

PAUL AMONG THE RUSTICS

By Paul Penno

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Nothing is more inspiring than to read mission stories for Jesus. Dave Howard, in his book *The Power of the Holy Spirit*, tells about a fearless pastor he ministered with in Colombia named Lupercio Taba. One Sabbath Taba was preaching from his pulpit when a man appeared at a side window of the church, aimed a pistol at him, and ordered him to stop preaching. The congregation, seeing the danger, dove to the floor and hid under the pews. Taba, however, went right on preaching the gospel. The man then fired four shots at him. two shots went past the preacher's head, one on one side, one on the other, and lodged in the wall behind him. two shots went past his body, one under one arm, one under the other, and also lodged in the wall. The would-be assassin then dropped his gun and fled. Taba, still unmoved, continued his sermon.¹

The Lycaonian residents of Lystra step forward during Paul's first missionary journey to represent the most primitive and rustic of the world's cultures. According to urban Romans these mountain dwellers, failed to overcome their fear of the remembered flood waters. They remained in the highlands of central Turkey. Their fears kept them from advancing beyond an extremely isolated and rustic way of life. The Lycaonians were in contrast to the larger city and coastal dwellers who had a liberal exchange of goods, services, ideas, institutions, poets, and philosophers. This was the hillbilly backwater region of a third rate Roman colony.

This was the first truly Gentile region for Paul to enter. There was no synagogue for him to begin preaching. However, there must have been a few Jews in that Lystra was the home of Timothy whose mother was a Jewess married to a Greek.

We read from Acts that Paul and Barnabas "fled unto Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and unto the region that lieth round about: and there they preached the gospel." Acts 14:6, 7. The Gospel is God's gift of righteousness in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins to every individual, including these backwoods heathens.

¹ Dave Howard, *The Power of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, Il.: InterVarsity Press, 1979), pp. 43, 44.

There are many to whom the gospel has been shared who will receive it. Zachariah Anani was born into a family of Muslim clergy in Beirut, Lebanon. He was expected to follow in the footsteps of his Great-grandfather, and Grandfather, who were Imams, (religious authorities) and so was sent, at age three, to Islamic school. At age 13 he joined one of the many militia groups. His family was delighted, because according to Islamic tradition, those who die on the battlefield against the infidel have a right to enter heaven, and their family is to be respected. He was trained to hate Jews, Christians, and Americans, and he was taught how to fight and kill, both with weapons and with bare hands.

In his organization, if a killing was witnessed by two or more militia members, a point was placed on his chart. Soon after enlisting he made his first kill, and by the time he was 17, there were 223 points on his chart. Anani describes two types of effects this environment had on young Muslims. Either they became insanely fanatical about Islam, or they became cold and dead on the inside. The latter was Anani's reaction. By the time he was 16 he had seen so much killing and violence, that life literally meant nothing to him and even his comrades feared him. Anani was promoted to troop leader, and then formed his own regiment. Once a devout Muslim joined, and began going door to door at 3 A.M. to wake everyone for morning prayers. Anani warned him, "I don't want to pray, don't come and wake me." The next morning he was back knocking at his door announcing prayer time. Anani pulled a pistol from under his pillow, shot him through the door, and went back to sleep. Anani himself, fully expected to be dead before he turned 20.

Alone and bored one day, he came across a missionary affiliated with Operation Mobilization, preaching on a street corner. Realizing he was a Christian, Anani quickly turned to walk away, only to be stopped in his tracks by the missionary's statement: "Jesus Christ will give you new life, hope, and salvation." Waiting until the missionary was finished, Anani approached him: "Do you really believe what you said?" he asked. After a brief discussion, the missionary pushed his card into Anani's hand and said, "Call whenever you want." Unable to sleep that night, he kept replaying the missionary's words in his mind. "Jesus Christ will give you new life, hope, and salvation. The next day he called the missionary, and met with him. He wept when he heard that Jesus Christ had died on the cross, paying for His, Anani's sins. He opened a Bible for the first time in his life and read Jesus' words:

“Come unto me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” That afternoon Anani gave his life to Jesus Christ. Anani says “That started a change in my life.”²

“And there sat a certain man at Lystra, impotent in his feet, being a cripple from his mother’s womb, who never had walked.” Acts 14:8. The man’s condition was hopeless. He was congenitally crippled and everyone in town knew it.

