

Title: Acts 13-15: Paul's First Missionary Journey & The Jerusalem Council

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Session 15

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Abstract

This lecture covers Acts chapters 13 through 15, tracking Paul and Barnabas's first missionary journey and the subsequent Jerusalem Council. Dr. Craig Keener explains the historical, cultural, and scriptural dimensions of Paul's ministry in Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe, including the miraculous healing that led locals to mistake the apostles for Zeus and Hermes. He then analyzes the theological conflict over Gentile circumcision and the consensus reached at the Jerusalem Council under the leadership of Peter and James. Ultimately, the resulting apostolic decree established table fellowship guidelines that preserved both the gospel's cross-cultural expansion and the church's unity.

Outline

I. Paul's Sermon in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13)

A. Scripture Exposition and Continuity of Israel's History

1. Showing how Israel's history points to and is fulfilled in Jesus (parallel to Jesus' road to Emmaus exposition in Luke 24).
2. The '450 years' (Acts 13:17-19) based on adding textual numbers without accounting for historical overlaps.

B. Divine Sovereignty and Human Disobedience

1. The execution of Jesus by ungodly Gentiles fulfilled God's predetermined plan (Acts 13:27-29).
2. References to Old Testament suffering passages: Isaiah 53, Psalm 22, Psalm 69.

C. Midrashic and Hermeneutical Proofs

1. Citing Psalm 2:7 ('You are my son today, I have begotten you') as an enthronement Psalm, applied messianically to Jesus' resurrection and dynasty.
2. Citing Isaiah 55:3 in connection with Davidic promises; the unquoted verse 4 implies hope for the Gentiles.
3. Applying the rabbinic hermeneutical rule of Gezerah Shavah (linking texts via common terms) to connect Isaiah 55:3 ('holy') and Psalm 16:10 to prove the resurrection of the Davidic Messiah (since David decomposed but his descendant Jesus did not).
4. Warning of impending judgment using Habakkuk 1:5 in its end-time context.

D. Response and Expanded Audience

1. Gentile God-fearers receive the message gladly; synagogues historically attracted Gentiles.
2. 'The whole city' gathering next Sabbath (Acts 13:44) — Luke's use of hyperbole, matching contemporary crowds for famous orators (e.g., Dio Chrysostom).
3. Applying Isaiah 49:6 ('light to the Gentiles') to the apostles' own mission (echoing Acts 1:8).
4. Shocking claim of Gentiles being ordained to life, causing opposition from Jewish leaders.
5. Local aristocracies (decurions and prominent women) drive the apostles out of their local jurisdiction to Iconium.

II. Ministry and Opposition in Iconium (Acts 13:51 - 14:4)

A. Shaking the Dust Off Their Feet

1. Jewish practice of shaking off profane pagan dust when returning to the Holy Land.
2. Applied to Galilean towns (Luke 10) and here to Jewish/Gentile opponents, treating them as outside the covenant.
3. Showing the heel as an ancient Middle Eastern insult.

B. The Road and Language of Iconium

1. Traveling 85 miles (135 km) east along the Via Sebaste.
2. Language of the region: Phrygian dialect as a local tongue, with Greek as a second language.
3. Reliance on bilingual interpreters (such as local Greek-speakers) when needed.
4. Worship of the Emperor and the prominent Phrygian mother goddess.

C. Expulsion by Magistrates

1. City magistrates banish the apostles to quell disturbances rather than executing them (stoning would be illegal mob action at this stage).
2. Obeying Jesus' instruction to flee to another city when persecuted (Matthew 10:23).

III. The Roman Colony of Lystra and the Mythological Misunderstanding (Acts 14:5-20)

A. Cultural Context of Lystra

1. A Roman colony for half a century, closely linked as a sister city to Pisidian Antioch.
2. Focus on prestige, Roman identity, and local culture.
3. Paul's practice of open marketplace preaching, matching non-elite Greco-Roman philosophers (as praised by Dio Chrysostom).

B. Healing of the Lam Man (Acts 14:8-10)

1. Paul commands a disabled man to stand, and he leaps up and walks.
2. Verbal and narrative parallels to Peter's healing of the lame man in Acts 3 and Jesus' healings in the Gospel.
3. Evocation of Isaiah 35 as a foretaste of eschatological restoration breaking into present history.

C. The Baucis and Philemon Legend

1. Locals interpret the miracle through local Phrygian mythology (recorded by the Roman poet Ovid).

2. Legend of Zeus and Hermes visiting Phrygia in disguise, rejected by all except the poor couple Baucis and Philemon, leading to a devastating divine flood of judgment on the rest of the population.

