

PAUL'S FIRST MISSIONARY JOURNEY

Acts 13:1-14:28

Key Verse: 14:22

“...strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. ‘We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,’ they said.”

It's good to remember that the Acts of the Apostles is the second book written by Luke. The life-giving work of God began in the Galilean district in the land of Palestine. After Jesus' ascension, the handful of apostles took over his gospel work. To the eyes of the historian Luke, it was amazing that gospel work did not perish but grew and grew, conquering the world progressively. When we study Acts carefully, we learn that the Holy Spirit is the principle and the apostles were agents. Acts 13:1-28:31 is primarily concerned with St. Paul's dynamic work among the Gentiles. It is so much his work that many call this section, "The Acts of St. Paul." Basing in the Antioch church, Paul takes three journeys around the Roman world. At last Paul attains his goal of preaching at Rome, the heart of the Roman Empire. Today's passage, chapters 13-14, covers Paul's first missionary journey; it is sometimes called, "Paul's work in Galatia."

First, the Antioch church (13:1-3). As we studied in chapter 9, the early Christians were scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen (11:19-24). Some Christians ran for their lives and came to Antioch, a cosmopolitan meeting place of Jew, Greek, Roman and Syrian. Here the gospel of Jesus first attracted Gentile attention. The church at Jerusalem sent Barnabas to Antioch to see about them. The Jerusalem church did not send a bigoted person, but Barnabas. It is obvious that the Jerusalem church had good intentions to help the Antioch church, despite racial prejudice. When Barnabas arrived, he saw that a great number of people were filled with the Holy Spirit and faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ (11:22-24). God had already established the Antioch church as the first headquarters of the Gentile Christian church. A main member of the church in Antioch was Barnabas, who loved God more than money (4:36,37), and who had introduced Saul to the apostles. He believed God's work in Saul. He also recognized the Antioch church as a legitimate Christian church (11:22-26). Then there were Niger, Lucius, who came from Cyrene in North Africa; Manaen, who had courtly connections; and Saul, who was a trained Rabbi. The Antioch church was, in essence, international. Verse 2 says,

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"While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.'" The Antioch believers devoted themselves to prayer and Bible study as their expression of worshipping God. The church was seeking God's will. As soon as they heard that they should set apart Barnabas and Saul as missionaries, they obeyed, even though these two men were two main pillars in their church.

Second, the work of God in Cyprus (13:4-12). Cyprus was a Roman province and the home country of Barnabas (4:36). Obviously, Barnabas desired to share the gospel of Jesus first of all with his own people. Barnabas and Saul, by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, went down first to Seleucia, a port city of Antioch. From there they went to Salamis, a city of Cyprus, and proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ. Cyprus was an island country like the Philippines. They traveled through the whole island until they came to Paphos. There Sergius Paulus was a Roman governor who kept a Jewish fortune-teller, Elymas. The governor was an intelligent man. But he was so fearful and unsure about himself that he hired a fortune-teller. He sent for Barnabas and Saul to hear the word of God. But Elymas the sorcerer opposed them and tried to turn the governor from the faith. Where there was a work of God, there was Satan's hindrance.

What did Paul do with this enemy of God? Paul looked straight at Elymas and said, "You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right!" (10a) At Paul's rebuking, Elymas' eyes were blinded. At this, the governor believed in Jesus. He was amazed at Paul's teaching about the Lord, not just by the miracle. Paul won a convert when he had faith in Jesus and a clear attitude toward a child of the devil.

Third, the work of God in Pisidian Antioch (13:13-52). In this part Paul explains that Jesus is the Savior of the world, relating Jewish history to the salvation plan of God. From Paphos, Paul and his companions sailed to Perga in Pamphylia, where John, later known as Mark who wrote the gospel of Mark, went back to Jerusalem. Probably he was homesick and was terrified by Paul's fighting spirit. After 20 years John Mark joined Paul's ministry again (2Ti 4:11). From Perga, Paul and his companions went to Pisidian Antioch. On the Sabbath, as soon as Paul's company entered the synagogue, the synagogue rulers asked them to say a word of encouragement to the people. Paul stood up and began to speak. In his

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speech we learn that Paul had a clear sense of the work and history of God. He concentrates on two main points.

