

Acts Series Part 39

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Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 00] Well, let's turn to the New Testament, to the book of Acts and chapter 14. Acts and chapter 14, we're going to continue shadowing, as it were, Paul and Barnabas on this missionary journey that they were embarked on, were sent on by the church at Antioch.

As we have just heard, vividly illustrated in the story of Huliang, the gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.

In the gospel, there is an inexhaustible power to transform lives, lives like that of Huliang, and indeed lives like those gathered here, you and me.

Power to redeem the lost, to make whole the broken. In the face of the gospel's power, there is no one too far gone, no impossible cases, no wound too deep or heart too hard.

And as we turn to God's word this evening, we will be reminded that this is indeed so. And let's read in Acts chapter 14, verses 8 to 10, just three verses.

[1 : 32] Acts 14, verses 8 to 10. We read as follows. In Lystra, there sat a man crippled in his feet who was lame from birth and had never walked.

He listened to Paul as he was speaking. Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed, and called out, stand up on your feet.

At that, the man jumped up and began to walk. The word of God. As we rejoin Paul and Barnabas on this missionary journey, on this church planting tour that they are on through Asia Minor, they arrive in Lystra.

And just to refresh our memories, or if perhaps we haven't been able to be here for the previous occasions that we've been considering this journey, they began in their home congregation of Antioch.

They went to Cyprus, were involved in ministry there, and then crossed over to Asia Minor, to Pisidian Antioch, a different Antioch in what is modern-day Turkey.

[2 : 49] They were run out of Pisidian Antioch. Their lives were in danger. They had to flee, and they moved within the province of Galatia to Iconium. There they announced the good news, and once again, the response was a similar one.

There were those who believed, but there were those who were opposed, indeed violently opposed, and they were run out of Iconium. And having been run out of Iconium, they travel a relatively short distance, some 20 miles southwest of Iconium to Lystra.

And it is there that we rejoin them on their journey. What do we know about Lystra and its attractions? Well, we know very little.

It would seem that it was not a particularly significant town, even in its own day. Not many would have known much about it then, far less, 2,000 years later.

But one thing we do know, a fact unlikely to have appeared in any tourist brochure of the Galatian tourist board.

[3 : 58] And the one thing that we do know is that in Lystra there sat a man crippled in his feet. That we do know about this town.

And Paul and Barnabas arrive in Lystra, and in God's perfect providence, they are drawn not to the home of a prominent citizen, but to the feet, the crippled feet, of this man.

This man, nameless, or at least his name not known by us, not thought worthy to record, nameless yet pivotal in God's purposes of establishing a church of Jesus Christ in Lystra.

In Lystra, in Lystra, there sat a man crippled in his feet. His destiny was to be transformed.

His person, his body was to be transformed. He was to be healed. He was to be restored. And I am sure, though we are not explicitly given this confirmation as it were, but I am sure that these words that we use of this man, transformed, healed, restored, can be given the fullest meaning.

[5 : 29] This man was to be transformed by the power of the gospel, the power of God, the author of the good news.

But he was to be transformed by the ministry of one who himself had been transformed by Jesus, by the ministry of Paul.

Paul was to be the means, the instrument God was to use, that this man would hear of Jesus, would be touched by Jesus, would be transformed by Jesus.

Paul was God's instrument in the transformation of this man, this man who sat crippled in his feet. Paul was the one who would speak to this man about Jesus. And before we consider the manner in which God uses Paul, let us be very clear of this.

[6 : 29] And I address you, Christian friend, be assured that you are God's instrument to speak. Who will you speak to?

In Lystra there sat a man crippled in his feet. Well, in Aberdeen there are many men, many women, many boys and many girls with needs perhaps different, but just as desperate as this man.

But what can we learn from the manner in which Paul relates to this man? Indeed, how he relates with the community that the man forms a part of.

And I think we can notice, or certainly I'm going to suggest, that we can notice four features of the manner in which Paul relates to this man.

