

## Acts 14v1-7 Great Expectations

### Intro

When I was in primary school, one of my favourite half-term and school holiday trips was to the Sealife centre in Brighton where I grew up, and of course, the best thing about the Sealife centre was the sharks. You'd walk up some stairs and see them in a big tank, swimming about, and then, you could go down again and walk through a glass tunnel *in the actual shark tank* and you could see them above you through the tunnel. It was amazing, I loved it!

Then at one point, we went to Belgium, and we took the Eurotunnel. Can you imagine my disappointment when I discovered that the massive tunnel under the sea was in fact nothing like the tunnel at the Sealife centre? I had had wildly inaccurate expectations!

A bit of a silly story, but expectations are important, aren't they? We want to make sure we know what to expect in life. So I wonder what your expectations are for what's going to happen when you share the gospel, when you tell people the good news about Jesus?

Today we're looking at a brief passage, detailing what happens at the next stop on Paul & Barnabas's journey around the Mediterranean, and it gives us a good example of what we can expect when we share the gospel. It's not written as a handbook, Luke – the writer – doesn't say "Do everything exactly like they did", but it's a pretty good casebook. Here we can see what happens when Christians tell non-Christians about Jesus.

Maybe evangelism – telling people about Jesus – is something you've not really tried before, maybe you kind of keep your faith to yourself. What would happen if you went out there and shared this good news? Maybe you've tried and been disappointed – well let's look at this today and get a realistic picture. What should we expect when we tell people the good news of Jesus? Let's have a look at what happens when Paul and Barnabas do that, and I think we see four different things

### Belief (v1)

And the first one is belief, and that's in v1

Let's get our bearings, we're entering a place called Iconium, now known as Konya, in modern Turkey. And Paul and Barnabas have just left Antioch, to go here. Now, before I looked it up, I thought these places might have been next door to each other, sort of a Huntingdon-St Ives thing. Leave one place, go to the next one. But no, they're actually 100 miles apart, it's more of a Huntingdon-Sheffield sort of thing! They didn't have cars, or bikes, they may have had horses, or they may have walked, which would have taken them 31 hours! It's easy for us to forget the physical toll that these trips would have taken on Paul and his companions – they were so committed to sharing the gospel!

They've stuck to what they said in Antioch – they said "We now turn to the Gentiles" – so now they're not just preaching to Jews – "A great number of Jews and Greeks believed", they're reaching Gentiles too.

Let's not miss how amazing this is – they preach the gospel, and people believe. Sharing the gospel is effective, it's not just something God wants us to do as a fun little exercise, it really does bring people to faith. God works through our witness.

But also, it matters how they spoke. "They spoke so effectively". Now, that doesn't mean that Paul and Barnabas made people believe because the power was in their words. No, it's God who does the work, but he equips us to do it. It matters what we say, our words are important. If we love Jesus and want to present him to others, if we care about our witness and our role as his witnesses, we'll drink deeply of the good news in the Bible so the message of Christ rings out in our conversations. And we'll work hard to understand the world of our friends. What is it they're looking for? Forgiveness, belonging, a way to live, family, love? All those things are given to us in the gospel, and if we understand what it is people are looking for, that will help us speak so effectively that a great number believe.

But ultimately, it's the word of God that works by the Spirit of God. And he can work through any one of us. Are your expectations too low? Sometimes mine are. Sometimes I think that none of my friends are ever going to become Christians. But God can work through you! He really can! When you tell a friend that when you're struggling you try to pray. When you mention to a colleague that you know God forgives you even when you feel guilty. When you tell your non-Christian Dad what you've read in the Bible recently. God can work through you to bring people to faith. Expect belief.

### **Opposition (v2)**

But the next thing that happens is opposition. I used to believe that "If only everyone heard the good news, if only everyone saw the evidence, there'd be no question, everyone would believe it". Sadly that's just not true, as Paul and Barnabas found out first-hand. And who rejects them? It's the Jews! The people of Paul and Barnabas's own culture!

I think that's interesting. They're not bringing in Jerusalem culture to Turkey. And they're not bringing in Judaism. It's the Jews who reject them. Later on the divide is described as "Jews or apostles" – they're not just the Jews, they're the apostles – the sent ones, the messengers. It's not a new branch of Judaism, or Jewish culture – it's something new.

And I think we need to be careful that when we share the gospel we're not just trying to make people like us. "Give up smoking, wear chinos, listen to this type of music, don't get tattoos" We'd love to be a church of all different sorts of people, who all love Jesus. We don't want to force people to be like us.

