable to them to try to kill Paul. This was in no wise murder from their perspective; it was justice. In fact it was probably viewed as an act of mercy when Paul was merely beaten up and chased out of town and told never to return.

So whether pagan, God-fearer or Jew, the bottom-line issue against Paul and The Way was that the Gospel message was a radical message of invitation to blasphemy and an incitement for civil instability. So with that understanding let's continue with verse 3 of Acts 14.

What Paul and Barnabas did in response to the threats and the persecution was the opposite of what most of us might do today if faced with the same thing: they remained in Iconium and continued to preach the truth. In fact, they stayed for a long time and they didn't seek compromise; they spoke out boldly. But let's not overlook that what seemed to buy them time and attention was the miracles that accompanied what they preached. Miracles are generally used in the Bible as an affirmation of something; in this case, it was an affirmation of the truth of God's love for all the peoples of the earth that was at the core of what Paul and Barnabas were teaching. Even so the people of Iconium were divided towards their message. There is a subtle change here that shouldn't go unnoticed: we are told that the people of the CITY were divided about them; not that the people of the synagogue were divided. This means that Paul and Barnabas were no longer preaching in the synagogue but rather in various places in and around the city of Iconium. This also means that they were no longer preaching to gentile God-fearers who were already devoted to the God of Israel; they were now taking their message to pagans who were entirely ignorant of the Holy Scriptures.

However in time (we don't know how much time), the opposition grew fierce enough that there were plans made to do serious harm to Paul and Barnabas. They learned of the plans and left Iconium for the cities of Lystra and Derbe. This time there is no mention of going to a synagogue to preach; most likely because these two Roman towns had no synagogues. So as they are preaching to a mixed audience of Jews, God-fearers and pagans, they run across a local man who was crippled since birth. In a description of the account of the healing of this lame man by Paul, it sounds much like the one we heard about Peter's miraculous healing of a lame man earlier in Acts. There is little doubt in my mind that of the many miracles we are told that Paul brought about, Luke chose to report on this one exactly for the purpose of drawing a parallel between Paul's and Peter's ministries. Why? Because he was intent on

demonstrating an equality of mission, authority, devotion, ability, and faithfulness between Peter and Paul. Luke, the gentile God-fearer, had a vested interest in showing that the Apostle to the Jews, Peter, and the Apostle to the gentiles, Paul, were on the same level in God's eyes because Jewish Believers and gentile Believers had been placed by God onto the same level.

So when Paul sees that this gentile cripple in Lystra is believing what he hears Paul proclaiming about Yeshua, he has enough faith to obey Paul's order to stand.....for the first time in his life.....and indeed he is healed. The crowd went wild with enthusiasm. This crowd consisted mostly of Lystrans who spoke their own dialect, so when they began happily shouting Paul had no idea what they were saying. It turned out that these people thought that Paul and Barnabas were gods. Of course they would think that; we all interpret what we see and hear within the context of our own familiar culture, language, experiences and circumstances. They thought Barnabas was Zeus and Paul was Hermes. And this in itself is a great lesson on the difficulties of crossing cultural boundaries and languages; none more so than when dealing with our Bible. Paul and Barnabas meant one thing (that was meant within a Hebrew cultural context) but it was understood by the Lystran locals in their Lystran cultural context. This is what has happened within Christianity as we have a faith that is based entirely on a Hebrew cultural religion, but for centuries has been re-interpreted in a gentile cultural context. Here the Lystrans got it so wrong that while it produces a comical scene for us, Paul and Barnabas nearly had a nervous breakdown because of it.

I've often said that if our thoroughly Jewish Messiah Yeshua came back today and walked into a typical western Church, He would be astonished (and confused) by what He sees because much of it looks nothing like what He meant or intended. And this is because Christianity in general contends that historical and cultural context ought to play no role in interpreting the Holy Scriptures. This is why the Church rails at the notion of our faith coming from Hebrew roots. And it is why Seed of Abraham Torah Class exists; to try to recover at least some of what was intended even if we have no goal of re-establishing a Biblical-era culture.

The fact that we are told that the locals thought they were Zeus and Hermes is also interesting because these were gods from the Greek pantheon of gods. Their Roman equivalents were Jupiter and Mercury. Therefore Lystra was more allied with a Greek lifestyle than a Roman lifestyle. So the comedy continues as the local priest of the temple to Zeus comes running to greet his god (Paul), bringing with him animals to be sacrificed in his honor. When Paul and Barnabas finally figured out what was happening, they were horrified. They protested that not only were they not gods, they weren't divine men. Rather they are ordinary human beings just like all of those in the crowd.

That Paul's audience is pagan means he can't talk to them like he would to God-fearers. These pagans know nothing of the Prophets or the Law of Moses, so Paul speaks to them in terms of natural revelation. That is, it is self-evident that God exists because of all the good things He does for the peoples of the earth, like bringing rains that grow crops to provide them with food. Paul says that in past times the Lord overlooked these pagan lifestyles and allowed people to walk in their own ways. But that is changing.

