**The Sacrifice That Didn’t Happen, And More!**

(Acts 14:18-28)

By Pastor Ricky Kurth

 Two men were talking one day, and one said to the other, “My wife treats me like a *god.”* The other man said, “Really?” The first man replied, “Absolutely. Everything she cooks for me is either a burnt offering or a blood sacrifice!”

 Speaking of sacrifices, I’d like to begin this lesson with a Bible question for you. Why did God ask Abraham to sacrifice *his son* when the boy was 12 years old? It was because, if he waited until he was a teenager, then killing him wouldn’t have been much of a sacrifice!

 And all the parents of teens said, “Amen.”

 Well, speaking of sacrifices, and being treated like a god, in our last lesson we saw that after the Apostle Paul healed a lame man here in Acts 14, the superstitious Gentiles in the city of Lystra figured that he and his coworker Barnabas must be *gods,* and they tried to sacrifices some oxen to them. And as we saw at the end of that lesson, the apostles were able to talk them out of it—but *just barely,* as we see as we begin where we left off in Acts 14:18:

 **“And with these sayings scarce restrained they the people, that they had not done sacrifice unto them.”**

Now to begin with, I want you to think about that word “scarce” there. Because, if these people Thought Paul and Barnabas were *gods,* you’d think they would do whatever their gods told them to do—or *not* do—with no questions asked! I mean, if your god tells you to jump, you ask, “How high?”, right? And if your god says not to sacrifice to him, wouldn’t you say, “Yes sir! Anything you say, sir!” But these guys said, as it were, “Well, all right. We won’t sacrifice an ox to you. But we still think we should!”

 Now what you’re seeing there is a perfect example of *religion.* Religion is man’s idea of how *he* thinks God should be worshipped. Men are religious by nature, and they *love* to worship God—just as long as God doesn’t have the nerve to tell him how to do it! When He does, it doesn’t take much to get men *to turn on Him.*

We see an example of that as early as the story of Adam’s son Cain in Genesis 4. God told him to offer Him a *blood* sacrifice, and Can brought God some fruits and vegetables instead. When God didn’t accept his idea of how to worship Him, Cain turned on God and got ticked off at Him!

 We see *another* example of people turning on their god as we read on in our text in verse 19, where it says,

 **“And there came thither certain Jews from Antioch and Iconium, who persuaded the people, and having stoned Paul, drew him out of the city, supposing he had been dead.”**

A minute ago, these same Gentiles were *worshipping* Paul as a *god!* But when he didn’t let them worship him in the way that they *wanted* to worship him, it didn’t take much to convince them *to kill him* instead!

 And these Gentiles weren’t the only ones in the Bible affected by the evils of religion. When the Lord rode the donkey into Jerusalem, *the Jews* cried, “Blessed be He that cometh in the name of the Lord.” But *one week later,* some of those same Jews were screaming “Crucify Him” to Pontius Pilate! All because He didn’t act like they thought their God *should* act and *fight back* against the Romans who were being pressured to execute Him.

 And to get to the point: unless your faith is based on the Word of God, *your* faith can be just as easily swayed. I know you don’t think it can, but it can. It’s the reason I *teach* the Word of God, and I hope it is the reason you study it, to keep that from happening.

 But now, why would verse 19 say that after they stoned Paul, they only *supposed* he was dead? I mean, how hard is it to tell that a man sporting massive head wounds, who has stopped breathing, is no longer among the living? Not hard at all! So why’s it say they only *supposed* Paul

was dead?

 I believe it is because of what we read in the next verse of our text:

**“Howbeit, as the disciples stood round about him, he rose up, and came into the city: and the next day he departed with Barnabas to Derbe” (Acts 14:20).**

Those unsaved Jews were *sure* they’d killed Paul, but after he got up and started walking around, they weren’t so sure any more!

 Now if *you’re* not sure if Paul was dead, what do you say we ask him? How an we do that? Well, fourteen years later, he wrote to the Corinthians about what happened here, speaking of himself in the third person, saying,

**“I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago*,* (whether in the body, *I cannot tell;* or whether out of the body, *I cannot tell:* God knoweth;) such an one *caught up to the third heaven”* (II Corinthians 12:2).**

Now listen, you don’t get to go to the third heaven, the very throne room of God, unless you’re *dead.* So how come Paul says he didn’t know if he was in his body, or just experiencing some kind of vision?

