

Cities of the New Testament: Lystra

This is the seventh in a continuing *Ekklesia Then & Now* series on the cities of the New Testament. Previous installments have been [Corinth](#) (ET&N 23), [Ephesus](#) (28), [Laodicea](#) (33), [Antioch](#) (40), [Rome](#) (53), and [Alexandria](#) (60). The purpose of the series is to examine the history, geography, religion, culture, and people of each city and to consider how they relate to us today. Additional installments of this series will discuss Tarsus, Puteoli, Caesarea, Arimathea, Colossae, Thessalonica, Philippi, Perga, and Athens. Additional cities may be added.

Then

Memories of the city of Lystra must have stirred strong emotions in Paul as he sat in a Roman prison writing what may have been his final letter, the one we know as Second Timothy. In the opening comments of that letter, he remembers Timothy's mother, Eunice, and grandmother Lois, who must have been among the earliest converts in the city and who passed their new faith on to Timothy (1 Timothy 1:5).



Paul's travels in Turkey
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When one looks at a map of Paul's missionary journeys, Lystra is prominent. Paul was in the city on at least four occasions, which is in itself a testament to Paul's faithful commitment to the early believers with whom he shared the gospel. Time and again, he returned to those cities to encourage the churches and combat those who attempted to subvert the story of God's grace. Considering Paul's experience on his first visit to Lystra, it's remarkable that he ever returned there.

The occasion was his first missionary journey. Barnabas and his young nephew John Mark had traveled through Cyprus, where the proconsul Sergius Paulus accepted Paul's message, and proceeded to Perga, on the central coast of Turkey. For reasons that would later cause a rift between Paul and Barnabas, John Mark left the mission at this point, returning to Jerusalem (Acts 13:12-13). They traveled to Antioch in Pisidia, where they converted many Gentiles but met stiff opposition from some Jews and were driven out of the city. In Iconium, the preaching of Paul and Barnabas was so dynamic, it divided the city. Their opponents plotted to stone them, so they fled to Lystra (Acts 13:14-14:6).

Lystra and Lycaonia

Unlike most of the cities in this series, Lystra was more a frontier outpost than a major metropolis. Colonized by Rome under Augustus in 6 B.C., it was populated by Greeks, Jews, and native Lycaonians, but the local aristocracy consisted of the garrison of Roman soldiers. Divided between the Roman provinces of Galatia and Cappadocia, Lycaonia is described by the Roman geographer Strabo as a cold region of elevated plains suitable primarily as pasture for sheep. The Anatolian plain stretches east and south from Lystra, while it is bordered by mountain ranges to the north and west. The primary city of Lycaonia, Iconium (modern Konya) lay some eighteen miles north of Lystra.



Site of Lystra from the east
Photo courtesy bibleplaces.com
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The Lycaonians themselves are frequently described as an independent, uneducated, wild and lawless race of freebooters, and the fact that Luke claims that the people of Lystra responded to Paul and Barnabas in the Lycaonian language (Acts 14:11) confirms their stubborn preservation of Lycaonian culture. Lystra had been Greek territory, and it had been colonized by Rome for more than fifty years, yet they persisted in using their native language.

Lystra during Paul's first missionary journey (48 AD)

In Lystra, Paul immediately created a sensation when he healed a life-long cripple. The natives were, however, unprepared for his display of divine power and attributed it to the Greek gods. They called Barnabas "Zeus" and Paul "Hermes," the principal messenger of Zeus, because Paul was the main speaker while Barnabas may have seemed more aloof and detached, as a principal god would (Acts 14:8-13). When the priest of Zeus brought animals to be sacrificed to these "gods" (as depicted in [Pieter Coecke van Aelst's 1534 painting](#)), Paul and Barnabas were distraught, shouted out "We also are men, of like nature with you" and shared the gospel (Acts 14:14-17).



The Sacrifice at Lystra, Pieter Coecke van Aelst, c 1534, [Paul Getty Museum](#)
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It appears that the people of Lystra were also rather fickle. According to Luke, Paul and Barnabas "scarcely restrained the people from offering sacrifice to them" and when irate Jews from Pisidian Antioch and Iconium arrived, they were able to persuade the people to stone the god-man, Hermes-Paul. They dragged him outside the city walls and left him for dead. When disciples came, presumably to recover his body, Paul was found alive. He and Barnabas departed Lystra the next day for Derbe (Acts 14:18-20). If their hasty departure is understandable, their subsequent decision to return to Lystra testifies to their courage and commitment. That decision also proves the existence of a fledgling church in Lystra (as well as Iconium and Antioch), where Paul and Barnabas "strengthen(ed) the souls of the disciples, encourag(ed) them to continue in the faith," and appointed elders (Acts 14:21-23). Their labors, performed under the serious threat of death, were not in vain.