The so-called 7 Noachide Laws are the perfect example of natural revelation for any human to

see and go by, regardless of whether they have the Torah to consult. However here in Acts 14:16, Paul is referring to this natural revelation in a very narrow sense. The previous verse says: **“turn from these worthless things to the living God who made heaven and earth and the sea and everything in them”**. In other words, for the moment Paul is only interested in establishing that the God of Israel is the Creator of all things. Thus the natural revelation of water that just falls from the sky on its own; and the miracle of food that spontaneously grows out of the soil provides sufficient proof that no people, anywhere, has any excuse for not acknowledging Yehoveh as the Creator God.

I want to pause for just a moment to make a comment about Paul and what he says in Acts and in his epistles. Whom he is talking to and what the setting is matters greatly. When he is talking with Jews, he speaks in one way because they have a Hebrew background that includes familiarity with the Prophets and the Law of Moses so he can explain and persuade using Scripture. However when he talks with gentiles, and especially if they are pagans, then he is going to use broad terms that aren't meant for us 2000 years later to tear apart and minutely examine the words. And especially those statements should not be used to formulate a Church doctrine. In other words depending on his audience Paul super-simplifies matters even using language that is general enough that pagans who know nothing of the Torah or the Prophets, and certainly nothing of the Patriarchs or the covenants or of redemption, can grasp the gist of it even if what they get is fairly limited. So here in Acts Paul is talking to people who are totally ignorant about the Hebrew faith. Unfortunately many would also have had their stereotypical views of Jews reinforced, and no doubt were quite insulted when Paul referred to their precious sacrificial offerings that they brought to Paul, and to their sacred ceremonies and the idols and the priests that were involved, as “worthless things”. Paul indeed spoke the truth; but it was said too severely. Paul's harsh mouth got him into trouble on numerous occasions.

The crowd backed off from making sacrifices to Paul (thinking he was Zeus) but then we hear of some of the unbelieving Jews from Pisidian Antioch and from Iconium who had opposed Paul in their home towns, coming to Lystra to foment trouble for him there. They incited the crowd in Lystra who no doubt was still stewing over having been told that their cherished religious system and icons were worthless. They stoned Paul and he apparently went unconscious as he was pelted. Everyone thought he was dead, but he survived it and the next day we are told he went right back into Lystra. Even so it must have been just to make a point that he wasn't going to be intimidated as he and Barnabas left the following day for Derbe.

We are told that he proclaimed the Good News “in that city”. This implies that Derbe also did not have a synagogue and so he preached to the townspeople in the city streets. We know nothing more of what went on there except that some of the residents became Believers. After that he retraced his journey, going back the way he came, and stopped to visit the Believers he had made in Lystra, Iconium and Antioch. The stated purpose was to strengthen them. No doubt this was needed after seeing their leader, Paul, beaten and driven out, and this would have made them fearful. Throughout the New Testament we see much suffering and tribulation placed upon new Believers such that it was fairly normal for Believers of this era to be treated roughly. Thus Paul tells them that it is through many hardships that we must enter into the Kingdom of God. How at odds this is with so much preaching in modern times that seems to



imply that if we come to Christ we can expect a happy path, our lives made free from disease and troubles, from here forward. Understanding that accepting Messiah could cause us more trouble than before we came to faith rather changes our purpose for seeking salvation from being self-focused to being God-focused; from wanting our problems to be solved and living a comfortable life, to being ready to serve Our Lord no matter how uncomfortable that service might be, or what the cost to us is.

But since Paul and Barnabas knew they would be moving on, it was necessary to institute a proper structure within each Believing group so that it could function as a community of Believers in their absence. So Paul and Barnabas chose certain men to be the elders (the leaders) and anointed them with prayer. Then they left for Pamphylia. In the province of Pamphylia they spoke in the city of Perga. From there they went to the seaport of Attalia (still in Pamphylia). They arranged passage on a ship that took them back to Syrian Antioch, where their missionary journey had first begun. Upon arrival they reported all that had happened to the Believers of the Antioch synagogue, and that they had successfully evangelized many gentiles. They stayed on at Antioch for some undetermined amount of time, no doubt to rest and recuperate and for themselves to be strengthened.

Please note that Paul's center of activities was the synagogue of Antioch on the Orontes, just as Peter's center of activity was Jerusalem in the Holy Land. The leadership of The Way resided in Jerusalem, with James being the supreme leader. So it was the Diaspora Jews and God-fearing gentiles who were funding Paul's mission to the gentiles. So let me say that another way: there were 2 headquarters of evangelism in this era: Orontes Antioch and Jerusalem. And, as you can imagine, those Believers who were James and Peter-led didn't see eye to eye with those Believers who were Paul-led on every issue. This is another key piece of the puzzle to grasp as we now enter Acts chapter 15.