 Believe it or not, it’s because souls in heaven *feel* like they have a body. How do I know? The Apostle John was given a vision of heaven in which he saw some men who’d died and gone to heaven. He wrote,

**“I saw…the souls of them that were slain for the word of God….*And white robes were given unto every one of them*…” (Revelation 6:9,11).**

If you could put a robe on, wouldn’t you think you had a body? They *didn’t* have bodies. Their bodies were back on earth in the grave. John only saw their souls. But they *felt* like they had bodies. And similarly, here in Acts 14, *Paul’s* body was being dragged out of town. But he *felt* like he had a body, so he wasn’t sure he was dead. But he was!

Here I have to pause to remind you of something I taught in our last lesson. And that is, the miracles in the Book of Acts aren’t recorded in the Bible just to entertain us. They are selected from *numerous* miracles that the apostles performed to be recorded in the Bible because they’re the ones God could best use to *teach us* things that God wants to teach us, using those miracles as *types.*

For example, last week we saw Paul heal a lame Gentile, who symbolized *all* Gentiles, Gentiles who were incapable of doing what Paul says we *ought* to do in I Thessalonians 4:1:

**“…ye ought to *walk and to please God…”***

Before Paul was made an apostle, only *Jews* could walk in ways that pleased God. But beginning with Paul’s ministry, now the Gentiles could too! And the healing of that lame Gentile typified that.

 So what’s this miracle of Paul’s death and resurrection typify? Well, in order to know how to walk and please God, you have to have some *instructions,* right? And Paul *received* some instructions during his trip to heaven, as he went on to say in that passage:

**“I knew such a man, (whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) How that he was caught up into paradise, *and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter”* (II Corinthians 12:3,4).**

Now most Christians *misread* that verse. They misread it to say that Paul saw and heard such wonderful things in heaven that he just couldn’t find words to express how amazing it is there. But that’s *not* what he says there! he says he heard *unspeakable* words that weren’t *lawful* for him to utter.

 And he wasn’t talking about uttering things that were against the laws of the Roman Empire to utter! He was talking about uttering things that were against *the law of Moses.* In other words, while in heaven he heard the Lord tell him words *about the grace message,* instructions about how to *live* under grace. That’s how this chapter started back in verse 1 where Paul wrote,

**“…I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord” (II Corinthians 12:1).**

After saying that, Paul went on to tell us how God *gave him* some revelations about the grace message while he was there in the third heaven! I mean, think about it. It was against the law of Moses to go around saying what Paul said, that it’s okay to eat bacon. It was against the law of Moses to say you don’t have to rest on the sabbath.

 And this is why Paul’s trip to heaven is recorded here at this point in the Book of Acts. It was to symbolize how, now that God was allowing Gentiles to walk in ways that please Him, as symbolized by the previous miracle, it was *Paul* who tells them how to do it!

 As we’ll see in a moment, the remainder of this chapter is a type of what God wants us to be doing in the dispensation of grace. He wants us to look to Paul to know how to walk and please God, and then if you peek ahead to verse 22, you’ll see how that verse symbolizes how God wants us to confirm the souls of people with what Paul teaches us. He wants us to do that by doing what we see Paul doing in verse 23, by ordaining leaders to teach us what Paul taught. God laid it all out here in Acts 14, just as the dispensation of grace began to unfold, to typify what we should be *doing* in the age of grace.

 But now, you’d think that after the people of Lystra stoned Paul that he’d leave and go preach someplace else. But some guys just can’t take a hint, as we just saw in verse 20, where we’re told that after Paul woke up from his dirt nap, he got up, dusted himself off, and went right back into the same city where they stoned him, *and preached some more!* Then and only then did he leave and do what it says in the next two verses of our text:

 **“And when they had preached the gospel to that city, and had taught many, they returned again to Lystra, and to Iconium, and Antioch,**

**“Confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:21,22).**

 Here we see Paul going *back* to all the cities he preached in to *confirm* the souls of the people he had led to Christ. That’s a part of the ministry that is just as important as leading men to the Lord!