Paul and Barnabas could have tagged Jesus on to Jewish culture and gone to bring culture to the Gentiles. We could tag Jesus onto our own culture, for me that would be white, middle-class culture. But the gospel is bigger than that, the gospel smashes cultural boundaries – it's for everyone! And that brings opposition – because it's radical! And as Paul and Barnabas saw, some people will reject the radical, inclusive gospel.

### **Perseverance (v3)**

So... That brings us to the third thing in their trip to Iconium, and that's perseverance. I find verse 3 beautifully ironic! There's opposition in v2 "So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there" They could have given up! They could have gone – "Ok, they don't like us here, off home we go!" But no! They sit down, look at the opposition and say "Work to be done!" They stick around, supporting those who do believe, and challenging those who don't.

The world will try and make us give up on Jesus – people will try and make us stop talking about him – but we mustn't! Earlier in Acts, chapter 4v20 Peter says "As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard". Paul and Barnabas keep speaking boldly for the Lord.

Now we need wisdom to know what perseverance looks like in each situation we might find ourselves in. Maybe it means inviting a friend to an event even after they've said no to the last three. Maybe it means keeping bringing Jesus up in conversations even when it seems to go nowhere. There are times when we shouldn't push it, as Paul and Barnabas show later, but here is a clear example of persevering right in the face of opposition. People want them to stop sharing the gospel, and they stay, speaking boldly for the Lord. How can you speak boldly for him this week?

### **God at work (v3)**

And the fourth thing we see is God at work. "Speaking boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to perform signs and wonders". God doesn't just leave them to it! He gets involved! He gives them power to perform miracles, to show that the message they're preaching is true. It's almost as if it's God's stamp of approval, confirming this message.

Now here we might get a bit discouraged because I don't know about you, but I haven't performed any miracles lately. So is my presentation of the gospel a little bit less valid? Am I less spiritual than Paul and Barnabas?

Well Paul in his letters doesn't seem to think miracles are a big deal. He doesn't teach believers that they should all be performing miracles, instead he teaches them that they should be filled with the Spirit. So he obviously doesn't think that miracles are necessary. He in no place tells people to go and perform miracles – the gospel doesn't need these signs and wonders, they're an added extra in this situation, and in some others in Acts. But the message, the main thing, the key thing, is the message of God's grace. That's the message! That's what God is doing, he's not being flashy with signs and wonders as a substitute for the preaching – he's confirming it, helping people to receive the word of God's grace.

The message of God's grace – his undeserved love for sinners, shown at the cross when Jesus took all the punishment for the things we've done wrong so we can know him and spend eternity adopted into his family. If you haven't received this message, God's longing to confirm it to you too. If you have, then as you share it with others, remember God is at work. He may not enable you to perform signs and wonders, but he does care about people coming to know this message, and as you witness for Jesus, God is with you, working in people's hearts to help them receive the good news.

### **Belief (v4)**

So those are the four things Luke wants us to know about what happens in Paul and Barnabas's trip to Iconium, and in case we missed it, he basically goes round again. So in v4-5 again we see belief mixed with opposition. "The people of the city were divided, some sided with the Jews, others with the apostles". Let's start with belief. I don't really have anything more to say here. When Christians share the gospel, people believe! It really happens! It's been happening for nearly 2000 years and it will continue happening every day until Jesus comes back. All over the world, Jesus has witnesses going and telling people about him and his death for them. And when they do witness for him, people come to faith. There's belief.

And it's serious belief! The people of the city are divided – Iconium residents (Iconionians? Maybe) are so convinced of the truth of the gospel that they are set against their own countrymen. The word of God works. Expect belief!

### **Opposition (v4-5)**

But also, we should expect opposition. In v5 we get some more details, and the opposition is fiercer this time. "There was a plot afoot among both Gentiles and Jews, together with their leaders, to ill-treat them and stone them." This is danger of death. And later on these same people follow Paul and Barnabas to Lystra and they do manage to stone him there. They hate him and his message so much that they're not content to just chuck him out of the city, they want him dead.

And we get opposition in today's world as well! In 2015 a Czech man named Petr Jasek was imprisoned by the Sudanese authorities for his work supporting churches in the country. He was beaten, put in solitary confinement, moved about from prison to prison, all while refusing to give up the names of the local pastors who he'd been visiting, because he knew that would be a death sentence for them. People hate the gospel. People hate Jesus. And he knew this was the case. John 15v18 "If this world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first." and 16v33 "In this world, you will have trouble" Not may, but will. "But take heart! I have overcome the world!"

