The Gospel on Collision Course
Acts 14

So we're back in the book of Acts, having left off for the summer. And we called this series 'Turning the world upside down' because Acts records how the early church did just that. Now if you and I were shortlisting candidates to do that job, we would never have picked this band of Jewish men, these disciples who started out hiding in fear, and yet, they were so transformed by the resurrection of Christ, that they went out with the gospel into the Roman world and changed it forever.

And the message spread outwards from Jerusalem until it reached Antioch, in Syria. And it was from the church in Antioch that the first mission out into the gentile world proper was launched. And in July we left Paul and Barnabas, half-way through that first mission trip. They left Antioch, went to Cyprus, and then up into what we now know as Turkey, and the city, also called Antioch, in Pisidia.

Today we're going to rejoin them as they leave that Antioch move on to three new towns. But as they do so, we're going to see what happens when the good news of Jesus collides with pagan culture and idol-worshipping world-views.

And whilst it may surprise you, it has a whole lot to say to our own situation as the gospel collides with our own culture, and the kind of world-views that surround us, and what the fallout might be for us as it does so.

Acts 14

Proclaiming the Truth
Now, perhaps the most striking thing about that passage is what Barnabas and Paul had to suffer to bring the gospel to people's lives. But before we look at their suffering I want us to look at their success.

Look at how Luke describes it: v1: 'Now at Iconium they entered together into the Jewish synagogue and spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed.' Now, today Iconium is the city of Konya, Turkey's 7th largest city. But even back in Paul's day, this was a major city. So what was it that they were saying that had such an impact in the city?

Well, Luke gives us some clues. In v3 he says that they spoke 'boldly *for the Lord*' and that through signs and wonders the Lord 'bore witness to *the word of his grace*.' Ok, so they're talking about Jesus, because he's the Lord, and the fact that Luke describes it as 'the word of his grace' means that Jesus' grace, the way he treats us way better than we deserve to be treated, must have been what Paul was emphasising. In other words, as Luke says in v7 when they moved on to Lystra and Derbe, they 'continued to preach the gospel.'

So that's the message, the grace of Jesus Christ to us, in living, dying, rising for us, making a way back for us, that was behind their success. But it was what got them into trouble.

Now why would the message that God loves you so much that he would send his son to die in your place, to rescue you, even though you don't deserve it, cause them, and plenty of others since, so much trouble? Why would someone oppose

that? Well, what goes on in Lystra, the second town in the passage gives us an idea.

Now, if you don't know, Su and the girls and I live in a little village north of Lausanne called Bournens. It has the grand total of 300 inhabitants, which means that the Slacks make up 2% of the population, which I think should give us a veto on any changes personally. My girls call it "Lost in Switzerland". Well, the books say that Lystra was worse. To describe it they use words like, insignificant, a rural backwater, rustic (I always worry when somewhere, like a holiday cottage, is described as *rustic*, it generally means it doesn't have a roof), or full of illiterate pagans. So if Iconium, the first city in the passage was hip and cool, the place to be, Lystra was the rural backwoods.

In fact, so far Paul and Barnabas's practice, whenever they entered a new city, has been to go into the local synagogue and start telling people about Jesus. But when they get to Lystra, there's no mention of a synagogue. Probably, because this place is so off the map, that there isn't one.

So, on first glance, these guys seem very different from us, and from our surrounding culture don't they? We're educated, they're illiterate. We're affluent, they're backwoodsmen. But I want you to see that once you peel back the surface, it may not be the case after all.

Paul had obviously been speaking out in the streets, and something he's said, maybe he was talking about how Jesus would heal the sick and crippled, triggers something in the heart of a crippled man sitting in the street. Paul sees him responding, and has this sense that he has faith to be healed, so calls on him to stand upright, and the man is healed. And the town goes wild, and Luke records their reaction, v11: 'When the crowds saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in Lycaonian, "The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men."' And Luke says that they called Barnabas Zeus, or Jupiter, and Paul Hermes, or Mercury, and the next thing the apostles know is that there is a pagan priest coming from the temple of Zeus with oxen and garlands, wanting to sacrifice to them.

Now, why has all that happened? Why do they respond like that? Because there was a local legend that told the story of how many years before Jupiter and Mercury, or Zeus and Hermes had come and visited the town disguised as humans, but no one had welcomed them, or shown them hospitality, all except one elderly couple. So the gods blessed that elderly couple and their house, but everyone else's houses got destroyed by floods. And so the people of Lystra, see Barnabas and Paul and this healing and think, 'o oh, here are Zeus and Hermes again, we aren't going to make the same mistake this time'.