The four features that I'm going to develop briefly are the following. First of all, we will notice Paul's compassion. But then we will look and notice Paul's conviction.

[7 : 34] We will move on and notice the manner in which Paul establishes a connection with this man. And then finally, notice Paul's confidence.

His confidence in the message that he brings. His confidence in the power of the gospel that he brings. So let's consider each of these in turn.

First of all, compassion. In Lystra, there sat a man crippled in his feet, who was lame from birth and had never walked.

The man's situation was a desperate one. And Luke deliberately and pointedly stresses his pitiful state.

The language he uses is a language that would appear to be overly descriptive. He goes beyond what we would need to know. If Luke had said, In Lystra, there sat a man who was lame from birth.

[8 : 39] We would know all that we need to know. We would know that he had never walked. We would know that he was crippled in his feet. These things we would know. Simply by being told that he was lame from birth.

And yet Luke deliberately describes him in this way. Time and again in three different ways to emphasize how desperate and how difficult was his situation.

There was nothing that this man could do for himself. There was no way he could heal himself. That is so blindingly obvious. But there was nothing that could be done for him.

Whether attempts had been made or whether his condition was such that it was hopeless to even attempt to help him, we don't know. It seems likely that there was no point in trying to help him, for there was no help for him.

Such was his condition. He was hopeless and he was helpless. I wonder what he was doing there in the square or in the market or in one of the main thoroughfares of Lystra where no doubt Paul would have directed himself in order to share the good news of the gospel.

[10 : 00] Why was he not in his own home with his family, given his condition? Well, it seems reasonable to speculate that he may have been a beggar. His very condition perhaps would have forced him into this life.

And so there he was where the people were, where the crowds were, in the hope of a few coins, a few coppers to see him through another day.

Did he have any expectation of a better life? Did he have any residual hope of a possible healing? Did he even consider the possibility that he was one who could be transformed? I doubt he had any of these things.

There was no hope. There was no better future. There wasn't some good news just around the corner. His destiny was to suffer as he had always suffered day in, day out, until his suffering was relieved by his own death.

[11 : 11] This is what awaited him in the months and perhaps years of life that remained. But again, as we would look to our own city and we would consider our own day, are there not many in

this city this very night who are hopeless and helpless?

Many who are the product of a broken home, perhaps have been guilty of contributing to the breaking of their own home. Many who, as we have heard of the young folk there in Medellin, who have been abused by those in whom they had put their trust, those most responsible for caring for them, and yet they have been abused by them in many sad and terrible ways.

How many in our city this evening in the grip of addictions of one kind or another, be they chemical addictions or be they addictions to material things, to success?

How many in our city tonight who are lonely and friendless, and for whom all hope is gone? Well, in Lystra, there sat a man crippled in his feet who was lame from birth and had never walked.

And Paul had compassion on him. And I am sure Barnabas also. But our focus this evening is on Paul.

[12 : 48] Paul is moved to compassion. He wants to help this man. Not only does he want to help this man, he will help this man. He will not leave this place. He will not move on from Lystra without this man being helped, without this man being transformed.

Did he immediately approach him and speak directly to him? Well, we read in verse 9 that this man listened to Paul as he was speaking.

And then the verse continues. Paul looked directly at him. And in that little information, and it is indeed very little information, the picture would seem to be of Paul speaking to a larger crowd.

And this man was within earshot of Paul, certainly close enough to establish eye contact, and for Paul to look directly at him. That would seem to be what's happening.

It's not impossible that Paul was actually directing the words to him. That's a possibility, though it doesn't seem the most likely one.

[13 : 54] What is certainly true is that Paul notices him. If indeed there were many listening, he particularly focuses his attention. He notices this poor man, this man who could not stand up to listen, this man who was prostrate before him, listening to what he had to say.

He notices him. Maybe in the words that he spoke, and we're not told what he was saying on this occasion, or at this point of his ministry in Lystra.

