

# Effective Witnesses

<b>Key Text:</b>	Acts 13 & 14
<b>Key Verse(s):</b>	“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)

## Background to the Study

Today’s text marks a natural division in the Book of Acts; from this point forward in the narrative, the principal figure is Saul. Chapter 13 describes the commissioning of Saul and Barnabas (vs. 1-3), their visit to Cyprus (vs. 4-12), and the beginning of Paul’s first missionary journey to the mainland of Asia Minor (vs. 13-52). The past tense of the words “have called” in verse 2 implies that the Holy Spirit already had revealed to Saul and Barnabas the sphere of their work prior to their being separated (“set apart for some purpose,” from the Greek word *aphorizo*). The actions by the church were simply a recognition and confirmation of the divine call. The missionaries began their ministry in Salamis, a main seaport on the east end of the island. After visiting Jewish synagogues throughout Cyprus, they departed from Paphos, the seat of the Roman government in Cyprus, located on the west end of the island. Establishing a pattern that Paul continued in later outreach efforts when entering a new location, the two men went first to the synagogue to preach (vs. 5 and 14). It was customary for the leaders of the synagogues to invite visiting rabbis to speak, so that was a natural place to minister. However, when Paul began to teach that Jesus was the Messiah, his message was vehemently rejected. At that point, he went to the Gentile community to teach about Jesus. In verse 9, Luke began to refer to Saul as Paul. Paul’s rebuke of the sorcerer Elymas, who opposed the missionaries, was both stern and direct (vs. 8-12). He charged the magician and false prophet with being “full of all subtlety” (or deceit). As punishment for resisting the true light, Elymas was temporarily struck blind. This divine retribution so affected the deputy of the country, Sergius Paulus, that he came to faith in Christ. Paul’s message to the Jews in Pisidia (vs. 16-41) is given in great detail. He began with familiar ground to his Jewish audience—God’s covenant with Israel. At the conclusion of his message, the Gentiles present asked to hear more of the truth on the next Sabbath. When a great crowd gathered on that day, the devout Jews were “filled with envy” and contradicted Paul’s words. The two men informed the Jews that the message had come to them first, but since they had rejected it, they would turn to the Gentiles.

Acts 14 continues the account of Paul’s first missionary journey, focusing on his ministry in Galatia, an area that today is located in central Turkey. Paul, accompanied by Barnabas, had travelled from Antioch in Syria across the Mediterranean Sea to the island of Cyprus, on to Perga in Pamphilia, and then to Antioch in Pisidia near Asia

Minor. Chapter 14 gives details of their time spent in Iconium (vs. 1-7), Lystra and Derbe (vs. 8-21), and their return to Antioch (vs. 22-28). Themes of preaching the Gospel, embracing the truth (particularly by Gentiles), and withstanding persecution recur throughout the passage. Because of the threat of stoning in Iconium, Paul and Barnabas departed from that city and went to Lystra, and soon after that to Derbe. In Lystra, because of the healing of a man with crippled feet, the superstitious Lycaonians hailed Paul and Barnabas as incarnations of the Greek gods Jupiter and Mercurius. Jupiter was the most popular god in Galatia and was the patron god of Lystra, where a temple had been built in his honour. According to an ancient legend, the two gods had visited the city many years before. An old couple had extended hospitality and were rewarded for their kindness. Possibly with that legend in mind, the people of the city brought garlands (used in religious rites) and oxen for sacrifices, with the intent of showering the two missionaries with gifts and honour. Paul used this misunderstanding as an opportunity to direct the multitudes toward “the living God,” describing Him as the Creator of the universe (vs. 15). On this portion of his trip, Paul experienced a threat of stoning (vs. 5) in Iconium, and subsequently was stoned and left for dead by Jews angry about his message (vs. 19).

## Testimony from Our Day

The dictionary indicates that the word preach means “to deliver a sermon or religious address to an assembled group of people, typically in church” or “to publicly proclaim or teach a religious message or belief.” While those definitions accurately describe how Paul and Barnabas taught, sometimes a song also can be a way of preaching. Through the years, I have been privileged to sing with many choral groups, performing a wide range of musical styles. One of my favourite numbers, and one that certainly preaches the Gospel, is a traditional spiritual entitled “Good News, Chariot’s A-Comin’.” The lyrics powerfully communicate the longing for an eternal home that was handed down musically from generation to generation. As I sing it, I cannot help but mourn the suffering and oppression—some of the “much tribulation” alluded to in our focus verse—that led to such a song. However, I also marvel at the hope that transcended the circumstances of those early singers. The words are simple and repetitive, yet they offer reassurance about what awaits beyond this life:

*Good news, chariot’s a-comin’ and I don’t want it to leave me behind,*

*There’s a long white robe in Heaven I know and I don’t want it to leave me behind,*

*There’s a starry crown in Heaven I know and I don’t want it to leave me behind,*

*There’s a golden harp in Heaven I know and I don’t want it to leave me behind,*

*Good news, chariot’s a-comin’ and I don’t want it to leave me behind.*

The song shares the good news that one day all who have experienced new life through Jesus Christ will be taken into an eternity with Him. It proclaims the blessed hope that our current circumstances, no matter how troubled, are only temporary. The joys that await us in Heaven will be eternal. Now that is very good news! According to our focus verse, Paul and Barnabas “preached the gospel” in Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch. Today, there are many sources of news in our world. There is plenty of bad news that graphically demonstrates the fact that humanity is broken and in great need of help. Yet, good news is also available! We can have hope for a bright future through Christ. That is the Gospel message that Paul and Barnabas preached, and which God also calls us to preach—through words, through our lives, or through song!

# A Closer Look

Question 1	Acts 13 marks a milestone in Christian history, as Saul (later called Paul) and Barnabas were commissioned by the Holy Spirit to set forth on the first missionary venture into Gentile territory. What were the two men doing when they were chosen? Why do you think this is significant? Acts 13:1-3
Question 2	The Early Church did not start or grow by its own efforts or enthusiasm. The early believers were empowered and directed by God's Holy Spirit. What role did the Holy Spirit have in the appointment of Barnabas and Saul? Acts 13:1-4
Question 3	Why do you think Paul began his message in the synagogue at Pisidia with an emphasis on God's covenant with Israel? (Acts 13:16-41) What principles for evangelizing can be drawn from Paul's presentation to the Jews that will be helpful for us as we reach out to unbelievers?
Question 4	According to Acts 14:19, what group of people stirred up the citizens of Lystra and persuaded them to stone Paul and leave him for dead? Why do you think Paul and Barnabas continued to preach even after their lives were threatened in Lystra and Derbe? How can you use your current situation to give "testimony unto the word of his grace"?
Question 5	Paul and Barnabas travelled for about two years on this first missionary outreach to the Gentiles, and covered many miles. After evangelizing in Galatia, the two could have finished their trip by returning through Paul's hometown of Tarsus. It would have been simpler and safer to do so. Instead, however, they retraced their steps and revisited the churches where they had been, going back into the very areas where they had been violently opposed and persecuted. According to Acts 14:21-23, what was their purpose in doing this?

# Take Home

All of us can and should take part in reaching out to the unsaved. We have received good news! While we may not all be preachers, we should all proclaim the Gospel through our words and our lives.