“The same heard Paul speak: who stedfastly beholding him, and perceiving that he had faith to be healed.” Acts 14:9. Paul perceived that the lame man at Lystra had faith to be healed. He had heard Paul preach the gospel—forgiveness of sins through Christ—and he believed. In this case, doubtless, as in that of the palsied man whom Christ healed (Matt. 9:2-8), forgiveness of sins preceded the miracle; the healing of the soul was first the healing of the body second. As the man heard of the great love of Christ for suffering humanity, and his power and willingness to forgive sins, how naturally the question would arise in his mind, “Why may I not as well be healed of my lameness as of my sins?” As Christ said, “Whether is easier, to say, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Arise and walk?” Matt. 19:5. Divine power is required for both, and it is no more wonderful that the sick should be healed than that sins should be forgiven.

Most religious teachers at the present time scoff at the idea that in this age of the world God miraculously healed diseases in answer to prayer; yet they profess to believe in the forgiveness of sins. There is a close relation between the two acts. They go together. Why should not Christians depend on God for the healing of the body as well of the soul?

Paul “said with a loud voice, Stand upright on thy feet. And he leaped and walked.” Acts 14:10. He had never taken a step forward, never ran barefoot through the grass, never felt the heat from the hot beach sand running through his toes. He was just sitting where he had been placed. He could have remained motionless following the command of Paul and his faith would have been dead. He chose to move his lifeless muscles and they instantly responded by launching him off the ground and onto his feet as he walked for the first time in his life.

² “The Terrorist Who Met God.”
http://www.churchatbeavercreek.com/the%20terrorist_who_met_god.htm

Although the cure of the lame man does not represent Paul's first miracle, it is the most significant one. Peter's miracle at the Beautiful Gate was a major sign to Israel just as the healing of the paralytic by Paul at Lystra attests the mission to the Gentiles. The appearance of a miracle inaugurating the mission to the pagans in the same way that Peter's miracle inaugurated the mission to the Jews, demonstrates that indeed, something new is happening in Lystra, but it is nonetheless in continuity with Peter's previous mission.

Was Paul trying to elicit faith from the crowds when he confirms the faith of the cripple? The crowds' reaction to the healing certainly manifests a disposition to believe, but the object of the crowds' belief was other than the one Paul had been speaking about. "And when the people saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in the speech of Lycaonia, The gods are come down to us in the likeness of men." Acts 14:11. Obviously, the crowds have not understood the message of the Good News as Paul intended it. The sign meant to confirm the faith of the lame man and possibly produce faith in the onlookers, rather brought out the pagan beliefs of the people. This indicates that the crowds had misunderstood Paul's previous words. The Lystrans would have had to make a giant leap in faith to pass from their belief in many gods to the new belief in the living God. The main difficulty that awaited Paul in dealing with non-Jewish heathens was the task of changing people's old beliefs to new ones.

The healing does not immediately produce faith in the message that Paul brings to the crowds. They certainly had a disposition to believe, but it was their engrained beliefs in pagan gods. "And they called Barnabas, Jupiter; and Paul, Mercurius, because he was the chief speaker." Acts 14:12. We know from Ovid's book *Metamorphoses* which is a collection of mythological stories that have to do with people being changed into one thing or another, that the following incident occurred in a nearby area. Zeus and Hermes had once visited a valley near Lystra. They went from door to door, but the people refused to take them in. Finally, they came to a poor house occupied by a man named Philemon and his wife Baucis. These elderly people received them. So they stayed the night. In the morning the gods took the couple up out of the city to a mountain, and when they looked back on the valley they saw that the gods had flooded it, drowning everyone. Then, while they were looking on,

Philemon and Baucis saw that the gods had transformed their poor hovel into a great temple with a glittering gold roof.

When the people of Lystra saw Paul and Barnabas performing this miracle, they inevitably thought that Zeus and Hermes (other names for these gods were Jupiter and Mercury) had returned. The miracle of healing the lame man was so awesome in their eyes that, to explain how it must have happened, they went right to the top. In their minds, this was nothing the lesser spirits, whom they also served and to whom they sacrificed, could possibly have done. Remembering what had happened the first time the gods visited, the last thing in the world they wanted to do was offend them.