But might it be that as he noticed this man, he would have deliberately framed his message in a manner that would be relevant to this man, that would bring hope to this hopeless man.

Paul does not cross over to the other side. He doesn't avoid the difficult person, the awkward person, the one who will cause discomfort, and will mess up his agenda.

He doesn't avoid the demanding cripple. He sees this man, and he has compassion on him. And we don't need to labor at the application as we would consider ourselves.

[15 : 11] What is our attitude to those who are difficult and awkward and full of problems? So we have in Paul's dealing with this man, in the manner in which Paul is used by God to bring transformation to this man's life, we find compassion.

But we also find conviction. We're told in verse 9 that this cripple listened to Paul as he was speaking.

He listened to Paul as he was speaking. Why did he listen to Paul? He knew nothing of Paul. Lystra was a town of little importance.

It seems highly unlikely that news of these itinerant preachers who would have made its way to Lystra before their arrival. They were unknowns. He knew nothing of Paul.

He knew nothing of what Paul could do for him. He was just another preacher passing through.

None in the past had helped him, and there was no reason why this man could help him.

[16 : 20] Why listen to this man? Why pay any attention to this man? Well, maybe he had nothing else to do. Maybe it began as idle curiosity.

But soon, what began as idle curiosity, it changes into something very different. Soon he is gripped by the message that this man brings.

He listened to Paul as he was speaking. He listens attentively. He is hanging on his every word.

And why is this so?

Well, we don't know what Paul was saying, but again, we know the message that Paul would bring.

And so we can, I think, safely and confidently assume that as Paul was speaking to this crowd and conscious that among the crowd there was this cripple, he would have spoken about Jesus.

This was at the heart of his message, and he would have spoken perhaps about the healing ministry of Jesus.

He would have spoken of Jesus as the one who is hope for the hopeless, the one

who loves the unloved, the one who brings forgiveness to the guilty, the one who provides a family for the dispossessed and the marginalized.

[17 : 39] These things he would have said concerning Jesus. And this man who begins listening out of idle curiosity, nothing else to do, while away another hour of the day, until his miserable day comes to a miserable end, before on the morrow another miserable day, he listens, and he is gripped, and he is drawn in by this talk of Jesus, this man Jesus.

No doubt the content of what Paul spoke gripped this man, but it would not only have been the content. I am sure the conviction with which Paul delivered this message concerning Jesus would have struck this man.

And when we speak of the conviction of Paul's delivery, we are not talking about some auditorial capacity or gift, but we are talking of the spiritual power with which Paul addressed his audience, the spiritual power with which he delivered his message concerning Jesus.

And this man, this man who sat crippled in his feet, listened and was gripped by what he heard.

There was conviction in Paul's delivery of the good news concerning Jesus. Is that true of us?

[19 : 10] Are we able to present to the helpless and to the hopeless in this city a message that rings true, a message that is delivered with conviction, not from a pulpit, but in a simple conversation, that as we speak of Jesus, those who hear us speak of Jesus are forced to recognize that there's something about what this man is saying that rings true.

I'm not sure if it's true, but he certainly believes it's true. She certainly believes it's true. Can it be true? Compassion.

Conviction. But as we read these brief words, very briefly describing this encounter, we notice also that there is a connection, a connection that is established between the stranger Paul who has just arrived in Lystra and this man who had lived there no doubt all his life.

He certainly hadn't been able to visit other towns. His was a life sentence to Lystra. But there's a connection between Paul and this man.

You can notice perhaps two elements of this connection. We read there in verse 9, in the second part of the verse, Paul looked directly at him.

[20 : 41] Paul looked directly at him. Now that alone would have impacted very greatly on the cripple, I am sure, because this cripple had lived his life with men and women, passers-by, avoiding eye contact with them.

He had lived his life trying to establish eye contact, that that would somehow generate some compassion, would achieve some coppers being thrown into his hat.

