

# 'WE HAVE THIS TREASURE IN EARTHEN VESSELS'

SERIES: PAUL, AN INSTRUMENT OF THE RISEN CHRIST

by Ron Ritchie

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I want to begin today by quoting from two recent articles concerning missionary work among the Jewish people. Here is a quote from an article by Julius Berman, Chairman of the Jewish Community Relations Council Task Force on Missionaries and Cults, published in the N.Y. *Jewish Forward* (9 Jan. 1987), under the heading: "A New Dilemma, Missionaries and Cults in Israel."

The Council was reported to be in contact with Israeli authorities advising them on how to cope with the "dilemma." Among the cults and missions described in the article were Scientology, the Unification Church, TM, Hare Krishna; but "a problem to a larger degree in Israel is the missionary epidemic." Examples cited were: Jews for Jesus, an infamous group which allegedly snatches up candidates for conversion at Jerusalem's Western Wall"; Project Kibbutz . . . "but due to the pressure exerted by American Jewish organizations, the United Kibbutz Movement has rid itself of this insidious group"; the International Christian Embassy of Jerusalem "which is deeply involved in proselytization efforts despite its contention to the contrary." [The article continues] "The Israeli Government is in a quandary concerning its dealings with the Evangelical movement. On the one hand, supporters of the State in Congress are pumping dollars into Israel via the tourist trade, yet on the other hand, actively seeking to destroy the very essence of the Jewish people through theological quest for mass conversion of the Jews." Rabbi Berman, nevertheless, "remains optimistic that both governmental and non-governmental agencies in Israel are meeting the challenge of cults and missionaries head-on."

And secondly, a quote from the *Jewish Chronicle*, published in London (2 Nov. 86);

A video warning vulnerable Jews about Christian missionaries is to be shown to Jewish student and youth groups throughout the country over the next few months. The 20-minute film explains the wellrehearsed tactics of groups such as Jews for Jesus, and the Church Ministry to the Jews. It has been made by Operation Judaism, the anti-missionary campaign which has the support of the Chief Rabbi's office of the Jewish Board of Deputies.

These news articles illustrate the incredible current resistance of the religious Jewish leadership to the gospel of Jesus Christ. The same kind of resistance is also to be found worldwide among Gentiles: people who want nothing to do with the good news that Jesus is the Messiah, that he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and that as such he is the only One who can forgive sin. Resistance to the gospel has been manifest in every generation since Jesus walked this earth. Spiritual warfare is the reason for it. There really is a Satan. There really are demons, dark, unseen powers operating behind the scenes. Satan holds captive all those who are taken in by his philosophy.

Christians, on the other hand, seek to save men and women, boys and girls from this kingdom of darkness and bring them into the kingdom of God's dear Son. These believers who are ministering today in Israel must pay a price for their desire to introduce people to Jesus. You and I too must pay a price for our ministry right here where we live. The price, of course, is rejection. The gospel we preach is rejected, and we ourselves are rejected. Yet, despite this, God has a people from every nation whom he is calling out of this darkness. And Christians have a part to play in this drama of redemption.

This is the gist of what I want to convey in this series of messages on the life of the apostle Paul. I want so

much for you to be part of God's wonderful plan to redemption, to understand it and participate in it, to experience both the joy and the suffering that come with playing your part in it. That is why our study this morning from Acts 14 will be very helpful. As we study Paul's ministry we will see that things have not changed a whole lot in two thousand years. The quotes I have just read could have been written by many of the Jews who were opposed to the apostle during his years of ministry.

In earlier studies we learned that Paul and Barnabas were sent out from Antioch in Syria on their first missionary journey in 47 A.D. They preached the good news of Jesus Christ and his power to forgive sin, first on the island of Cyprus, and later in southern Turkey. Their message in the synagogue of Pisidian Antioch divided the city, however. They were forced to depart because the leaders of the Jews rejected their message that Jesus was the Messiah and the Savior of Israel. They walked the 50 miles to the city of Iconium, leaving behind in Antioch, under the care of the Holy Spirit, a new Christian assembly.

