

"THE GODS HAVE COME DOWN TO US"
Acts 14:8-28

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A fundamental doctrine of Christian faith is the teaching that **God came down to earth in the form of a man**. This is called the "incarnation."

Incarnation being a compound word based upon two Latin words:

in, and **carn**. The word "in" we all understand; carn is the word from which we get the word flesh. In war when there is a lot of **human killing** people will speak of the great CARNAGE, meaning the great amount of dead bodies, dead flesh.

So the incarnation is when **God came down to earth "in flesh."**

Philippians 2:5-8

This is the great INCARNATION passage of the New Testament where we are specifically instructed about how Christ, being in the form of God, "emptied himself and took on flesh."

This is, of course, a great stumbling block to many people: the notion that God should come to earth as a man, being born in a stable, raised by an otherwise very normal sort of couple, reaching adulthood and then displaying his tremendous knowledge and divine skills to heal, even raising the dead back to life.

(By the way the original story of Superman is based upon the incarnation of Christ: superman being sent to earth as a baby, raised by a very normal midwestern farming family, and then, upon reaching adulthood, suddenly displaying his tremendous strength and skills to help.)

But here in Acts 14 we learn of how with just **one divine healing** of a cripple, the people of Lystra were **QUICK TO ACCEPT AND BELIEVE** that, as they put it, "The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!"

This was the **EXACT teaching** that Paul would have been trying to convince these people of – that God came down to earth in the likeness of men, to save us and redeem us – and here they are, in effect, spewing back Paul's message to him! This is **more than a little ironic**. The problem, of course, is that these people were not saying these things about Jesus the

Christ, but about Paul and Barnabas! In their minds it was Paul and Barnabas who were the gods come down to earth. And with that the people decided that they should honor Paul and Barnabas as one would and should honor any god...

verses 12-13

Some weeks ago I suggested to you that with Paul's sermon in Acts 13, when Paul spoke in Antioch of Pisidia, it established **Paul as the spokesman** of this small band of disciples. But here in verse 12 we see that the people saw it in the same way:

Barnabas was to be honored as Zeus, while
Paul was to be honored as Hermes.

In Greek mythology

Zeus was over the sky, lightning and thunder, and ruler over all the gods on Mount Olympus.

Hermes, on the other hand, was the ancient Greek god of trade, wealth, fertility, sleep, travel and language. Above all things he was the herald and messenger of Mt. Olympus. To the Romans he was known as Mercury.

That the people would have identified Paul and Barnabas in this way supports what we already know about Paul and Barnabas: that Paul was the good public orator, and Barnabas (Paul's mentor and discipler) was the older of the two and likely recognized by Paul as being the one to whom he deferred.

So while the people wanted to honor these two men the text is clear that Paul and Barnabas wanted to IMMEDIATELY bring this kind of honor to an end. And so, tearing their robes they rushed **into the crowd** and began speaking to them about the true God of heaven and earth: the one and only LIVING GOD who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and all that is in them.

Based upon verse 18...

verse 18

...the impression one gets from the narrative is that Paul and Barnabas' attempt at stopping the crowds from honoring them was not effective. Bedlam was taking place. This was **not the time** or place for a quiet reflective word. And as for any kind of presentation of the gospel, we don't even get a hint that they got started. Indeed the name of Jesus doesn't even come up once in all that is recorded of what took place.

If the people had quieted down, and **if** they had given Paul a hearing, I have no doubt that Paul would have used their very words ("the gods have come down to us in the likeness of men") as **his springboard** to telling about the coming of Jesus into the world. For, from a preacher's point of view, they truly OPENED THE DOOR WIDE for him to **walk right on through**. It would have been a great introduction to preaching about Christ. But it was not to be.

And, in the end, just as the crowds had hailed Jesus when he entered Jerusalem (Shouting "Hosanna to the son of David", and waving palm branches and throwing down their cloaks before him), here too they turned on Paul. For Jesus, within a week of honoring him they were shouting "Crucify Him, Crucify Him"; for Paul and Barnabas it apparently didn't even take that long for the crowds to turn.

First they wanted to honor them as "gods";

Next they wanted to kill them.

This is what many modern politicians experience!

Or maybe a pitcher for the Philadelphia Phillies baseball team!

Or Roger Jewell when he intervened at the Centennial Olympic Park bombing. One day you are the hero and the next day you are the prime suspect in a highly publicized bombing.

Or how about that pastor I met with this past week who, following initial success, now feels like they all want to see him burned at the stake.

Fickle crowds.

