

Theme: As You Are Going: The Church on Mission

Message: Opportunities & Obstacles

Aim: See again the pattern of opportunities & accompanying obstacles.

Intro: We've already seen it but there's a definite pattern in the book of Acts, woven throughout. We see the movement of God the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, giving opportunity for Peter to preach, & 1000's came to faith in Christ. We see the healing of the lame man outside the temple gate, again giving opportunity for Peter to preach, & still more came to faith. However, we begin to see another part of the pattern – obstacles/opposition to the gospel/disciples. The Jewish religious authorities sought to contain the movement of Christianity & arrested Peter & John & on another occasion all the apostles, but had to let them go, given wise counsel. Then there were obstacles w/in the Church, w/the deception of Ananias & Saphirra; then the division in the Church w/the accusation that the Hellenists widows were being overlooked. That led to the appointing of the 7 deacons, of whom Stephen & Philip were 2. Stephen was so adept at apologetics for the faith that those he confounded w/his wisdom decided to accuse him of blasphemy & stone him to death. That gave rise to persecution & a scattering of the disciples, giving more opportunity to preach the gospel in Judea & Samaria, as Christ had instructed. Saul/Paul was converted on the road to Damascus & called by God to be the apostle to the Gentiles, but then he had to escape from Damascus as others sought to kill him. Peter had opportunity to preach the gospel to Gentiles in Cornelius' house, but he had to explain himself to Jewish believers in Jerusalem. Some time later, James the apostle was killed by Herod & Peter was arrested w/a like fate in mind. But God rescued Peter & his work continued on. The church at Antioch was raised up & being led by the Holy Spirit they sent out Barnabas & Saul to go to the Gentiles. Paul's 1st missionary journey begins in Acts 13, which Pastor Derek led us thru last week. They were opposed by Jewish leaders in Pisidian Antioch, & Paul announced that they were going to concentrate on the Gentiles in that area, which they did. Everywhere the apostles/disciples went w/the gospel, they found great opportunities but also great opposition/obstacles in their way. The good news is that the gospel couldn't be stopped, tho it wasn't for not

trying. God will not lose! We'll see that pattern continue in today's text & throughout the book of Acts: opportunities & obstacles. We'll see in our text different tactics/strategies by Satan, which he still uses today. As Pastor Derek did last week, we'll be better served if we read a section at a time. Acts 14:1-7 [READ]. I) **Poisoned Influence**. Immediately we read that as Paul & Barnabas spoke in the Jewish synagogue in Iconium that they "spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews & Greeks believed." God the Holy Spirit moved as they spoke, stirring the hearts of Jew & Gentile alike & many believed. What a marvelous opportunity! But also immediately, unbelieving Jews "stirred up the Gentiles & poisoned their minds against the brothers." They didn't believe & didn't want others to believe either. The word "poisoned" means embittered. They somehow stirred up others to angrily oppose Paul & Barnabas. They weren't satisfied w/not believing themselves. They wanted Gentiles, whom they disliked, to not believe & to rail against Paul & Barnabas. This certainly happens today all over the world. There are people who so hate the Church that they don't want to see it succeed. They hate the gospel & don't want it to be shared w/those who may believe. But who/what's being hurt by the gospel being preached? Note that Luke wrote that they "poisoned their minds against the brothers." They personally attacked Paul & Barnabas before the Gentiles, disparaged them, tho they didn't really know them. They probably falsely accused them of being blasphemers & heretics & smeared their character. We all know that all one who opposes you has to do is make an accusation or twist the truth against you & it's out there for people to believe or not. Not to discourage you, but that may happen to you as well, as you share the gospel. It's simply a tactic of Satan trying to stop you. We should follow Paul & Barnabas' example. They remained in Iconium "a long time," continuing to preach the gospel & teach the truth of God. God "bore witness to the word of His grace" & gave signs & wonders – miracles of healing & deliverance. A church was established; but the "people of the city were divided." Some took the side of the opposing Jews – "We need to get rid of these trouble makers." Others sided w/the apostles – "Look at how lives have been changed! They're doing good, not hurting anyone." It got to the point