 We hear a lot these days about what they call “deadbeat dads” who father children, then *take off* instead of being the father to their children that they should be. *Not Paul!* He told the Corinthians,

 **“…though ye have ten thousand instructers in Christ, *yet have ye not many fathers:* for in Christ Jesus *I have begotten you through the gospel…* I will come to you shortly…” (I Corinthians 4:15,19).**

Paul fathered the Corinthian believers by leading them to Christ, but “shortly” afterwards he went *back* to Corinth to confirm their souls. And we see him going back to *these* cities here in Acts 14 to confirm *their* souls as well.

 So how does one go about confirming a person you lead to the Lord? Well, take a look at how some of Paul’s coworkers did it in Acts 15:32, where we read,

**“…Judas and Silas…*exhorted* the brethren with many words, and *confirmed* them”**

Judas and Silas confirmed those new believers by *exhorting* them “with many words”—the words of *grace* that Paul taught! The words of grace he learned in the third heaven that day, and more!

 Do you know what it *does* to a new believer to hear more about the grace of God that saved him? To find out, let’s compare how Isaiah confirmed the Jews under the law. God told him,

**“*Strengthen* ye the weak hands, and *confirm* the feeble knees. *Say* to them that are of a fearful heart, *Be strong, fear not…”* (Isaiah 35:3,4).**

It *strengthens* a believer when you confirm him. You can give him *spiritual* strength just by saying words to him! Of course, in Isaiah’s case, it was the words *of the law* that strengthened them, as we see in Deuteronomy 31:6, where Moses wrote,

***“Be strong* and of a good courage, *fear not...”* (Deuteronomy 31:6).**

As you can see, Isaiah was being told to *quote* the words of Moses there to confirm and strengthen the Jews to whom he ministered.

 But Judas and Silas, and Paul and Barnabas, confirmed the souls of these *grace* believers with the words of the Apostle Paul—the words of *grace!* Words that included what Paul says there in verse 22, how that someday we’ll enter the kingdom of God. I don’t know about you, but I find that *very* encouraging, and spiritually strengthening!

But here I must point out that the “kingdom” it’s talking about there isn’t the kingdom of heaven *on earth,* the one God plans for His Jewish kingdom saints. It’s the unseen kingdom of God *in heaven,* the one Paul talked about when he wrote that

**“…flesh and blood cannot inherit *the kingdom of God*...but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound…and we shall be changed” (I Corinthians 15:50-52).**

Our bodies aren’t equipped to live in *that* “kingdom of God” without the “change” that we’ll undergo at the Rapture!

 But now, why does Paul *also* say in verse 22 that we have to go through much tribulation before we can *enter* the kingdom of God? I mean, who doesn’t know what Job wrote in Job 5:7:

**“…man is *born* unto trouble, *as the sparks fly upward”***

The sparks of every campfire fly upward *naturally,* and men experience trouble *just as naturally.* The world calls it “Murphy’s law,” and phrases it like this: “Whatever *can* go wrong *will* go wrong!” And just about everyone on the planet knows it! But if that’s the case, why would Paul have to confirm these disciples by *telling them* that we have to go through tribulation in life before we can go to heaven?

 Well, remember, under the law, God told the Jews that if they obeyed Him they *wouldn’t* have to experience the kinds of troubles that people experience naturally! They *wouldn’t* be troubled by things like bad health and bad crops. But beginning with the ministry of the Apostle Paul, there had been a dispensational change. Paul tells *us,*

***“…we are not under the law,* but under *grace…”* (Romans 6:15).**

That means troubles in your life don’t mean you’ve been disobeying God! So don’t let some slick TV preacher tell you otherwise, I don’t care how fast he talks!

 Under the law, God *also* told the Jews that He wouldn’t let Israel’s *enemies* trouble them if they obeyed Him. And that’s no longer true under grace either! And these disciples in Lystra, Iconium and Antioch would need to be told *that* as well, for as soon as Paul led them to Christ, God’s enemies drove Paul out of town, and they started troubling *them!*

 And if those disciples thought we’re still under the law that said God would *protect* His people from their enemies, they’d think that God wasn’t keeping His word. So Paul *confirmed* them by telling them that they *must* pass through tribulation before entering the kingdom.