Do demonic forces ever do good things to people? Of course. Sick people treated by psychics in the Philippines actually get well, some through bloodless, physical surgery. Lonesome men and women find ardent lovers through voodoo in Haiti. Fortune tellers in Japan warn clients of potential dangers and tell them how to void them. In Los Angeles, distraught people learn the precise location of lost items through Santeria. Demonic forces are not quaint superstitions of backward, unenlightened people. They are personalities that intervene in daily human life and sometimes have amazing supernatural power. And although many of their activities take the appearance of being good, such are only deceitful means used by the powers of darkness to accomplish their malignant ends.

The Lystrans were deceived into thinking that the supernatural power that healed the lame man came from Zeus and Hermes. The priest of the local temple cult for the gods would have been one of the elite, aristocrats of the town. Instead of the professional priest controlling the civic religious expressions, he is responding after the fact to the people's perception of the missionaries as being the gods. "Then the priest of Jupiter, which was before their city, brought oxen and garlands unto the gates, and would have done sacrifice with the people." Acts 14:13. A chicken or pig would have been the normal sacrifice for a poor worshiper, but a bull shows that the entire city or at least some elite benefactors provided the animal. Barnabas was a diaspora Levite (Acts 4:36) and Paul a tent maker (Acts 18:3). The crowd and the priest offer both non-elite apostles bulls as sacrificial offerings; an economic extravagance suitable for gods and perhaps heroes but most certainly not for Judean craftsmen.

In the Greco-Roman sacrificial rituals garlands and wreaths demarcated the sacredness and the divinity honored on the worship

occasion. The public procession of priest, assistants, sacrificial victims, and people carrying various ritual implements emphasized that the Lystrans attributed divinity to Paul and Barnabas.

The Lyconians spoke their own language other than Greek which Paul understood and used in his communication. So at first they didn't know what plans were afoot to honor them. As soon as they found out the meaning of the ceremony, they were appalled. They took immediate and decisive action. They wanted no part of any pagan sacrifice that involved them. "Which when the apostles, Barnabas and Paul, heard of, they rent their clothes, and ran in among the people, crying out, and saying, Sirs, why do ye these things? We also are men of like passions with you." Acts 14:14.

Why are you doing these things? He answers his question by stating that we all are humans of the same nature. Paul erases any distinctions between Jews and Lystrans, and places all of humanity on common ground. The line of division is not between Jews and Gentiles but between humans and those thought to be gods.

"And preach unto you that ye should turn from these vanities unto the living God." Acts 14:14, 15. These foolish things are idolatry. The vain things are the practices involved in the worship of the Greek gods. The issue is power. Is this new God, the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, more powerful than Zeus and Hermes?

The reason Paul could address this issue of power was the healing of the lame man. Chances are, no miracle of this magnitude had previously been seen in Lystra. By stopping the sacrifice, Paul and Barnabas had succeeded in persuading the crowd that the power that had healed the lame man was not the power of Zeus and Hermes. From the Lystrans' point of view, if the supernatural power had not come from Zeus, who was the chief of all the gods of the Greek pantheon, it must have come from a yet higher source they were hearing about for the first time. Who was this God who had so much power?

Paul revealed to them that God was "the living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and all things that are in them" (Acts 14:15). God was nothing less than the Creator. Paul's approach to the Lystrans was an "allegiance encounter." In this instance it was not a "truth encounter," as it was in Antioch where the issue was grace versus law. Nor was it a "power encounter," as it was in West Cyprus with Bar-Jesus representing Satan versus Paul representing God. God had shown His superior power, so the Lystrans were faced with

the decision whether they should give up their allegiance to Zeus and Hermes and switch it to Jesus Christ.

These Lystrans were glorifying the creature (Zeus and Hermes) rather than the Creator.

The preaching that was good for those people is equally good for us, and it was written for our benefit. God's witness to Himself—to His power to save—is that He does us good, and sends us rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, supplying us with food. By these things we not only know that God *is*, but that He saves. There are not two gods. "The Lord our God is one Lord." He does not send one life and one measure of power to keep us in existence, and then another life and another power to save us; but He is present for all things that we need. "His Divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who hath called us to glory and virtue."

This is why it is so strange that there are any who "find it difficult to believe." There is no one who does not know that he lives; no one who cannot feel the breath of life from God. And yet he cannot believe! What can he not believe? Can he not believe in God's existence?

"Oh, yes; we believe that there is a God."