3. Lycaonians determine not to repeat the mistake of rejecting gods.

D. Identification as Zeus and Hermes

1. Barnabas is identified as Zeus (more silent/dignified King of Gods).
2. Paul is identified as Hermes (the messenger god/spokesman of the Olympians).
3. Priest of Zeus outside the city gates brings a highly expensive bull decorated with garlands to offer sacrifice.

E. The Apostles' Rejection of Veneration

1. Paul and Barnabas tear their clothes, rejecting divine worship, asserting they are merely human.
2. Parallels Peter's deflection in Acts 3 and 10, contrasting sharply with Simon the Sorcerer (Acts 8) and Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12).
3. Paul's natural theology sermon to Anatolian farmers: appealing to the God who rules nature and provides rain, harvest, and food.
4. Use of Stoic concepts (testimony of nature to a supreme God) used by Jewish apologists to bridge the cultural gap with pagans.

F. Stoning and Escape to Derbe

1. Opponents from Pisidian Antioch and Iconium travel nearly 100 miles to stir up the Lystran crowd.
2. Mobs change opinions rapidly; Paul is stoned (the most common form of ancient urban violence) and left for dead.
3. Paul revives and travels 60 miles southeast off the Via Sebaste to Derbe.

IV. Consolidating the Church and Appointing Elders (Acts 14:21-28)

A. Courageous Return Route

1. Re-visiting Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch after tempers cooled to encourage new believers.
2. Summary message: 'Through much tribulation we must enter the kingdom of God'.
3. Jewish expectation of intense suffering (Messianic birth pangs) before the end-time restoration.

B. Appointment of Local Elders

1. Adaptation of local governing structures: town/village elders, synagogue councils, or Greek gerousia (elder clubs).
2. Several elders acting as a governing council to keep the new communities stable.
3. Timothy's ordination by the laying on of hands (1 Tim 4) as a model of leadership.

C. Return to Antioch Home Base

1. Sailing from the main port of Pamphylia at Attalia.
2. Reporting back to Antioch, a community highly sympathetic to the Gentile mission.

V. The Circumcision Controversy and the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:1-35)

A. The theological dispute in Antioch

1. Conservative Jewish believers from Judea demand that Gentiles must be circumcised to be saved.

2. Stricter than the common Jewish view of 'righteous Gentiles' (keeping Noahide laws) being saved without conversion.
3. The core issue: Can Gentiles belong to the covenant people of God without becoming Jewish proselytes?
4. Paul, Barnabas, and Titus travel to Jerusalem as representatives to resolve this issue.

B. Rising Conservative Nationalism in Judea

1. The reign of Herod Agrippa I (41-44 AD) and subsequent Roman misadministration had highly intensified nationalistic and anti-Gentile zeal.
2. Christian Pharisees demand law-observance, aligning with the dominant, strict Shammaite school of Pharisees prior to 70 AD (contrasted with the more lenient, later-dominant Hillelite school).

C. Conflict Resolution and Consensus in Jerusalem

1. Vigorous debate among apostles, elders, and leaders.
2. Peter speaks first, recalling the Cornelius event as empirical proof of the Spirit's cleansing of Gentile hearts without circumcision.
3. James (the local leader respected by the conservative Judeans) serves as a bridge.
4. James's exposition of Amos 9:11-12:
 - a. Rebuilding the 'Tabernacle of David' refers to the restoration of the Davidic dynasty through the Messiah Jesus.
 - b. James cites the Greek Septuagint version, which translates 'remnant of Edom' as 'remnant of Adam' (all humanity), proving nations are called by His name.

D. The Apostolic Decree

1. Consensus over table-fellowship rules based on Noahide laws (Leviticus 17-18 guidelines for resident aliens).
2. Requirements: abstain from food sacrificed to idols, sexual immorality, blood, and meat of strangled animals.
3. Rejects circumcision as a prerequisite for salvation/fellowship, validating the Antioch mission.

E. The Hellenistic Letter (Acts 15:23-29)

1. Constructed in highly sophisticated Greek to show deep respect to Gentile believers.
2. Refers to Gentiles as 'brothers', using the standard Greek epistolary greeting (charein) as a circular letter.
3. Uses official decree language: 'it seemed good to us' (equivalent to 'be it resolved' in Greek assemblies).
4. Re-establishes unity, though subsequent conservative pressures would remain.