But look how Paul and Barnabas respond, because they don't say, 'o that's lovely. Yes… you can worship God your way and we'll worship him in ours; Jesus and sacrificing bulls to idols, they're just different paths to the same God, so let's all be one. Let's hold hands and have an interfaith service'

No, Luke tells us in v14, 'When the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their garments.' And if you're a Jew, tearing your clothes was a response to

blasphemy. And through what they do and what they go on to say, the apostles are stating: 'listen, you're believing wrong things about God'. In other words, when it comes to God, you cannot believe just whatever you want. Either things are true of God or they aren't. And you cannot simply add Jesus to your other beliefs in a kind of syncretistic religion.

Now, can you begin to see why their situation is not so very different from ours? Because today there are a multitude of other religions and people take a bit from here and a bit from there and decide for themselves what is and what isn't, for them. Not only that, but because one god of our age is the god Tolerance, we are told that you can't say that this way is right and that way is wrong, because that's intolerant. The irony is, of course, that stating that is itself intolerant of other views.

But here the apostles are confronted with different beliefs and different ways of worshipping God, and they don't swallow a sort of ancient variation of post-modernism, that says you can have your truth and I can have mine, and we'll all get along just fine. No, they go head to head with that kind of thinking. And by tearing their clothes and running into the crowd, and saying what they say they are saying, 'what you think about God is wrong; how you worship God is wrong.' And they faced opposition to this message of grace precisely because it collided with other views in this whole issue of truth.

And truth matters, doesn't it? Just think about it: if there is one true God, then there is *one, true* God, and it matters because a man or woman's eternity may depend on it. And so to paraphrase someone else, how much do you have to hate someone not to tell them that they are wrong?

Now of course, if you go and talk to a student on campus, or chat to the person in your office, rather than them having some mixed up ideas about God, they are just as likely to have been influenced by the new atheists, men like Richard Dawkins. And of course their response to something like this account here in Lystra is: you Christians think these guys worshipping idols are primitive, and we should worship one God not many, well, us atheists have just gone one god further, and got rid of every false idol, including yours, and every god of our imagination.' But have they? You see, listen to what Paul says as they rush into the crowd, v15, 'Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God.' What Paul and Barnabas are so objecting to is the idea that these people of Lystra would worship them, mere men, as gods.

Now ask yourself: what is it that the new atheists worship? Because someone has rightly said that we all worship something. What is it that *they* have elevated to the level of a god? What do they pay homage to, pledge their lives to, evangelise for, write books about to spread its message, believe in when it requires faith beyond the facts? What do they make sacrifices for? Isn't it human reason? Don't they deify science? Or evolution and the natural world? And so it's not that they don't have a god whose word goes, to whom they devote their lives, it's that they don't recognise that that is what they are doing.

And so the message of Jesus' grace and his love collides with that world-view – it comes into direct conflict with it, and it says don't worship human reason (though clear-headed, rational thought is crucial), don't worship science (though science, good science, absolutely matters), don't worship the natural world (though it is beautiful), because ultimately, these are just created things. And Paul takes these pagans in Lystra to creation, to the natural order, to the rain and the seasons, and the crops and the goodness of life, and says – the created world can tell you something of God: that he exists, that he's powerful, that he's good, that he's the creator, v15, 'who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them.' He's the God you should worship.

But it is exactly this confrontation with wrong thinking about God that lands the apostles in trouble, and the same can be true for you and me.

Paying the Price

Now, maybe with a few exceptions, we all like to be liked, and we like people to think well of us. And everyone likes you and thinks well of you when you're agreeing with them, and they don't like you so much when you're not. So the danger is that we shy away from disagreeing with friends or colleagues when their thinking about God is wrong. We hesitate to speak because we don't want to come across as intolerant or someone from the backwoods. And yet, to be true to the truth inevitably means that you will come into conflict, because whilst the gospel unites, it also divides.

Look at what happened in Iconium, the first city, where, v1, 'a great number of Jews and Greeks believed.' So the good news of Jesus brings people together. But the good news also divides. Of the same city Luke says in v4: 'But the people of the city were divided: some sided with the Jews and some with the apostles.' So whilst Jews and Gentiles were joined together by the gospel, others were joined together in opposition to it.

So, there are times when the gospel is going to be the centre of controversy, when people will not like the message. But that doesn't make it wrong.

So, what can we learn from how Paul and Barnabas handled themselves when they faced opposition, that could help us handle it?

Firstly, opposition is a reason to keep telling the truth, not a reason to quit. Now, I don't mean if you're being obnoxious and getting up people's noses you carry on doing it. Rather, look at verses 2 and 3 again. The apostles are telling people about God's grace to them in Jesus, but the Jewish religious leaders don't like it, and v2, 'stirred up the gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers.' So it wasn't the apostles who were being poisonous – they were speaking about grace and about Jesus and about the good news. But look how Luke says they responded to the poison and the bile coming their way, v3, 'So they remained there a long time speaking boldly for the Lord.' It's interesting isn't it? Things start hotting up, opposition is on the increase, and they respond by saying, 'well, we'd better stay here a bit longer then!' They aren't discouraged, they don't shut up, and they don't change their message – either to water it down, or to make it more harsh. Opposition becomes the very reason to keep on talking about Jesus: 'God is clearly up to something, if the opposition is growing!'

