



Central Peninsula Church

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When God Leaves Fingerprints

SERIES: *Acts: The Rest of the Story*

From time to time over the years I've enjoyed watching the TV show *C.S.I.* There is one that takes place in Las Vegas and one in Miami. I always love the part when the *C.S.I.* team shows up at a crime scene because it amazes me what they see and what they find. Of course they always brush for fingerprints. They look for what they call physical evidence. They look for little drops of blood under a special light. They look for barely visible strands of hair; tiny threads of clothing; shoe prints and things we would never think to look for. The idea is to find any shred of evidence that will tie a person to the crime scene.

I was thinking about that in relation to God. When God has been in a place, what will you find there? What kind of physical evidence does God leave when he's visited a scene? I've heard people say, "Well, this or that has God's fingerprints all over it." That sounds good, but what does that look like? How do you know he has been somewhere?

In chapter 14 of Acts, Luke describes the continuation and completion of the 1st missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas. They minister in three more cities—Iconium, Lystra and Derbe. We're going to briefly look at what happens in each city and we'll see that God shows up in each place in a significant way. Then we're going to ask the question, what kind of evidence did he leave there? We expect God to show up in our lives and in our church, but what kind of evidence can we trace back to him?

When we last left Paul and Barnabas they had been driven out of Pisidian Antioch. They headed southeast about 80 miles on a famous road constructed by Augustus in 6 BC. They would have traveled through rolling countryside, snowcapped peaks, and then they came to a beautiful plateau surrounded by forests where the city of Iconium was located. Today it's called Konya and is Turkey's fourth largest town. When Paul and Barnabas visited it, Iconium was culturally Greek. We pick up the story in Acts 14:1-7.

"In Iconium they entered the synagogue of the Jews together, and spoke in such a manner that a large number of people believed, both of Jews and of Greeks. But the Jews who disbelieved stirred up the minds of the Gentiles and embittered them against the brethren. Therefore they spent a long time there speaking boldly with reliance upon the Lord, who was testifying to the word of His grace, granting that signs and wonders be done by their hands. But the people of the city were divided; and some sided with the Jews, and some with the apostles. And when an attempt was made by both the Gentiles and the Jews with their rulers, to mistreat and to stone them, they became aware of it and fled to the cities of Lycaonia, Lystra and Derbe, and the surrounding region; and there they continued to preach the gospel."

I. A tale of three cities.

A. Paul and Barnabas minister in Iconium: As usual, Paul began in the synagogue. As we've seen before, as a visiting guest he was likely asked to comment on the Old Testament reading. Paul used that opportunity to preach the gospel and that had an immediate impact. Luke says that a large number believed.

But trouble soon followed, led by some Jews. Luke doesn't say they were unable to believe, but that they disbelieved. The word literally means, disobedient. It wasn't that they didn't get it but that they didn't want it. They begin to stir up hatred towards Paul and Barnabas through a campaign of slander. But that just motivated Paul and Barnabas to keep at it. They remained, probably for several months. God confirmed the Word with signs and wonders and many came to Christ.

But Luke also says that "the people of the city were divided." The gospel always divides. People are either for it or against it. Eventually, their enemies finally divide the town council and a decision is made to stone Paul and Barnabas. When they discover the plot, they decide to leave town. They're not afraid; but they're not stupid either, and so they wisely get out of there.

B. Paul and Barnabas minister in Lystra: They flee to a small town in Lycaonia, called Lystra. Some wonder why Paul chose this place because it was basically a small, podunk town. The people were uneducated. Many were illiterate. But this quiet backwater place was about to spring to life. Look what happens. **"At Lystra a man was sitting who had no strength in his feet, lame from his mother's womb, who had never walked. This man was listening to Paul as he spoke, who, when he had fixed his gaze on him and had seen that he had faith to be made well, said with a loud voice, 'Stand upright on your feet.' And he leaped up and began to walk"** (vv.8-10).

There weren't many Jews in Lystra, and no synagogue. So they begin preaching in the marketplace. And God shows up. Sitting there was a man who had been lame from birth. He listened intently as Paul spoke. Somehow Paul could see that he "had faith to be made well." There was a work of grace already going on in him. Paul says to the man, "Stand upright on your feet!" Though he's never walked, he obeys. He jumps up and starts walking. When the crowd sees this, they respond in a rather over the top way. **"When the crowds saw what Paul had done, they raised their voice, saying in the Lycaonian language, 'The gods have become like men and have come down to us.' And they began calling Barnabas, Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates, and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds"** (vv.11-13).