Newton's third law of motion: Every action has an equal and opposite reaction, you know that one. Well that's not true of sharing the gospel! Newton's third law of mission would be "Every action has an opposite, but not equal reaction". There will be opposition, but it will never match the power of the message.

Sharing the gospel will be hard. I don't know what kind of opposition you'll face. But there will be some. So expect it. Don't be surprised. Be prepared for it to be hard. But it's worth it. Because some people will believe.

### **Perseverance v6-7**

And then, in the last verses, 6-7, we get perseverance again. "But they found out about it" that is the stoning plot "and fled to the Lycaonian cities of Lystra and Derbe and to the surrounding country."

Sometimes, if someone really doesn't want to hear it, if someone's really standing up against the gospel, if they're opposing everything we try and say – it is biblical to stop pushing it. If your neighbour turns around and says "Stop talking about Jesus. Stop inviting me to church, or I'll throw eggs at your car." It's probably wise to leave that conversation!

And it can be less extreme than that. Graham Daniels who came to preach for us at a guest service back in March always said "Just be normal". If your mate says, "Hey sorry Matt, this Jesus stuff, it's not for me, I'd rather you kept it to yourself" don't push it, just say "Ok, that's a shame, but I understand. You been watching anything good on TV lately?" Just be normal! Keep praying for them, keep being their friend, who knows when an opportunity might come up. But perseverance doesn't mean stubbornness. It means knowing to keep going and where to keep going.

Notice what Paul and Barnabas do – they fled to Lystra and Derbe and to the surrounding country "WHERE THEY CONTINUED TO PREACH THE GOSPEL". They didn't run away, give up and go home. They found somewhere else to go, somewhere where other people would want to hear the gospel.

If a neighbour's hostile to the gospel, make friends with the person on the other side of the road! If a friend doesn't want to hear about it, see if you can meet some other people too, who knows – they may be desperate to hear the gospel! I'm not saying drop your friends if they're not interested, they're people not projects. But I think we often think of sharing the gospel as a tick-box exercise – "I'll try it with the people I already know, and if they're not interested, I'm off the hook." But Jesus has sent us into the world to tell everyone! Don't push it with those who aren't interested, but for the love of God (and I mean that literally) keep seeking out people who *are* interested!

Who can you talk to this week? Who of your friends can you share the gospel with? Or who of your acquaintances can you get to know a bit better, and maybe down the line invite them to church. Paul and Barnabas persevered in the face of opposition. At times that meant sticking it out, and at times it meant going somewhere else. But no matter what, they kept telling people the good news. And that's what we've got to do too.

### **God at work v21-22**

And finally, we see God at work. And for this we're going outside of our passage a little bit, sorry for the spoilers for two weeks time. But if we look at v21-22 We see what Paul and Barnabas do at the end of their trip "Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch". Here we go they're back in Iconium, and what are they doing? "strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith." The missionaries were forced out, there was violence in the city. The new converts had to deal with an aggressive mob, and they had to establish the church with no outside help, and yet, when the missionaries return to see how they're doing, there are disciples there.

Because that's the thing, they did have outside help – they had Jesus. What does he tell Simon Peter – "You are Peter and you will build my church"? No! "You are Peter and on

this rock *I* will build my church. People becoming Christians doesn't depend on us, it depends on Jesus, working by his Spirit. And he will always accomplish his purposes.

If you want to know some stories of God working even in his people's absence, I can't recommend Christian biographies enough. I've brought a few with me if you'd like to borrow some. They're well worth reading.

Don't lose heart when people seem to reject the gospel, or fall out of our lives. God can still work in their hearts to bring them to Christ, even when we're miles away, or never see them. It's God who works, and we should expect that! Even when we feel like we might have done a rubbish job in pointing people to Jesus, God can work! Even when we feel like there's no hope of someone ever coming to faith. God can work! So trust him!

As we go out as witnesses to Jesus – this is what we should expect!

Expect belief, expect opposition, expect to persevere, and expect God to work.

There's one thing that we know we won't be able to do in heaven, and that's evangelism – telling people about Jesus. As our last song says "We must tell of his salvation while we wait, for the day when Jesus comes will be too late."

We're going to have a time of prayer now. We're going to try praying in the Korean style together. Not the Korean language, but basically we'll all pray at once – pray for anything that's struck you from today's passage, and for anything else on your heart – maybe something personal, national, or global. Then in a minute or so I'll close by praying for Genr8, our mission partners.

It might feel weird, but give it a go – shall we give it a try?