But Paul, rather than avoiding looking at him, rather than seeking to avoid him, he looks directly at him. This alone would have been something that no doubt caused a great impact.

And this look, he looked directly at him, was, I am sure, a penetrating and yet a tender look. It was also a look that committed Paul.

You see, having looked at this man in this way, he couldn't simply then move on. This looking at the man in this way obliged Paul to do something for him.

[21 : 51] He looks at him. He looks directly at him. And a connection is established. What about you and what about me? Do we look at the cripples in our society, at the broken, at the homeless, at the lonely, at the suicidal, at the hopeless?

Or do we live in a bubble, avoiding that look that will commit us, that will force us to arrange our lives in different ways, that will mess up our plans as we have them laid out before us?

Paul looked directly at him. He connects in this way, but there's another element. We can see the other element by asking the question, what does he see?

What does Paul see when he looks directly at this cripple? He doesn't see a cripple. Well, of course, he does see a cripple, and in seeing a cripple, he was moved to compassion.

But he doesn't, in the first instance, or in the most important way, he doesn't see a cripple, certainly not just a cripple.

[23 : 09] He certainly doesn't see one worthy only of his pity. He sees a man transformed. As yet, he is not a man transformed, but he sees with the eyes of faith a man transformed.

And he also sees the faith of this man. We're told that very clearly in the verse. Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed.

He saw that this man had faith to be healed. The message that he had heard concerning Jesus had produced in this man the faith to believe that he could be healed.

Now, this is a remarkable thing, that this man, seeing this stranger who had only appeared out of nowhere, had heard him speak, and now he believes that he can be healed. But Paul is able to see this.

What does he see? He sees the faith of this man. We might say he sees his soul. How can he see his soul? He certainly sees the evidence of what is in his soul.

[24 : 17] And how can he see this? How can Paul connect with this man at such a deep level? How can he know, just by looking at him, that he has the faith sufficient to be healed?

Well, Paul can only see in this way by the Spirit of God. We talk of the connection that Paul has with this man, but there is a prior connection that makes it possible for Paul to connect in this way. And it is this, Paul is connected with God. And so he can connect with those in whom God is working by his Spirit. And this is crucial.

Am I connected to God in that way? Are you connected to God? Are we full of his Spirit? Because it is only then that we will have the spiritual discernment to look as Paul looked.

Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed. There is this connection that is established between Paul and the cripple.

[25 : 32] But finally, we find, we notice also here, confidence. And here I speak of confidence in the Gospel.

Paul's confidence in the Gospel. And this confidence can also be witnessed at two levels. First of all, his confidence in the message that he is delivering for such an audience.

And here we're broadening it out beyond this one man. We will come back to this man. But to begin with, as we speak of Paul's confidence, notice his confidence in his message for this audience, for Lystra.

We've been following Paul and Barnabas on this first missionary journey. We've noticed how on each occasion, their first port of call was the Jewish synagogue. And they went there as a point of principle to the Jew first and then to the Gentile.

But they went to the synagogue first also because in the synagogue, there was shared ground. There were bridges that would allow a connection in the message.

[26 : 41] But here, for the first time, Paul arrives in Lystra and he is addressing a completely pagan audience. There is, with his audience here in Lystra, no common ground from the Old Testament to build on.

No shared commitment, albeit formal, to Yahweh. But does this hold Paul back? Does Paul say, well, nothing's going to happen here.

They won't believe. They won't understand. How could they understand about a Messiah that was promised by the prophets? They won't have a clue what I'm talking about.

It's going to be a waste of time speaking to these pagans about Jesus. They simply don't have the sufficient background and information to make use of this message.

But does he think in this way? Does he conclude that they will never understand? Does he presume that they won't be interested? No. He has confidence that the gospel that he is bringing is a gospel for Lystra.

[27 : 49] It is a gospel custom-built for Lystra, as it is for any and every community. Whatever their background, however pagan they may be, however ignorant of the things of God, and this is an important point for us.