It's helpful to know some local background is here. The locals believed a legend, based on a poem written 50 years

earlier. One day, according to the legend, the supreme god Zeus and his son Hermes came to their hill country disguised as mortals, seeking lodging. Though they asked at a thousand homes, no one would take them in. Finally, a poor elderly couple welcomed them in and gave to them out of their poverty. Later the gods rewarded them, but destroyed the homes which would not take them in. These superstitious folks were determined not to make the same mistake again. When they saw the miracle, they shouted in their language that the gods had come back. They named Barnabas Zeus, since he looked dignified, and Paul, Hermes, because he was smaller and talked a lot. Paul and Barnabas didn't know what was happening at first, because they didn't understand the language. But when the priest began to sacrifice to them, they got the picture and were horrified. Look at their response. **"But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their robes and rushed out into the crowd, crying out and saying, 'Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of the same nature as you, and preach the gospel to you 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 the generations gone by He permitted all the nations to go their own ways; and yet He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.' Even saying these things, with difficulty they restrained the crowds from offering sacrifice to them"** (vv.14–18).

They tear their clothes to show their outrage and shout that they're mere mortals, like everyone else. Then Paul uses the situation to launch into a sermon. This is the only recorded address we have of him speaking to uneducated, illiterate pagans. It's a very interesting message which we will look at in more detail later. But again, the Jews oppose them. Look at vv.19-20. **"But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having won over the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead. But while the disciples stood around him, he got up and entered the city. The next day he went away with Barnabas to Derbe."**

This time they've traveled from Antioch, 110 miles away, and Iconium, 20 miles away. It seems pretty important to them to stamp out this work. The crowd is incited to riot. The stoning that was plotted in Iconium now takes place in Lystra. Paul was bruised, scarred and deeply wounded. These marks would be with him for the rest of his life. Those probably were the marks to which Paul is referring in Gal. 6:17, **"I bear on my body the brand-marks of Jesus."** He's dragged out of the city gates and left for the dogs to eat his carcass. As Paul's blood-soaked, broken body lay on the rubble, the new believers gather around him, weeping and lamenting. They, too, thought he was dead. But Luke says that Paul got up and walked right back into the city. That's amazing! Caked with blood and dirt, he must have been quite a sight and quite a witness to those new believers in Lystra!

C. Paul and Barnabas minister in Derbe and head home: The next day Paul walks 30 miles to the town of Derbe. That's even more amazing! The pain of being wounded and humiliated doesn't dampen his enthusiasm for the mission God had given him and they have a great time of ministry there. Luke writes:

"After they had preached the gospel to that city and had

made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, 'Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.' When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. They passed through Pisidia and came into Pamphylia. When they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia. From there they sailed to Antioch, from which they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had accomplished. When they had arrived and gathered the church together, they began to report all things that God had done with them and how He had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. And they spent a long time with the disciples" (vv.21–28).

The Lord blesses their efforts in Derbe with "many disciples." There is no mention of opposition. But then they decide to retrace their steps on their way home, passing through the three towns in which they had just ministered. On the return visit their concern is not evangelism, but the care and nurture of new believers. They taught them and prepared them for the tough road ahead. They appointed elders. And with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord.

So Paul and Barnabas headed home. This time they didn't bypass Perga, but preached the word there. From there they went on to Attalia, the port from which they sailed back to Antioch of Syria. There they gathered the whole church and gave a report on what God had done. What an exciting time that must have been! They'd been gone for about two years. The believers saw the scars on their bodies and heard the marvelous stories of changed lives. Notice how Luke puts it: they "reported all the things God had done with them and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles." I would say that God's fingerprints were all over that trip; God had been there and left some serious physical evidence in each of those three cities! Some of this evidence we've seen before in Acts; some of it shows up for the first time. What was it?

II. What do you see when God has been at work somewhere?

A. Lives are changed through the preaching of the gospel. The first thing we see is that once again lives are being changed through the preaching of the gospel. Several times in this passage, in each city, we read that Paul and Barnabas preached the gospel; that in Christ there is a way to receive from God all that we're looking for: cleansing, forgiveness, freedom from guilt, joy, and much more. And God opened up their hearts to believe and their lives were changed. I love how Luke puts it in v.21: **"After preaching the gospel to that city and making many disciples..."** That's what it means to become a Christian—to be a disciple (a follower, learner, apprentice) of Jesus.