 He told the Thessalonians the same thing, when he wrote,

**“…*the Jews…have persecuted us*…But…no man should be *moved* by these afflictions: for yourselves know *that we are appointed thereunto.* For verily, when we were with you, *we told you before that we should suffer tribulation”* (I Thessalonians 2:14,15,17; 3:3,4).**

Now as a grace believer, you know all that. But Christians who *don’t* know how to rightly divide the word like to quote verses like Isaiah 54:17, where God promised His people,

***“No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper;* and every tongue that shall rise against thee in judgment thou shalt condemn. *This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD”* (Isaiah 54:17).**

Christians quote that verse to one another a lot here in the safety and security of the United States. But don’t try quoting that verse to Christians who live in other lands where weapons formed against believers *do* prosper! Isaiah’s words haven’t been true for 2,000 years! If you don’t believe it, take some time and read all 1800 pages of *Fox’s Book of Martyrs.* That ought to convince you!

 Unless you get confirmed by knowing we must pass through tribulation in life, you’re not going to be able to do what Paul says these saints did in verse 22 of our text. You’re not going to continue in the faith! You’re going to *abandon* the faith instead, like untold numbers of Christians have done over the centuries when they concluded that God didn’t keep the promises He made to the Jews under the law.

 Now before Paul left those cities, he did *more* than just confirm the souls of those saints. He did something that would ensure they would *continue* to be confirmed after he left, something we read about in Verse 23:

 **“And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed.”**

Before Paul left, he ordained men who would *continue* to strengthen the disciples in his absence. Ordaining men to the ministry is *another* important part of the ministry—an *extremely* important part.

 But if it’s so very important, why didn’t Paul do it the first time he went to those cities and led those people to Christ? To find out why, consider just a few of the *qualifications* that Paul gives for leadership in our churches:

**“A bishop then must be…not given to wine, no striker…not covetous….” (I Timothy 3:2,3).**

The point? It takes *time* to tell if a man is given to wine. Some alcoholics are pretty good at hiding it. And you can’t always tell right away if a man is a striker who is prone to hitting people, simply because they too are often able to mask it. Covetousness is another thing that sometimes takes time to manifest itself.

And all of that is why Paul told Timothy,

**“Lay hands suddenly on no man…” (I Timothy 5:22).**

Before you lay hands on a man to ordain him to the ministry, you have to get to know him and *then* ordain him, and *then* do what it says at the end of verse 23 there and commend him to the Lord upon whom he believed.

 Now here, you may be thinking, “What other Lord *could* they have commended those leaders, other than the one on whom they had believed?” The answer is, the one Paul warned the Corinthians about when he spoke to them about

**“*another* Jesus, whom we have not preached” (II Corinthians 11:4).**

That’s talking about the Jesus the 12 apostles preached under the law! These leaders here in Acts 14 hadn’t believed on *that* Lord! They’d believed on the Lord of *grace* preached by Paul, the one Paul commended the Ephesian elders to in Acts 20:32, when he told them,

**“I *commend* you to God, *and to the word of His grace,* which is able to build you up…”**

The Jesus preached by the 12 under the law can’t build you up. That Lord can’t edify you! It tears you *down* to think God doesn’t keep the promises He made under the law. It *weakens* your faith, it doesn’t *strengthen* it.

 But leaders who are commended to the Jesus preached by the 12 *must* teach the law, for the Lord told the 12,

***“The Pharisees sit in Moses' seat:* All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, *that observe and do”* (Matthew 23:2,3).**

But leaders who are commended to the Lord whom *Paul* preached *teach grace,* as Paul says we should in Colossians 2:6,7:

**“As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, *so walk ye in Him:* Rooted and built up in Him, and stablished in the faith, as ye have been taught…”**

Didn’t you receive Christ by grace through faith without the works of the law? Of course you did! Well if so, then Paul says you should *walk* in Him *as you received Him—*by grace through faith without the law. If you love the Lord for saving you by grace without any works, you don’t need a law to tell you to walk in ways that please Him! That’s the essence of grace!