Well, can you not believe that He is very near? Do you breathe His breath, and yet not believe that He is a God at hand. Could you feel a friend's breath on your cheek, perhaps feel his tears falling on your face, and yet not believe that he was near?

"Y-e-e-s; of course I know that there is no life but the life of God; it is plain that nothing creates itself, and that nothing can exist apart from Him."

Hold to that, then. Know of a surety that God is your life. Now, then, what can you not believe, since you say that you believe that God exists and that He actually lives in you, otherwise you would not be alive?

"I cannot believe that He saves me."

But you have daily evidence that He does. He saves you from death every day. "It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not, they are new every morning; great is Thy faithfulness." Lam. 3:22, 23.

"But I am so wicked."

Just in that very thing is the greater evidence of His salvation. You know that you live only in Him; for "in Him we live, and move, and

have our being.” He keeps you alive in spite of your sinfulness. He does not forsake you, although you deny Him. He suffers your ways. He is your life; therefore He bears all the sins of your life. How long-suffering and patient He is! Now you must know that “the long-suffering of our Lord is salvation.” Hear what He says: “Thou hast made Me to serve with thy sins, thou hast wearied Me with thine iniquities. I, even I am He that blotteth out thy transgressions for Mine own sake, and will not remember thy sins.” Isa. 43:24, 25.

God says, “I, even I, am the Lord; and besides Me there is no Saviour.” He is Saviour. His presence saves. You cannot disbelieve in His salvation without denying your own existence. His everlasting power and Divinity are seen in everything that is made, including you; and the Gospel is nothing more than the announcement that His power saves.

Will you any longer say that you cannot believe? Will you call God a liar to His face? God has not left us without witness; He gives us the witness literally in our own hearts—in the life-blood that comes from the food that we receive from Him. “He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself; and he that believeth not God, hath made Him a liar.” Don’t do it any more. When God Himself bears witness, take Him at His word. “He that hath received His testimony hath set to his seal that God is true.” Accept the mystery, that God is manifest in the flesh, and let your whole spirit and soul and body rest on that living and active word that works effectually in all who believe.

“Who in times past suffered all nations to walk in their own ways.” Acts 14:16. Of course “all nations” does not here include the Jews, since God had given them his law so that they might not walk in their own ways. The reason why the other nations were allowed to do so is stated by Paul in the first chapter of Romans: “And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient.” God does not force himself upon any. If they do not wish to remember and acknowledge him, he withdraws from them, and lets them have their own way. The depraved condition of the Lystrans, and the heathen of other nations, shows the level to which men soon sink when they cast off from God. It may be said that infidels and atheists are often men of good morals. The answer to that is that they have the good fortune to live in a land where the public opinion is to a certain extent against immorality. Whatever of good there may be in an atheist is due solely to his surroundings or to the force of early instructions, for there can

be no principle to hold him. Let those that fear God be removed from a country, leaving only atheists to have it, having no communication with any who fear God, and the country would soon be worse than the vilest heathen country on earth.

Although God one time suffered the nations to walk in their own ways, they were not without excuse. Since the creation of the world, the eternal power and godhead of the Creator are clearly seen through the things that he has made, so that all unbelievers are without excuse, even though they have not his revealed word. Paul did not preach Christ to these men of Lystra, on this occasion; that would have been beyond their comprehension. They must have a knowledge of the true, and see that they had sinned against him, before they could receive Christ, the remedy for sin.

“Nevertheless he left not himself without witness, in that he did good, and gave us rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness.” Acts 14:17. O, the wonderful patience of God! Day after day and year after year he showers his grace. He causes his sun to shine on the evil and on the good, and sends his rain on the just and the unjust. He sends the fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness. He is witnessing of himself all the time, and has patiently kept it up year after year, while we were groveling like the beast, not recognizing it. But if we begin to recognize it, what can we not expect of the Lord. “For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life.” Rom. 5:10. We are saved by the same thing that reconciles us. In his death he gave his life to us, and when we recognize that, and as we are recognizing it, we are saved by his life.