This lame man is a great example (vv.8-10). He's a parable of the condition in which we live apart from Christ. Like this man, we're born spiritually crippled. We're born in sin, unable to walk as the kind of person God wants us to be. Sin paralyzes us. Deep down we know we're helpless but we have no idea what the cure is. But then someone comes along and shares the message about Jesus, the forgiveness of sin and the power of a new life.

Our heart is opened up and we believe. Notice that it was at this point that Paul saw his faith and said to him, "Stand up on your feet" and the man obeyed; he leaped up and began to walk. That's the way the Christian life always works. When it comes to change, God gives us the power but not much will happen until we begin to obey the Word. Faith isn't passive; it's active. It calls for a response on our part. Some of us are kept from seeing God at work in our lives because we keep waiting for God to make us walk in order for us to believe. No, he's already given us the faith, now we have to get up! Some of you are right at that place where you need to act; you need to obey.

Lives are changed through the preaching of the gospel. We've seen this before in Acts. But what's new in this story is how Paul adapts the message to his audience. What we see in vv.15-17 is very different from the sermon he delivered in the synagogue to educated Jews. Can you imagine Paul quoting to these pagans from the Old Testament? That wouldn't have made any sense at all to them. So he starts with something they could relate to—creation, rather than something they couldn't relate to—the Scriptures. He says that behind creation there is one living God, not a whole host of powerless pagan idols, and he invites them to turn from the vanity of their idolatrous worship to the living and true God.

He explains how God "permitted them to go their own ways." That's such a curious statement but it explains so much. It explains why there is so much evil and heartache in the world, because in his wisdom God allowed people to turn their backs on him and go their own way.

But then he says that even in that state he didn't leave them without a witness. They all continued to benefit from his kindness. He's shown his love by giving them rain for their crops, providing them with food, and satisfying their hearts. I love how he doesn't condemn them for enjoying life apart from God; he simply says, "Do you know who gave you all of this? Do you know who satisfies your hearts with good things? Do you know who is behind that? It's a loving God."

This is so helpful. We live in what many people call a "post Christian era." We have to think creatively about how to communicate the gospel to a generation of people who didn't grow up in church; who have never read the Bible. We have to find points of contact with them. It doesn't mean we change the message. It means we find ways to communicate the same message that are new and fresh and people can understand.

B. The gospel arouses misunderstanding and opposition: But even when we do that, we also see that the gospel arouses misunderstanding and opposition. That's the second bit of physical evidence that God leaves behind. There will always be people who oppose him. As we've seen before, sometimes that opposition erupts in violence. Paul is stoned and left for dead. But opposition can also be more subtle. In v.2 we saw that the Jews stirred up trouble by spreading rumors and gossip. Someone might have said, "Well, Paul and Barnabas are really just trying to get your money." It's interesting, during the first few hundred years of the early church there were two lies that were told about Christians that kept many people from considering Christianity. One was that they were cannibals. Where did they get that? From the Lord's Supper because supposedly Christians ate the body of Christ. The other was that they were involved in orgies because Christians had these kind of secret meetings called "love feasts." Of course neither of

those things were true; they were distortions of the truth. But we should expect this kind of thing. There have been lies told about this church; there have been lies told about me in an effort to discredit the gospel. I know of people in this body who have lost jobs for the same reason.

There is even one more form of opposition in this passage you may have missed. Opposition can also be disguised. In Lystra it's disguised as flattery. The people of Lystra want to see up Paul and Barnabas as gods (vv.11-13). The enemy probably thought, "If I can't bring them down with stones, I'll appeal to their ego." The flesh in Paul might have thought, "You know Barnabas, we could have a pretty good life here. You as Zeus and me as Hermes. Let's just set up shop here and start our own little religion."

When I read this I couldn't help but think of my last trip to Cambodia with Justin Buzzard. We were at a Cambodian Cultural Center where they had all kinds of live reenactments of their cultural history. We were sitting there in a crowd of several hundred people and the actors began to scan the crowd for someone to play the role of the ancient Fire King. Now Justin was the only blond-haired blue-eyed man there and he also was about a foot taller than anyone. So they chose him. They whisked him off to a tent and dressed him up and brought him out on a throne and began to worship him. Justin seemed to enjoy the whole thing! If I hadn't have saved him from all of this he might still be there with his own little cult!