that those who opposed wanted to stone Paul & Barnabas, so when they heard of it, they decided to leave Iconium & go to Lystra & Derbe & the surrounding country. But they did not stop preaching the gospel! They would look for more opportunities. Acts 14:8-18 [READ] II) **Misplaced Accolades**. It seems that almost immediately after arriving in Lystra, tho it may not have been right away, they encountered a man crippled from birth who had never walked. This was definitely a Holy Spirit directed encounter because as the man listened to Paul speak – certainly sharing the gospel – Paul sensed in his spirit that the man “had faith to be made well.” Paul said to him, “Stand upright on your feet” – the same feet crippled all his life. W/out hesitation, the man “sprang up & began walking!” What a wonderful miracle & display of God’s saving power. That phrase “made well” means to be saved, whether from physical ailment or from the judgment of God, which we all deserve. It was more than physical healing for this man. The crowd, rightly amazed by this, began to say, “The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!” They called Barnabas Zeus, who was considered “the national god of the Greeks, corresponding w/the Roman god Jupiter.” Paul, because he was doing most of the talking, they called Hermes, who was considered “the herald of the gods,” a Greek god corresponding w/the Roman god Mercury. The priest of Zeus brought oxen & garlands & was prepared to offer sacrifices to Paul & Barnabas, who didn’t seem to realize what was going on at first, since the crowd was speaking in Lycaonian. When they realized what was happening, they were astonished & appalled. Now, the temptation clearly was to receive the worship of the people for themselves, to revel in the praise & adoration of the crowd. That remains a strategy of Satan against the spread of the gospel even today. If he can get people thinking more highly of you than of the Christ you serve & wanting to be followers of you more than of Christ, he has won. We see it happening all the time w/televangelists, Christian artists/authors, but it can happen on a smaller scale w/us, the focus being put on us more than on Christ & the gospel. It’s good to be thought well of, to be considered spiritual heroes, but when it becomes person centered instead of Christ centered, that is misplaced. We’ve a story to tell, pointing to Jesus, who alone can save. Paul & Barnabas actually used the opportunity to preach

the gospel. “We’re just men like you, & we have good news to share. We urge you to turn from these vain things to the living God, the one true God, our creator & provider. VS18 – *“Even w/these words they scarcely restrained the people from offering sacrifice to them.”* Acts 14:19-23 [READ]. III) **Physical Attack**. Those Jews from Antioch & Iconium really wanted to stop the gospel & those who shared it. They came to Lystra & persuaded the crowds (the same crowds who marveled at the miracle of healing & even wanted to worship Paul & Barnabas) against Paul & Barnabas. They persuaded them to stone Paul, presumably because he was the main spokesman. When I was in Israel, in a Palestinian area, some boys saw us go by & gather to talk about the site. We were behind a natural barrier so we couldn’t see them, but all of a sudden, a rock came over the barrier & hit one of our group in the head. It cut him & he wore a bandage for days. To stone someone is to pelt them w/large rocks – stones. To be hit once would be bad enough, but to have the stones hit one after another, hitting the head, breaking bones, knocking one down & continuing to strike, it would easily kill someone. They stoned Paul & then dragged him out of the city, thinking he was dead. Barnabas & other disciples probably fled, wisely. After his attackers left Paul for dead, the disciples gathered about him, surely praying for him. He “rose up & entered the city” then left the next day for Derbe. It is against the law in some countries to preach the gospel or to gain converts to Christianity. 1000’s have died for their faith – arrested, imprisoned, put to death. That doesn’t happen in North America, tho it may someday. But note what Paul & Barnabas did. They preached the gospel in Derbe & “made many disciples...Then they returned to Lystra, where Paul was stoned, & to Iconium & Antioch, where those Jews who opposed them were from. They encouraged them “to continue in the faith” even tho it was “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.” Paul especially knew tribulation – stoning, imprisonment, disparagement, etc. What they were saying is “it’s not an easy road, but it’s worth it.” Eternity is in the balance. Eternity is in the balance for those around us as well, who need to hear the gospel & know there is a Savior. Let us be a church on mission,

taking the opportunities God gives us to share the gospel, in spite of opposition/obstacles. Jesus saves!