This appeal to the things that are made, was the only way that the heathen could be convicted of the folly of idolatry. But how could they from nature learn righteousness? They could not; but when their minds were awakened to the fact that there is a God above all things that are made, the next thought would naturally be, “What must we do in order to please him?” And when a soul in sincerity asks that question, God will not leave him in ignorance. As Paul said to the Athenians, “He is not far from every one of us.” God will send a messenger with the revealed word to those who accept all that is taught them by the revelation of nature. Or he can work independent of human agency, by his Holy Spirit, applied to them directly, as in the case of Abraham. This much we may be sure of, that God is not

cramped for means to carry on a work that he has begun. And since he has given a revelation of himself that speaks a universal language, he can easily bring the one who heeds that silent voice into circumstances where he can learn the way of God more perfectly.

“And with these sayings scarce restrained they the people, that they had not done sacrifice unto them.” Acts 14:18.

“And there came thither certain Jews from Antioch and Iconium, who persuaded the people, and, having stoned Paul, drew him out of the city, supposing he had been dead.” Acts 14:19. This is a very strange episode indeed! In places like Lystra, the boundaries of the city were also the boundaries of the gods. People had only a vague notion of a god who had influence outside of their boundaries. Step out of those boundaries and you step into the area of another god or group of gods. Blur the boundaries and you blur the city’s identity. It would not have been difficult to convince a crowd that Paul was advocating the worship of foreign gods, and that would have been seen as threatening the boundaries, threatening the local cults, and therefore threatening the very city itself. Such behavior risked mob violence. People would pick up anything that lay in the street—cobblestones, broken tiles, rocks—and let fly. Stoning was a common form of group vengeance.

In December, 2006, 23-year-old Michael Blakey, was working as a Christian aid worker in Dharamsala, India, among the Tibetans. He was a student from Swansea University in England. His body was discovered in a Gully near to the St John’s Church in the Wilderness, in the northern state of Himachal Pradesh where he worshipped. Police sources in the region said that his injuries were consistent with him being stoned to death. The motivation for the killing remains unclear and police believe may have been committed by more than one person.

Paul had stones thrown at him. His body was dragged through the streets and dumped outside of the city because the locals thought he was dead, and because they wanted to disgrace his body. This dragging suggests that Paul was dead.

The disciples come to give the body a decent burial. “Howbeit, as the disciples stood round about him, he rose up, and came into the city.” Acts 14:20. They encircled his body in a ritual of mourning. The brutal stoning had wounded his body considerably, causing cuts, bruises and possibly broken bones. These new believers had their

faith in the true God confirmed by the immediate resurrection of Paul from the dead.

The very same people who, after the miracle of the loaves and fishes, would have made Jesus king, not long after that were as eager for His death. Even the very same week that He was crucified, as He came into Jerusalem, they raised their voices in shouts of “Hosanna to the Son of David,” “Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord,” and then turned about and shouted “Crucify Him! crucify Him!” The voice of the people was anything but the voice of God.

God has sent us into the world, to be saviours of the world; but let us ever bear in mind this truth, “If I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ.” The only way we can serve our fellowmen to their salvation, is to serve the Lord Christ, and to remember that promotion comes from Him alone. We must not put our trust in flesh, not even our own. There is no way of salvation and honor, except the way that Christ took,—with the cross; and the world is just as much opposed to that way today as it was in the days of Pontius Pilate and Caiaphas. “We must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God;” and to this rule there are no exceptions.

I share with you the rest of Anani’s conversion story. Anani’s first reaction was to share the joy of his new life in Jesus with his family. “I went and told my parents and everybody the next day. I didn’t hide my faith.” His family immediately responded. His father tore apart Anani’s Bible and slapped him. His mother warned all the neighbors to keep their children away from him. As the word of his conversion spread, Muslim leaders in Beirut ordered him on trial for apostasy. He was interrogated by an Imam who asked him intelligent questions. Anani felt the inadequacy of his answers, but he knew that he knew he was a Christian now, that he belonged to Jesus. He was beaten unconscious and excommunicated. He was given three days to recant and come back to the mosque a Muslim, or anybody had the right to kill him. Three days later, Anani had still not abandoned Jesus Christ, so his own father hired three Kurdish assassins to kill him. In the ensuing years, there have been 18 attempts on his life. In one attempt Anani barely escaped several attackers on the streets of Beirut. “They knifed me, there was a big gash wound in my neck,” he says. “By the time I was carried to the hospital I was clinically pronounced dead.” As his vital signs faded, one doctor worked feverishly to revive him. Miraculously Anani survived the attack, as

well as many others. “It seems the Lord doesn’t want me to do yet,” he says. “When God has his hand on you, nothing can happen.”