As noted last Sunday, this crowd that turned on Paul and Barnabas did so with a bit of prompting. Like some of the agitators in places like Portland, Seattle or Kenosha, only later do we learn that they are **not all from these cities**. Some have traveled a great distance so as to become part of the

rabble. And in Acts 14 we find that 2,000 years ago it was pretty much the same. So in verse 19 we read...

verse 19

Without these **out of town agitators**, maybe Paul and Barnabas could have finally gotten the excited crowd in Lystra quieted down to the point that they could have given a clear and cogent presentation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. But these **out of towners** were there for one reason only and that was to see Paul and Barnabas dead. And so stirring up the crowd and turning them now AGAINST PAUL and Barnabas, they stoned Paul. What happened to Barnabas we have no idea. But Paul they stoned to the point they were sure he was dead. And with that they **dragged his dead body** out of the city, dumped it on the ground and went back to town.

The text here speaks of the disciples. Just who the disciples were or how many of them there were we do not know. Presumably Barnabas was among them and possibly Luke (who later wrote the book of Acts). If Luke was there, as he was a doctor, one may **presume** that learning Paul was not dead he may have **done his best to give him physical aid**. But certainly to everyone's amazement, in the end, Paul rose up and walked...right back into the city!

Many years ago I read the two-volume work by Arnold Dallimore entitled George Whitefield. I was so impressed by the book (over 1100 pages in length) that when I finished I tracked Dallimore (a Canadian) down and called him to thank him for his fine book. He was 81 years of age by that time. He told me it took him 30 years to write the book. That book is now on my personal "top ten" list of **best books** I have ever read.

But in telling the story of George Whitefield, the great "open air" field evangelist of the mid-18th century, Dallimore writes about some of Whitefield's contemporary fellow evangelists: people like John Wesley, Charles Wesley, John Cennick, William Seward and Howell Harris. These last three are not well known today, but back then they were fiery preachers of the gospel.

Howell Harris was, like Whitefield, a great preacher.

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As was the case with all of these men of this time, their preaching drew both **admirers and those who despised them**. It was not uncommon for one of these men to be preaching and to have tomatoes or other vegetables hurled at them. Dead cats were another thing that often came flying towards them.

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In the case of Howell Harris, it was a blow to his head that stopped him cold one day.

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In 2 Corinthians chapter 11 the apostle Paul, at a later point in his life, recounts what trials he faced through the years because of his stand for the gospel...

2 Corinthians 11:23-25a

With that in mind, consider what he wrote in the next chapter...

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

Many Bible commentators will suggest to you that Paul's "thorn in the flesh" was poor eyesight, but given what happened to Howell Harris, Paul's "thorn in the flesh" **could absolutely have been connected** to one of the beatings he received or maybe even to the stoning that we read of him receiving here in Acts chapter 14.

Persecution. Are **you** ready for it?

Around the world many of our brothers and sisters in Christ are facing persecution. Some are facing it almost daily. You who have been at Burning Hearts for awhile have **heard with your own ears** the testimony of Pastor Britto Joseph and of the beating that he received back in India, along with

the threats against his life...threats that left his wife, by her own confession, **living in fear** for their lives. And why? Because some people absolutely **HATE** the good news of Jesus Christ.

Can we understand this? I don't think so.

If someone says to me, "I hate the taste of beer," I understand that. And many of you would agree with me.

Or if someone says, "I really don't enjoy watching Nicholas Cage as an actor," again, I understand, because I never liked him either.

But if someone says, "I hate ice cream," is there anyone who can relate to that? When, years ago, to encourage our son, I fasted from eating cake, cookies, candy, cola and ice cream for one entire year, when that year came to an end and the clock had struck 12 midnight, and my fast could end, I again tasted all those sweets that I had missed. Everyone of them was a huge disappointment...except for one: ice cream. Man, did that taste good.

Well, **we who have TASTED the good news** of Jesus Christ would say it is sweet to our taste and scrumptious in our mouth. But if people **REFUSE TO OPEN THEIR MOUTHS AND LET GOD FILL THEM** (Ezekiel 2:8) they will **never taste** and see that the Lord is good.

And that is what was the problem with these unbelieving Jews.

- Their hearts were hard,
- Their ears were plugged,
- They had blinders over their eyes and
- Their mouths were sealed shut.

And this is the same problem today with the unbelievers around us. We may think, or they may suggest, that they just haven't heard enough to convince them of the truth of the gospel. But that is **NOT** the issue.

John 3:19-20

The real problem is the problem of people's wills: their hard hearts, plugged ears, blind eyes and sealed shut mouths.

And until God breaks through as he did with Paul on the Road to Damascus, that is the state they will remain in. Well, it was while the people were in that hard, deaf, blinded and starving state they chose to try and kill Paul. And they **ALMOST succeeded**.

But our God had greater plans for Paul. And in the weeks and months to come we will learn more of them.