Paul's Letter to Galatia (49 AD)

Galatians is not written specifically to the church in Lystra, but to all the churches of southern Galatia, which would have included Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe, as well as any churches that formed in other Galatian cities and towns. Furthermore, Paul's letter to the Galatians is generally considered the earliest Christian document, probably written sometime just prior to the Jerusalem Council (see an excellent analysis [here](#)) laying out Paul's position on what was to be the subject of the Council.

Lystra during Paul's second missionary journey (50 AD)

Following his trip to Jerusalem for the apostolic conference in 49 A.D., Paul spent some time preaching and teaching in Antioch before deciding to again visit the churches he and Barnabas had planted. Disagreeing about John Mark, Paul and Barnabas split. Barnabas took John Mark back to Cyprus, while Paul chose Silas as his new missionary companion and headed west on the Roman road to Cilicia (central coastal Turkey) before turning northward to Derbe and Lystra (Acts 15: 35-16: 1).

In Lystra, Paul adds the young Timothy to his missionary team. Timothy was apparently a native of Lystra and Luke tells us that he was the product of a not-uncommon mixed marriage—his mother, Eunice, was a Jewish Christian, probably converted during Paul's earlier visit, while his father was an unbelieving Greek. Before leaving Lystra, however, we encounter one of Paul's more curious acts—the circumcision of Timothy, which Luke mentions almost parenthetically (Acts 16: 1-3).

Why would Paul, who had only a few months earlier debated with some Judean Christians who came to Antioch teaching "*Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved*" (Acts 15:1-2). In his letter to the churches of Galatia, perhaps a response to this challenge, Paul writes, "*For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace*" (Galatians 5:1-4). Also in Galatians, Paul defended the right of Titus, also a Greek, to remain uncircumcised as a Christian (Galatians 2:3).

While the text is silent on the issue, we can guess that Timothy was uncircumcised because of his father. Greeks and Romans considered the Jewish rite to be brutal and superstitious and frequently opposed it as unnatural. Timothy had learned Jewish faith in a single all-powerful God from his mother and grandmother, but his ethnicity remained Greek because of his father. I can almost hear the father's objection: "You can teach him your superstition if you must, but you're not going to mutilate my son!"

Why then would Paul suggest that Timothy be circumcised against his own arguments and probably against the wishes of his father? Wouldn't Paul be obligating Timothy to keep the whole law and removing him from grace? Wouldn't he be defying Timothy's father for no critical purpose? Certainly in Lystra, people would also know how dangerous preaching the gospel could be. Paul is planning to take Timothy away from his home and exposing him to potentially life-threatening situations. Why add fuel to the fire by insisting on the Jewish rite?

First of all, I would guess that Timothy's father was no longer alive, removing the paternal objections, but that does not address the efficacy issue. The solution comes from Luke, who notes that Paul had Timothy circumcised "*because of the Jews who were in (Lystra and nearby Iconium)*" (Acts 16:3) and that one of the primary purposes of Paul's second foray through Turkey was to deliver the news contained in the letter drafted at the Jerusalem Council; that is, that circumcision (or other observations of the Law) was not required for Gentile converts to Christianity (see Acts 15:23-29). On the surface it appears that the circumcision of Timothy is a concession to the Jews of Lystra and Iconium so that Timothy would not be a stumbling block for belief in Jesus,

While I suspect something of that nature is part of the reason, I find the explanation incomplete because it might bolster the "circumcision party" Paul so strongly opposed. Certainly, the matter was clear after the Jerusalem Council and the letter Paul carried, why reawaken it? The notion that Timothy's circumcision was a concession carries a negative connotation—do it to avoid problems.

The truth, I suspect, is subtly different—that Timothy's circumcision was meant to honor his maternal heritage. The Jews Paul taught, who would care deeply about their traditions, could not help but be impressed by Timothy's act even though, as Paul would certainly explain, it was no longer necessary for salvation under God's grace revealed through Christ Jesus. Paul never objected to the practice of Jewish traditions (circumcision, feast days, etc.) as traditions. He only objected when these were viewed as necessary to salvation.

Paul himself later testified that evangelism involves being able to be identified with a given audience: "*To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law*" (1 Corinthians 9:20-21). Knowing that a significant part of Timothy's immediate evangelistic efforts would be to the Jews of Lystra and Iconium, Paul is simply having Timothy become "*as a Jew, in order to win Jews.*"

Lystra during Paul's third missionary journey (53 AD)

We have no specific reference to Paul visiting Lystra during his third missionary journey, but Luke tells us that he "*went from one place to the next through the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples*" (Acts 18:23). Lystra was in the Roman province of Galatia along the Roman road that would eventually take him to Ephesus, and it is impossible to imagine him failing to make a stopover in a city where he had experienced such momentous events, particularly since we know Timothy accompanied Paul on his third missionary journey. Certainly, Paul would have afforded Timothy the opportunity to visit, however briefly, with his mother and grandmother.