C. God grants courage and strength to his servants

But, in whatever form the opposition comes, the third evidence we see of God in this story is that he grants courage and strength to his servants. Despite or even because of the slanders, Paul's campaign in Iconium, v.3 says they spent a long time there speaking boldly with reliance upon the Lord. That's what opposition does, it makes us more reliant on the Lord. And then in Lystra, after Paul is stoned and left for dead outside the gate he gets up and walks right back into the city (v.20). It's like, "I'm going to leave, I'm going to leave on my own terms." And then, to top it all off, after they have great success in Derbe they decide to retrace their steps, walking right back into the places they had been persecuted.

We wonder what we would do in similar circumstances. We wonder where do people get this kind of courage? Over and over again, Paul tells us in his letters. It was his confidence that through these sufferings the life of Jesus would be manifest. Listen to what he says in 2 Cor. 4:7-11. **"But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh."** Do you see what he says? These things that afflict us and perplex us and break us down are the very things that God uses to reveal the life of Jesus through us to others. How else could he do that? If everything went our way, how would God demonstrate his power? We're like a vial of perfume that needs to be broken in order for the fragrance to spread. In this case, it's the fragrance of Christ. So don't be surprised when

your efforts to follow Christ and share him with others get you in trouble. Don't automatically think that you've done something wrong. Whatever it is, let it cause you to rely more on him than yourself. That's where strength and courage is found.

D. Churches are established where disciples can mature: There is one more strand of evidence that God leaves in this story. In the last section, we saw how Paul and Barnabas retraced their steps and went back into those same cities and visited the folks who had become believers months earlier. Up until now the focus has been on making disciples (v.21). But now it's on maturing them in the faith. And in order for that to happen churches had to be established. Paul and Barnabas didn't want to just leave believers behind, they wanted to leave churches behind. Notice the three foundations upon which they established these churches where disciples could mature together.

First of all, there was instruction (v.22). That's what Luke means when he says they were **"strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, 'Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.'"** When it says "continue in the faith" it's talking about continuing in the truth of the gospel; not wavering from it. That's why we need teaching. You can't mature in the faith without regular exposure and intake of the word of God. That's one of the major reasons you come to church.

Second, there was the appointment of elders (v.23a). In each city Paul appointed elders. The word "elders" here is the Greek word *episkope* which means overseers. These elders were basically the pastor-teachers of the church. Notice that these elders were appointed by Paul and Barnabas from within. They didn't bring in someone from outside the church; they appointed men from within. Notice also that there was more than one in each place. It appears there was no such thing as a Senior Pastor. Instead, there were several men called to lead the congregation and the Senior Pastor was Jesus.

The third foundation is that in each place they entrusted them into God's care and left (v.23b). They did this because they trusted God to look after his own people through the Holy Spirit who was present there. They trusted that from within that little congregation would come a powerful expression of the gospel that would impact the whole city. They didn't stay and micromanage things; they entrusted them to God.

But here is the deal: if you were one of those people who came to Christ the first time Paul passed through, you would also be one of those people who became a part of the church. And when I say "church" I don't mean a building, I mean a congregation of believing people who gather together wherever for teaching, worship, prayer, fellowship and the Lord's Supper. There was no such thing as church-less Christians. We have those today. That's a modern day deal. We talk to people, "Oh, yeah, I'm a Christian but I just don't like organized religion. I'm not really into church. I'm into Jesus but not church." Let me tell you, that just doesn't fly. Jesus said, "I will build my...CHURCH!" The church is where you get taught and fed. The church is where you get shepherded by overseers. The church is where you rub shoulders with other members of the body who support you and rebuke you and balance you out. You say, "Well, that's the problem. It's all those people. There are so

many hypocrites in the church." Well, look in the mirror. I know that I'm preaching to the choir here but if you're one of those church-less Christians, find a fellowship of believers and commit yourself to them.

CONCLUSION

When God leaves physical evidence behind, he leaves transformed lives through the preaching of the gospel, he arouses misunderstanding and opposition, he gives strength and courage to his servants, and he leaves churches where believers can not only be made but where they can mature.

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