### **READ ACTS CHAPTER 15 all**

Paul and Barnabas are still in Antioch on the Orontes when some Jews showed up uninvited and began to teach that a gentile who wanted to trust in Yeshua for salvation had to be circumcised. That is, these gentiles had to convert and become Jews. Please note that these were Believing Jews who came from Judah who formed the Circumcision faction. Those Jews from Judah were under the influence of the Jerusalem leadership of The Way, and so here we see an example of the conflicting viewpoints between the Jewish Believers of the Holy Land versus the Jewish Believers of the Diaspora.

Before we embark on a nearly word by word study of Acts Chapter 15, I think it is good to balance it with a very brief report from Paul about his perspective on the Jerusalem Council (which is the central event of Acts 15), as he tells it in Galatians chapter 2. Remember: what we get in Acts is Luke's perspective on what occurred, and he was not an eyewitness. Rather he gathered credible reports from a number of sources after the fact (apparently quite soon after the fact). But in Galatians we are hearing from one of the participants in the Jerusalem Council, Paul, and he gives us his personal viewpoint on what occurred.

### **READ GALATIANS 2:1 – 10**

Paul explained that the Jerusalem Council meeting was a leaders-only meeting. And he emphasizes that it was convened in private. There is a reason when privacy is a large concern and Paul was very concerned about all the work he had done with the gentiles from the perspective that if the official leadership of The Way didn't sanction it and give their blessing to it, then it was all for nothing. There is no hint of what he might have done if he hadn't received the favor of the leadership. But as we have gotten to know Paul, and learn about his iron will, and fearless self-confident sense of being right, one wonders if he would have submitted or might he have rebelled, gone his own way, and formed his own separate faction of Believers. Thankfully things turned out well and we'll never know.

But the bottom line is that Paul knew from being a Pharisee who resided in Jerusalem, and knowing the ultra-pious and rigid doctrinal stances that Jerusalem Jews often took on religious matters, that there was a real danger of a split. So in obedience to a revelation (that told him to go to the leadership in Jerusalem) he went with some anxiety.

We find out in Galatians that young Titus accompanied Paul to Jerusalem and the Jerusalem leadership did not force Titus into having a circumcision to remain a member of the group. Remember: ALL the leadership of The Way were Jews, and Titus was a gentile. This decision to not require circumcision for Titus was no doubt a huge relief for Paul, because it told him most of what he needed to know: the leadership of The Way was not supportive of the Circumcision faction's insistence that Believing gentiles essentially had to be made into Believing Jews. In fact Paul claims that those who came to Antioch insisting on circumcision for the new gentile Believers were "pretenders". This is a term that we'll see Paul use in a few of his epistles and we need to be cautious about how we take it. That is, Paul sees those who disagree with his theology too much as not sufficiently genuine in their Messianic faith to be counted as a Believer. It is very difficult to ascertain if Paul means it in the extreme sense that they literally were not, and never were, actual Believers but rather they intentionally masqueraded as Believers in order to infiltrate and do harm. Or, from Paul's perspective, perhaps a "pretender" was someone who sincerely saw themselves as a Believer in Yeshua, but was sincerely wrong. That is what these so-called "pretenders" believed was too off base from the correct doctrine to rightly consider them as legitimate Believers. And when I weight it all out, it is my opinion that this is more what he means. That is for Paul a "pretender" is kind of a negative epithet thrown at professing Believers (particularly professing Jewish Believers) who don't measure up to Paul's standard of belief in order to qualify as true Believers in his eyes.

And we see in Galatians that Paul had mixed feelings about the leadership in Jerusalem. In his mind (and again, Paul came from a strict Pharisee background) some of these leaders sure didn't look like the kind of leaders he was used to submitting to. But as he says, "they added nothing to me". In other words, they didn't put any rules or burdens upon him (something he no doubt feared could have been the result).

Rather, the super organized Paul describes the results of the Council as confirming his place as the primary emissary to the gentiles and Peter's place as the primary emissary to the Jews. This was a two-edged sword. That is, organizationally it made Peter and Paul co-equals, with Peter in charge of one task, and Paul in charge of another. On the other hand it shows a

definite division had developed and so Peter and Paul would naturally be compared and contrasted to one another in every imaginable way: authority, intelligence, rate of success, etc. This goes back to my statement that in Chapter 14 of Acts, as Luke tells us about Paul's healing of the lame man in Lystra, that the purpose of reporting on this particular miracle (out of the many more that were not reported on), it was to help establish Peter and Paul as equals, with one having no more influence than the other.

It is fascinating to me that in the gentile Western Church Paul's preeminence became the norm. And why is that? It is obvious: Paul's mission was to the gentiles while Peter's mission was to the Jews. And the Church didn't like Jews. Paul's statements have become the basis for the bulk of Church doctrine, while Peter is left to be a more likable and impulsive fellow who Jesus loved and trusted, but little more. Of course Peter is also considered as the founder of the Catholic Church. This is also no doubt why very early on in Christianity, as the Church Father John Chrysostom testifies to in his commentary on Acts, the Book of Acts was barely known within the Church. That is, the Church had elevated Paul's thoughts generally above any others' thoughts in the Bible. But the Book of Acts makes Peter to be equal to Paul. Something had to give.

Next week we'll begin in earnest to dissect Acts chapter 15.