In the first place, God sent the Savior of the world from David's root (16-25). In this part Paul began to teach the history of Israel to the Jews and devout Gentile converts. It was necessary to explain who Jesus is. Look at verse 17. "The God of the people of Israel chose our fathers; he made the people prosper during their stay in Egypt, with mighty power he led them out of that country..." God chose Israel as his firstborn son so that through them the world might overflow with the knowledge of God (Ex 19:5,6). For this, God trained his people in Egypt, where they experienced the cruelty and heartlessness of mankind under godless rulers. It was a kind of humanity study. After the training was over, God brought them out into the wilderness. To God, humanity study was not enough; they needed faith training. God gave them daily bread training in the wilderness. They had to gather one day's portion of manna every day. If they gathered in their greediness more than that, they found the next day that it had spoiled. They received this training for 40 long years. Finally God sent them to the promised land. But his people asked for a king like other nations. God gave them a king, Saul. After removing Saul because of his unbelief, God established David as king because he was a man after God's own heart and would do everything God wanted him to do (22). When David obeyed God's will absolutely, God was pleased and promised that he would send the Savior of the world from his root. As God promised, John the Baptist came. And then Jesus came. He is the Savior of the world. His coming changed the world from BC to AD. These days many people say history is going nowhere. More educated people say history is nothing but a vicious cycle. Some stoic people say, "History is the record of man's sins and injustice." But history is not a purposeless process, as they say. Here Paul insists that the coming of Jesus is the consummation of history.

In the second place, God raised Jesus from the dead (26-52). After explaining God's plan to send a Savior of the world through his chosen people and from the root of David, Paul exclaimed, "Brothers, children of Abraham, and you God-fearing Gentiles...." It was unthinkable for Jews to call Gentiles "brothers. But Paul accepted the Gentiles as his own brothers in Christ. We can aptly describe Paul's feeling when we think about the Lord's prayer, "Our Father in heaven..." Look again at verse 26. "Brothers, children of Abraham, and you God-fearing Gentiles,

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it is to us that this message of salvation has been sent." Paul had been an ardent nationalist, but when he accepted Jesus, the universal brotherhood in Christ came into his heart. Paul, who had the heart of a squirrel, began to have the heart of God.

Next, Paul tells them what the people of Jerusalem and their leaders had done to Jesus (27-29). Jesus came to that which was his own, but his people did not recognize him or receive him. When Jesus healed the sick and preached the good news of the kingdom of God, the religious rulers should have supported him because his work was to save sinners from their sins. When Jesus raised 12 disciples, they criticized him with sarcasm, "They are a band of beggars and breakers of the Sabbath law." Thomas Carlyle said, "Sarcasm is the language of the devil." These devils condemned and crucified Jesus on the cross. But his death was not a tragedy; it was the fulfillment of prophecy that the Messiah would come as the Lamb of God; his death was to save men from their sins; ultimately, his death was the Son's obedience to his "Abba Father" and the fulfillment of the Father's will for world salvation.

What did God do when his one and only Son was buried in a tomb after crucifixion? God raised him from the dead on the third day (Ps 16:10). Let's read verse 30. "But God raised him from the dead..." By raising him God proved that he is living and almighty. By raising him God destroyed the last enemy, death. By raising him God gave a living hope of the kingdom of God to those who believe in the Son.