As we prepare to look at the second part of this missionary journey we can see clearly the fulfillment of the words which the resurrected Jesus spoke to Ananias concerning Saul, "He shall be a chosen instrument of Mine to bear My name before the Gentiles, kings and children of Israel, and to suffer much for My sake." Paul would later write to the Corinthians, following the completion of his second missionary journey, these words concerning the suffering he endured:

But we have this treasure [Jesus Christ] in earthen vessels, that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our body . . . So death works in us, but life in you. (2 Cor. 4:7-10:12)

In the first part of our text we will see that the apostle was,

### **I. "Afflicted, but Not Crushed", Acts 14:1-7**

And it came about that in Iconium they entered the synagogue of the Jews together, and spoke in such a manner that a great multitude believed, both of Jews and of Greeks. But the Jews who disbelieved stirred up the minds of the Gentiles, and embittered them against the brethren. Therefore they spent a long time there speaking boldly with reliance upon the Lord, who was bearing witness to the word of His grace, granting that signs and wonders be done by their hands. But the multitude of the city was divided; and some sided with the Jews, and some with the apostles. But when an attempt was made by both the Gentiles and the Jews with their rulers, to mistreat and to stone them, they became aware of it and fled to the cities of Lycaonia, Lystra and Derbe, and the surrounding region; and there they continued to preach the gospel.

Iconium, a beautiful city surrounded by snow-capped mountains, was very much off the beaten path. Because of its remote location there was no Roman garrison there, so outbreaks of lawlessness could not easily be put down. Paul and Barnabas entered the local synagogue on the Sabbath and took the opportunity that was usually extended to visitors to speak. After he had addressed the gathering, the apostle once again experienced the same response he had seen in the city he had just left: He "spoke in such a manner that a great multitude believed . . . But the Jews who disbelieved stirred up the minds of the Gentiles, and embittered them against the brethren." Those who believed what Paul and Barnabas were sharing from the Old Testament immediately came into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. They believed by faith that he was the "Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." They believed that their sin, shame and guilt had been dealt with by Jesus at the cross, and thus they received the gift of the Holy Spirit who would now enable them to live as they were meant to live.

Receiving the Holy Spirit is one of the greatest joys in life. Last week I got the bad news from the IRS that they didn't owe me anything, rather that I owed them. Every year that happens to me. it seems. I think I have

done everything right and then suddenly find myself crushed by the government's interpretation of my income. When I got the news I fell to my knees and asked God why I couldn't seem to get my life in order. I prayed that I could work things out in a way that would be honoring to him and not be a detriment to me in my spirit. I felt the rush of the Holy Spirit saying to me, "Now just relax. We'll work this out step by step." Since then I've had a quiet peace about the problem. When you have the Holy Spirit, it doesn't really matter what the trial is. We are empowered to cope with reality. My natural inclination was to panic, but the Holy Spirit settled me. What a joy-to live like that on a daily basis! God allows these things to come into our lives to remind us that we are following him, and not to act like the world around us acts.

But not everyone present in the synagogue who listened to Paul became believers. The Jews who disbelieved initiated the first of two attacks upon Paul and Barnabas. First, they stirred up the minds of some of the Gentiles present against both of these men, and also against the new believers. Rather than leaving the city, however, the Holy Spirit gave Paul and Barnabas the boldness and courage to keep on witnessing to the word, even granting them power to do signs and wonders so as to lend authenticity to their message.

Jesus himself performed many signs and miracles during his ministry on earth, in fulfillment of the prophecies of Isaiah 61:1-2. It was he who determined when he wanted a crowd to see a particular miracle that would indicate the presence and power of God. Often he would allow these signs to become the basis of faith for new believers. Here in Iconium also signs and wonders were visible evidence of the authenticity of the gospel. The real sign of such authenticity, of course, was the resurrection of Jesus from the grave.