But secondly, they also knew when it was time to withdraw. They hear about this threat to stone them at Iconium, and v6, promptly 'fled to Lystra and Derbe.' So they're not fools. They're not seeking martyrdom. They know what they are called to do and so if withdrawl is the way to do that most effectively, then they withdraw. And having moved on to Lystra, v7, 'they continued to preach the gospel.'

Thirdly, they understood something of the fickleness of human nature. And guys, this is crucial to learn. One moment the people of Lystra are treating Paul and Barnabas like gods, the next moment like dogs, and they want to kill them. And nothing changes does it? People love putting celebrities on a pedestal, and they love knocking them off it. The apostle John said of Jesus that 'he did not entrust himself to people… for he knew what was in man' (John 2:24-25). That doesn't mean Jesus went around all suspicious and cynical, trusting no one. It meant he had no intention of playing the crowd, or trying to be popular. And the lesson for us is, don't try and live to please the crowds. Don't gut the gospel, don't compromise your faith, just to try and win some friends and be in the 'in crowd', because just as with Paul and Barnabas, they'll dump you in the end, or if they don't you'll have lost everything of value in the process.

But fourthly, these guys embraced the cost for the sake of Christ.
Luke tells us that Paul is stoned by a mob, he's dragged out of the city, and his seemingly lifeless body is left for dead. Then what does he do? His friends gather round him, and tend to him, and then he gets up, walks right back into the city where the mob is, and the next day walks 30 or more miles to Derbe, to preach the gospel in that city, and does it all over again!

And guys listen, sometimes we complain about having to get up on a Sunday morning, in Switzerland of all places, and drive to church! Isn't that crazy? Paul and Barnabas and our brothers and sisters in Iraq and Syria, in Iran and South Sudan are embracing the cost for Christ, and we want Christ, but only if I'm not inconvenienced. And we become consumers. And just a word to the men: Guys, could it be that you and I have embraced a comfortable, costless Christianity? And I'll do this or that, provided it doesn't cost me, or inconvenience me. But look at Paul, as he picks up his bloodied body and walks back into the city, determined to go on telling people about Jesus and his grace. And we worry about inconvenience! And he's embracing the cost of being a disciple, as a man. He's taking up his cross. Isn't there something about Christian sacrifice that stirs something on the inside? That this is what it means to lead, to be a Christian man, to lay your life down? As one writer said, 'no cross, no crown.'

And to begin to embrace inconvenience is to begin to embrace the cross. And for each of us it may mean something different. It may mean putting your head above the parapet at work, it may mean initiating a conversation with someone, it may mean finding an area of service in the church, or it may mean relooking at your finances – 'what of this should I really be keeping, and what should I be giving away for the cause of Christ?' - as you begin to embrace the kind of radical, sacrificial discipleship Christ calls us to.

But the problem is, me just saying that, or you feeling guilty, is zero motivation for change. And who wants a Sunday school teacher who feels guilty, or a guilty giver. No way! So where can you and I find the joy and the inner, happy desire to stand for truth and embrace the cross?

The Courage to do Both

Now I reckon that one of the remarkable things about what goes on here in Lystra, with all the talk about Zeus and Hermes and them wanting to offer sacrifices is how near and yet how far these pagans are from the truth.

They think that the gods have come down to them in human form. And Paul is telling them the good news, that God has indeed come down in human form and his name is Jesus. They are wanting to sacrifice bulls to them, and Paul is telling them that out of his love and his grace it is God who has sacrificed himself for them and for us, to bring us back to him.

And when you understand, when you get what Jesus has done for you, how he has humbled himself to bring the truth to you, and laid down his life in service of you, then it will give you this inner courage and this inner joy to stand for truth and to pay the price in service of Jesus and of others.

You see, when you understand how much Jesus loves you, and others, there will be this growing love for others; and you won't hate them, so you'll want to share the gospel with them. When you understand that God has forgiven you so much, then you'll forgive those who oppose you, and you won't hold a grudge against those who ridicule you, so you'll keep on coming back to them in love. When you understand the value that the cross of Christ puts on you, and you get your sense of self worth there, then you'll not fall for the old trick of worrying what others think of you that can so often end up silencing you. And when you get something of the measure of Christ's sacrifice for you, that he hung on the cross for you, then you'll embrace sacrifice, whether it's time or energy or money or reputation, you'll embrace the cost, and the cross, because he's worth it.

And you won't do that with guilt or with regret, but with joy. Get what Jesus has done for you, and you'll understand why these two men, Barnabas and Paul, kept doing what they were doing, regardless of the cost. Get that, and we'll be able to do what they did when they return to their church at Antioch at the end of this first mission trip, where v27, 'they declared all that God had done with them.' If we get what Jesus has done *for* us, then like them we'll be able to declare in the months and years ahead, all that God has done *with* us.