Well, after Paul ordained those elders, we read:

**“And after they had passed throughout Pisidia, they came to Pamphylia.**

 **“And when they had preached the word in Perga, they went down into Attalia:**

 **“And thence sailed to Antioch, from whence they had been recommended to the grace of God for the work which they fulfilled” (Acts 14:24-26).**

After preaching in all those cities, Paul and Barnabas returned to their home church in Antioch, where they’d been recommended to the *grace* of God for their work—a work it says they fulfilled. But how did they *know* they’d fulfilled their work?

 Did you ever text or email someone and ask what they’re doing, only to hear them say they’re doing “nothing”? Being something of a wiseacre, I usually as, “If you’re not doing anything, how do you know when you’re done?”

 Well, how did Paul and Barnabas know they were done with their work? It was because the church in Antioch had clearly spelled out what they wanted them to do! They had no doubt told them to go out and lead people to Christ, and then go back and confirm them, and ordain elders in every church. When they did that, they knew they were done!

 When they returned to Antioch, they called a congregational meeting:

 **“And when they were come, and had gathered the church together, they rehearsed all that God had done with them, and how he had opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles.**

 **“And there they abode long time with the disciples” (Acts 14:27,28).**

What a rehearsal that must have been, as the church “rejoiced with them who do rejoice” (Rom.12:15) to hear of all that God had done with Paul and Barnabas among the Gentiles!

 In closing, there’s something that every grace assembly can learn as a church. And that is, it’s important to have a plan for your work, so you can know when you’ve fulfilled it.

 I was once sitting in on a board meeting of our *Berean Bible Society* board of directors, and they were talking about something they needed to do. At one point, board chairman Pastor John Fredericksen said something that I’ve never forgotten. He said, “Brethren, we have to have a plan about how to do this, because if we aim at nothing, we’re bound to hit it!”

 That’s true! If you aim at nothing, you’re bound to hit nothing. If you plan nothing, nothing will get done!

 Do you know why the Gulf War was such a military success? It’s because our generals learned a lesson from the Vietnam War. You see, the United States never declared war on North Vietnam, so it was not technically a war. Historians often refer to it as a “police action.” In other words, we were there to try to maintain the peace.

 But that’s something that’s *never* finished! If you don’t believe me, ask any policeman! So when President Bush asked our generals to take our military into Iraq, our generals asked him *exactly* what he wanted them to do, so that *when they did it,* they could declare victory! The president replied by telling them that he wanted them to go free Kuwait, the nation that Iraq had conquered, and our military *did it.*

 In the same way, the church in Antioch had a plan that they clearly outlined and laid out for Paul and Barnabas, and your church should as well. As for what plan you should draw up, I recommend the one I planned 43 years ago when I became the pastor of my church.

 I planned to teach the Word of God to edify God’s people, and ensure that new people knew how to be saved from their sins by hearing the gospel preached and the Word of God taught. I don’t know if you know this or not, but preaching the gospel means more than just saying “Christ died for our sins” forward and backward, and nine other ways to Sunday. It includes expounding the *details* of the gospel in the verses that make up the *mechanics* of salvation. Those details are found in abundance in Romans, but they are sprinkled generously throughout Paul’s epistles in places that delve into the nuts and bolts of the gospel. Studying the great doctrines of justification, redemption, forgiveness, and sanctification are *tremendous* ways to preach the gospel, and make it clear in the hearts and minds of the lost.

 And the well-grounded saints who attend my church are proof that we fulfilled that work. In addition, the many who follow our ministry online provide us with additional proof of this, along with all the people our church has blessed through my ministry at *Berean Bible Society.*

You know, years ago a man visited our church for a few Sundays, a man who had been to seminary, where they teach you countless *fluffy* ways to build a church *without* teaching the Word. After a few Sundays, he criticized me and our church by saying, “You don’t even know where you’re going to be in five years!” He said that because he didn’t think we had a plan!

 I told him, “I know *exactly* where we’re going to be in five years—right here, preaching the gospel of the grace of God and teaching God’s rightly divided Word!”

 And that’s where we’ll be until the Lord comes.