So the missionaries spent quite some time there in Iconium sharing the gospel. Then came the second attack upon them. The gospel has the characteristic of always dividing communities. Jesus said this would happen: "Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth," he said. "I did not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Matt. 10:34). I have always been amazed at how quickly people divide into two distinct camps wherever the gospel is preached. I have seen this happen so often in my own ministry. I was guest speaker at a banquet of about four hundred people in another city recently, and when I was introduced I felt a chill descend. Many of the people there were not sure who I was, and when I began to speak a large number of them began to look up at the ceiling. The gospel was dividing this group, who came from a very well-to-do community. And yet I fully expected God to work among them. Although a great majority of those who had greeted me earlier left the room and never said another word to me, several others came up to me to say they had heard what I said and did accept Jesus into their lives. What do we do now? they wanted to know. I knew that would happen. I didn't know I would hear about it, but they were kind enough to tell me.

So the Jews and their rulers, together with some Gentiles, attempted to mistreat and stone Paul and Barnabas. As a result the missionaries left the city, walked about 18 miles southeast to Lystra, and later the 10 miles to Derbe and continued to preach the gospel. What amazing ministers of the gospel they were! No matter how severe the persecution they faced they just went right on preaching the good news, dividing communities left and right, and fearlessly and boldly offering salvation to all who believed.

The apostle Paul's character always came shining through, no matter how trying the circumstances. He never lost sight of his commission from the risen Lord, being always aware of Jesus' presence with him. He had a clear understanding that once it was preached, the gospel was the power of salvation to Jew and Gentile alike, so he had no fear of men. He knew that his preaching would divide families and friends, even entire cities, that spiritual warfare would enter the picture as he sought to win people to Christ. Both he and Barnabas endured pressure and affliction that burdened their spirits. The Gentiles were upset and embittered at them; the mob plotted to mistreat and stone them. Despite all of that, however, they were not crushed.

In the next section, verses 8 through 18, we will see that Paul and Barnabas were,

## **II. 'Perplexed, but Not Despairing', Acts 14:8-18**

And at Lystra there was sitting a certain man, without strength in his feet, lame from his mother's womb, who had never walked. This man was listening to Paul as he spoke, who, when he had fixed his gaze upon him, and had seen that he had faith to be made well [literally, "to be saved"], said with a loud voice, "Stand upright on your feet." And he leaped

up and began to walk.

Imagine the scene. Two strangers, Paul and Barnabas, enter the city of Lystra desiring to find a hearing for the gospel. The scene that follows is almost identical to what occurred in Jerusalem 16 years earlier when Peter healed a lame man in the temple. Paul came upon a man who had been lame -from his mother's womb." This man listened to the gospel of Jesus Christ, and Paul. Looking at him, saw that he believed Jesus could heal him both physically and spiritually. Then, with a loud voice, before the watching crowds, Paul commanded the man to stand on his feet. The man obeyed what he heard, leaped up and began to walk. He did not need any further help; no lessons in how to walk, no physical therapy, nothing.

In this man's lameness we have a picture of the spiritual condition of humanity without Christ. Man is spiritually crippled, held captive by sin and shame. He has no real freedom of movement, for without forgiveness of sin there is no true freedom. Yet the moment we place our faith in Christ he heals us. We find we can walk for the first time in our lives. Our hearts are filled with joy and praise and we are set free to serve our Lord for the rest of our time on earth and for eternity. We can discern what drugs and sexual immorality are doing to our society. We know why people are crippled by their fear of nuclear war. The Christian understands the fears and the sins of the crippled. Our ministry is to share the gospel with them, with the hope that God will change their hearts and set them free to walk spiritually, emotionally and, at times, physically.

A couple of weeks ago a man driving an 1 8-wheel truck came by my house and said, "Hey, Ritchie, want to come for a ride? I have a whole bunch of questions to ask you about the gospel." I hopped in, and we drove up and down Highway 1, delivering all kinds of equipment. We talked all the while about his being set free-from cocaine and alcohol dependence and sexual immorality. We talked about temptation, about spiritual gifts, and how gracious God was to put us together so that he might be encouraged. Yes, God specializes in helping spiritual cripples come to their feet and walk. As Christians, we will be used by God in our own communities to help the lame ones rise up and walk in righteousness before him.

The miracle of the lame man's healing, however, was the cause of misunderstanding among the crowd at the synagogue. Verses 11-13:

And when the multitudes saw what Paul had done, they raised their voice, saying in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have become like men and have come down to us." and they began calling Barnabas, Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. And the priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates, and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds.