For we live in a pagan city. We live in a city that increasingly is populated by men and women who know nothing of the Bible, who know nothing of Jesus, and we say, well, they won't be interested. They won't understand. It's a waste of time. How can I possibly generate any interest in this gospel among such people? But as we ask these questions, we simply betray our lack of confidence in the gospel.

Paul suffered from no such lack of confidence to this entirely pagan audience. He goes confident and assured that the gospel that he brings, the good news that he brings, is good news for Lystra, as it is good news for Aberdeen.

So he has confidence in the message for such an audience. But as we focus in on the man who is our primary concern, this encounter that is our primary concern, he has confidence in God's power to transform this man.

[29 : 13] In Lystra, there sat a man crippled in his feet who was lame from birth and had never walked. But the confidence of Paul that this would not continue to be so brims over in the word that

he addresses to him.

In verse 10 we read, Paul, he looks directly at him, he sees that he has faith, and he calls out, stand up on your feet. Stand up on your feet.

Is Paul concerned that he's going to look silly when the man doesn't stand up on his feet? Does Paul say these words, wondering, well, will he or won't he? No, he utters these words in the confidence that this man will indeed stand up on his feet.

He has seen the faith of this man. He has seen his soul. And he is sure that he will respond, and he will stand up, and he will be healed. He has confidence in God's power to transform this man.

What about you? What about me? I was challenged, convicted, I might say, when I was speaking to a friend about the work that we were able to do, perhaps a very small thing, over the winter with the night shelter.

[30 : 40] And this friend, who's not from Aberdeen, asked me if any of the men who had come had been converted. And I said, oh, well, no.

And he said, but did you tell them about Jesus? Did you believe that they could be converted? And I wasn't really able to answer that question.

Because, if I were honest, I didn't really expect that to happen. And why didn't I expect that to happen?

Well, because I lacked the confidence that Paul had as he saw this cripple in Lystra. What about you? Do you have the confidence in God's power to transform the life of that colleague you work next to, of that neighbor who you say hello to fleetingly every so often?

Do you have confidence in God's power to transform the broken and the helpless and the hopeless in this city where God has placed us?

[31 : 56] Compassion, conviction, connection, confidence. And what is the result? Well, in Lystra, there sat a man crippled in his feet who was lame from birth and had never walked.

But one day, one day, this man jumped up and began to walk. He jumped up and he began to walk, never to lie prostrate again.

Now that was some result. But that is not all the result of this man's transformation. If we were to read through to the end of the section, which we haven't done, we would notice other ways in which this miracle produced a response.

But my concern is to simply jump through to verse 20, when, once again, Paul and Barnabas are being not only run from the city, but Paul, indeed, close to death.

And in verse 20, we're told, and we're still in Lystra, but after, the disciples had gathered round him. And the question is, where do these disciples come from? If you were to read the whole section, and we haven't done so, so it's a little unfair to pose the question, but if we were to read the whole section, there is no reference to anybody believing.

[33 : 26] And yet, here we have disciples. Presumably, Paul and Barnabas arrived in Lystra alone. There was nobody else with them, certainly no reference to any others. And yet, here, disciples are spoken of.

And so, there were those who believed. There were those who responded to the gospel invitation. There were those who put their faith in Jesus. And how did that come about?

Well, we don't know. But isn't it reasonable to imagine? That among them, certainly, there were those who had seen this cripple jump up and walk.

There were those who had seen this cripple jump and leap and walk and run. And they said, now here is power. Here is a message I want to consider and respond to.

And so, not only is this cripple transformed, but this cripple is then having been transformed, the means that God uses to reach others, that others would also be transformed.

[34 : 31] The impact of one man touched by grace and the value. And this, consider each of us, the value and the importance and the urgency of reaching even just that one man, that one woman, that one child.

of loving, of looking, of blessing that one person, that that one person might then in God's providence be the means of reaching many others.

Let us pray.