Conclusion

We cannot know precisely what thoughts passed through Paul's mind as he wrote his final letter to his protégé, but it is evident that many of the experiences described above were on his mind since he told Timothy, "*You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra--which persecutions I endured; yet from them all the Lord*

rescued me. Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 3:10-15).

Now

The reaction Paul and Barnabas received in Lystra—when Christianity met paganism—has been repeated many times in the ensuing centuries, and it would be easy to recount here the many instances of the murder of Christian missionaries and leaders in parts of Africa, South America, and the Middle East. Crimes against humble, blameless servants merely trying to spread the message of the Gospel continue today. A variety of websites adequately document the persecution of Christians including:

[International Christian Concern](http://persecution.org) (persecution.org)
[Christian Persecution Info](http://christianpersecution.info) (christianpersecution.info)
[The Voice of the Martyrs](http://persecution.com) (persecution.com)
[Christian Persecution Water](http://jesusjournal.com) (jesusjournal.com)
[Christian Monitor](http://christianmonitor.org) (christianmonitor.org)
[Exposing Satanism](http://exposingsatanism.org) (exposingsatanism.org)
[Benny Hinn Ministries](http://bennyhinn.org) (bennyhinn.org)

Persecution should come as no surprise to any Christian—it was promised by Jesus, Paul, and Peter, among others:

- *"If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you" (John 15:20).*
- *"Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:12).*
- *"Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you" (1 Peter 4:12).*

The appropriate Christian response to persecution was mandated:

- *"But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44).*
- *"Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness" (James 1:2-3).*
- *"Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them" (Romans 12:14).*

Persecution (see [ET&N 12](#)) was an important mechanism God used to spread the Gospel in the early church. Luke documents that the persecution following the execution of Stephen spread the Word *"as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch"* (Acts 11:19). Tertullian wrote "The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed" (*Apologetic*, Chapter L, ca. 200 A.D.). It was never the intent of Jesus or His disciples to spread Christianity by anything other than serving others in love and sharing the hope of the Gospel. Their reward was often persecution and martyrdom.

The situation changed dramatically on October 28, 312, when a five-year power struggle between Constantine and Maxentius for control of the western Roman Empire culminated at Milvian Bridge. Constantine supposedly had a vision of a cross and either saw or heard the Greek phrase "*Ev Toutw Nika*," often rendered in the Latin phrase "*In Hoc Signo Vinces*"—*In this sign, conquer*. Constantine defeated Maxentius at Milvian Bridge and consolidated control of the Empire. The claim that Constantine converted to Christianity is probably overstated. More likely, he recognized the growing dominance of Christianity in the Empire and used the alleged vision as a political move to gain support.



Vision of the Cross, Raffaello Sanzio, c. 1522
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It was not until 380 that Christianity was declared the official religion of the Empire by Theodosius I and the persecuted church, which had grown so dramatically over the previous three hundred years, became the persecuting church, reaching its heights during the Inquisition.

Before we Christians pat ourselves on the back for having outgrown violent methods of weeding out heretics and converting lost souls, we need to confess that in some cases, we're still using the same unbiblical and decidedly unchristian approaches. The violence may be more subtle than in the past, but it persists. I previously documented the verbally-abusive techniques of [Repent America](#) against homosexuals, but even more reprehensible techniques continue to be employed by such militant evangelistic (an oxymoron if there ever was one) groups as the [New Tribes Mission](#) and the [Summer Institute of Linguistics](#). While the websites of each of these organizations portray noble purposes, they have been accused of kidnapping, abuse, enslavement, and neglect. Many tactics employed by such groups are manipulative at best, displaying a distinct lack of faith that the message of the gospel is sufficient. Perhaps they believe that whatever meager ends they accomplish (a few conversions) justify the means. Jesus would not agree.

While many Christians today employ the biblical lesson and receive a violent response, others have forgotten or choose to ignore the example of the apostolic church. When Paul and Barnabas healed the cripple in Lystra and were subsequently hailed as gods, they were quick to deny deity and share the simple gospel message. When they were beaten nearly to death, they did not organize a retaliatory strike. Despite the initial reception, Paul returned to Lystra at least three times over the next decade, strengthening the church that arose despite the opposition and, undoubtedly, shared the reason for his hope with those who would listen. He understood that God loves pagans, too.

Discussion

Several subscribers wrote thanking me for the detailed information about Lystra, but there were no questions or comments useful to post here.



Unsure about or don't agree with something in Ekklesia Then & Now? First, be a Berean (Acts 17:10-11). If you still disagree, [post a message](#) so we can all share in the discussion!

NEXT ISSUE: New Testament Apocrypha: Acts

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