There was a Lycaonian legend that Zeus, the chief god of the Greek pantheon, and Hermes, his son and proclaimer, once came to earth in disguise. No one offered them any hospitality except two old peasants, Philemon and his wife Baucis, who took them in. The whole city was destroyed in punishment, the legend goes, for people's failure to be hospitable. Everyone perished except the old couple, who were turned into trees after their death. When Paul and Barnabas came into the city, therefore, and people saw the miracle of the lame man, they assumed they were being given a second chance by the gods. They were determined not to make the same mistake. Barnabas, the more dignified of the two visitors. they called Zeus, and Paul they referred to as Hermes, the proclaimer. The priest of the temple of Zeus, located just outside the city, was taking no chances this time either. He showed up with oxen to sacrifice in honor of these "gods." Followers of the New Age movement, whD all want to be gods, would have loved this.

But neither Paul nor Barnabas wanted anything to do with the locals' plan to worship them. Verses 14-18:

But when the apostles, Barnabas and Paul, heard of it. they tore their robes and rushed out into the crowd, crying out and saying, "Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of the same nature as you, and preach the gospel to you in order that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and all that is in them. And in all the generations gone by He permitted all the nations to go their own

ways; and yet He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness." And even saying these things, they with difficulty restrained the crowds from offering sacrifice to them.

Paul and Barnabas were not prepared for the reaction of the crowd to the miracle. They were accustomed to being persecuted for their actions, not honored. But they knew that they were sinners, saved by grace to be servants of the living God. They tore their robes, symbolizing their horror at the blasphemy, for they knew they were not gods but mere men. They also were aware of what had happened to King Herod (Acts 12) when the people heard him speak and they thought, "The voice of a god and not a man . . ." Acts continues, "And immediately an angel of the Lord struck him because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten with worms" (Acts 20:23).

But this incident gives Paul and Barnabas further opportunity to preach the God of Jesus Christ. Now, however, they are dealing with a pagan crowd. Rather than referring to the Old Testament, Paul makes his appeal from nature, using three points. The apostle tells them that the gods they are serving are really not gods at all; they are merely associated with a pantheon of gods who are like men. There is only one Living God, and he created the heavens, the earth and the seas and all that is in them. God is not part of his universe but rather dwells above and outside of it. And, Paul continues, God allowed man a period during which he could go his own way and do whatever pleased him. That was not God's original intent, but man rebelled and abandoned belief in him. But even in man's rebellion, God never left him without a witness: He gave man rain from heaven, fruitful seasons, food and gladness and a satisfied heart. If man had but stopped to think where this bounty came from he would have discerned that it did not come from idols but from the God of heaven and earth.

Thus, Paul's message to the people is one that says they could be freed from idol-worship. Your gods are no gods at all, he says, but are gods of your own imagination that keep you in bondage. As such they are without power because they don't even exist. But even after saying these things, Paul and Barnabas had difficulty restraining the crowds from offering sacrifice to them.

Not a lot has changed in the two thousand years since this incident at Lystra. In the Third World, for instance, the worship of idols goes on all the time. Entire societies are given over to the worship of demons and spirits, either real or unreal. Here in the United States we find this kind of thing beginning to enter our culture also. In Half Moon Bay, a palm reader has just opened up for business. There are witches all over the Santa Cruz mountains, performing all kinds of ceremonies right at this instant. You can even turn on the television and get the Tarot cards reading for the day. Don't fly anywhere on Friday the thirteenth, we are told; avoid black cats and don't walk under ladders. We are surrounded by real and imaginary gods who are seeking to hold us in total captivity.

"We have this treasure [Christ] in earthen vessels," says Paul. "that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from ourselves. We are afflicted in every way but not crushed, perplexed, but not despairing, persecuted but not forsaken . . ."

### **III. 'Struck Down, but Not Destroyed' Acts 14:19-23**

But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having won over the multitudes, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead. But while the disciples stood around him, he arose and entered the city. And the next day he went away with Barnabas to Derbe. And after they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

Here the apostle is literally struck down for preaching the gospel. Some Jews had walked 68 miles from Antioch and Iconium just to get a shot at him in Lystra. They spent some time winning over the residents of the city and then attacked Paul and stoned him. I believe they killed him. They had already killed quite a few people, in all probability, so they knew what death looked like. They killed him and dragged his body outside the city. Later that day, however, the Lord raised him from the dead and the apostle went back into the city. Instead of getting out of town as quickly as possible, Paul goes right back again! What courage! Only the Holy Spirit can empower people to do such things. The next day the apostle went on to Derbe, 18 miles away, and preached the gospel to many there who became disciples of Christ.

So Paul was struck down but he was not destroyed. Having been pioneers of the gospel for two years now, he and Barnabas feel that the time has come to shepherd the churches they had founded. Although it would seem logical to avoid places like Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, where they had suffered much persecution, under the prompting of the Holy Spirit they do the unnatural thing, returning to the same three cities where they had been beaten and reviled. Why did they do this? They sensed the need to strengthen the souls of the new believers, and knew that they needed to be encouraged in the faith. They recognized the need to appoint elders in every church; and they saw the need to pray with them and commend them to the living Lord and Savior in whom they had put their trust.

Thus the time has now come for Paul and Barnabas to head home, following their two years of missionary work.

#### **IV. 'Death Works in Us, but Life in You . . .' Acts 14:24-28**

And they passed through Pisidia and came into Pamphylia. And when they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia; and from there they sailed to Antioch, from which they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had accomplished. And when they had arrived and gathered the church together, they began to report all things that God had done with them and how He had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. And they spent a long time with the disciples.

On their return journey they stopped at Perga, a place they had avoided on their outward journey, and preached the gospel. Occasionally you will not feel like sharing the gospel in a given location and then later hear the Holy Spirit say, "Now is the time." There is a principle there. It is being in tune with the Spirit, knowing when to speak and when not to speak.

In verses 27 and 28 we read that, upon their return to Antioch, Paul and Barnabas gave a report of their travels and the work they had accomplished through the power of the Holy Spirit. They gathered together the church that had commissioned them and had been praying for them for the past two years, reporting all the things that God had done with them: how Paul's apostleship was validated in Paphos; his sickness on the journey to Antioch; their boldness in the synagogue in Antioch; the persecution they suffered from both Jews and Gentiles in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra; their turning to the Gentiles in Antioch; the signs and wonders granted them in Iconium; the healing of the lame man in Lystra, and the response of the onlookers who thought they were gods; and finally, the establishing of churches and appointing of elders.

Then they reported on how God had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles; how there were no converts made in Cyprus until Sergius Paulus, the Roman governor, came to Christ; how the Jewish leadership rejected the gospel in Antioch, but the joy they had in watching the Gentiles, not only in the city but in the surrounding countryside, come to faith; how in Iconium a great number of Jews and Gentiles accepted Christ; that in Lystra, a lame man came to faith; and in Derbe, many Gentiles come to the Lord.

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake, that

the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our mortal nesh. So death works in us, but life in you.

"Death works in us . . ." That is, we are willing to die, physically, emotionally or spiritually, so that others might live. We are willing to give up everything so that you might have life in Christ. So ends the first missionary journey of the apostle Paul, a journey of some 2100 miles over a period of two years (47-49 AD).

God wants Christians to penetrate communities and use every opportunity to witness for his name's sake. Paul's experience pictures for us the fact that God is willing to work with anyone who will show up and be available to be used by him. We are living in the age of the Spirit, which began on the day of Pentecost and will last until Jesus returns again. During this time, God will draw out from every community and from every generation a people for himself. So there are people all over the world waiting to hear this gospel. But there will be resistance to the message of the good news. Spiritual warfare will ensure that. The challenge for us is, do we want to be part of God's wonderful plan of redemption? If we do, we can be sure we will experience joy and adventure, but also suffering and heartache. When you wake up in the morning knowing who you are a sinner saved by grace and knowing that Jesus has been raised from the dead and is now living within you, and that the Holy Spirit will minister through you, you will agree that the Christian life is life as God intended it to be lived. There is no other life worth living. May we be found by Christ, when he comes again, living in this way, being busy about our Father's business.

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Ron R. Ritchie  
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