In the past all men knelt down before the power of death and were swallowed up. David was a king who served God's purpose in his own generation. But he also died and his body decayed (36). What happened to the one whom God raised from the dead? Look at verse 37. "But the one whom God raised from the dead did not see decay." The resurrection of Jesus is God's victory as well as victory to all human beings who believe in him (1Co 15:54b, 55). Not only so, but also through his Son's death, those who believe in the Son are all pardoned and accepted as the children of God, regardless of their condemned state. Let's read verses 38,39. "Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses." Therefore we must not take lightly what the prophets have said (40,41). In this way Paul explained that Jesus is the Savior of the world.

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As Paul and Barnabas were leaving, the people invited them to speak again (42,43). On the other hand, the Jews who were filled with jealousy talked abusively against what Paul was saying (45). The Jews persecuted and expelled Paul's company by making use of God-fearing women of high standing (49,50). Since fellow Jews rejected the gospel, Paul and Barnabas decided to turn to the Gentiles. Let's read verses 46-47. "Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. For this is what the Lord has commanded us: "I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.""" When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord. In this way God opened the door for gospel work among Gentiles.

Fourth, the work of God in Iconium (14:1-7). The work of God in Iconium was like a bloody battle between Christian soldiers and those of the devil. Look at verse 1. "At Iconium Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue. There they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Gentiles believed." Then what happened? Enemies of God poisoned new Christians' minds. Paul and Barnabas did not argue with the agents of the devil. Instead they only preached the gospel of Jesus Christ. When the soldiers of Christ were too weak, the Holy Spirit enabled them to perform miracles before the enemies. Still the enemies persisted. So there was a division in the city between the Christian soldiers and the enemies of God (4). There was a plot afoot among the Gentiles and Jews; historically they were known to be enemies, but in doing the devil's work they became friends. Paul and Barnabas found out about the plot and fled to the cities of Lystra and Derbe. Here we learn that when Christians are weak, the Holy Spirit comes to the rescue.

Fifth, God's work in Lystra and Derbe (8-28). In Iconium Paul and Barnabas met a critical moment because they were badly mistreated. In Lystra they met another critical moment because the people there wanted to make them gods. In Lystra there sat a man crippled in his feet, who was lame from birth and had never walked. He listened to Paul as he was speaking (8.9a). Paul healed him because he saw that the man had faith (9b,10).

What was the response of the crowd when they saw what Paul had done? They said, "The gods have come down to us in human form!" They

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called Barnabas Zeus--the god of lustful immorality. They called Paul Hermes--a chief speaker (Kermit the frog). The priests of Zeus prepared to offer sacrifices to them. These ignorant people tried to deify them, not based on the gospel, but on a miracle (10-13).

What did Paul do with them? He said, "We are only men, human like you." Paul began to teach them a simple truth from Genesis: God is the Creator; he provides for all men's needs; he fills men's hearts with joy (14-18). But Genesis study did not work in their hearts because they were superstitious (18). Things went from bad to worse when some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and stirred up the crowd. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city and threw him away, thinking he was dead. But after the disciples gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city (19,20). In doing gospel work, Paul participated in the remaining suffering of Jesus Christ, who was killed and thrown away outside the city walls of Jerusalem.

The next day Paul and Barnabas went to Derbe and won a large number of disciples. Then they started back to Antioch. On the way back, what did they do? They visited the towns where they had been mistreated. Did they complain? No. Read verse 22. "...strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. 'We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,' they said." This was their testimony after their first missionary journey. Through their testimony they strengthened and encouraged the disciples to remain true to the faith. "To enter the kingdom of God" does not mean only personal salvation; it also means to expand the territory of the kingdom of God and conquer the whole world with the gospel of Jesus Christ until his kingdom comes. When they arrived in Antioch, they told how God had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles.

In this passage we learn that the Christian church is the fellowship of those who study the Bible, pray earnestly and obey wholeheartedly. Christians are not easy-going civilians, but the soldiers of Jesus Christ. May God use us as Christian soldiers, to fight to expand the territory of the kingdom of God. In the past God blessed America to send one million missionaries to the whole world. Now it seems that working hard for future security and enjoying the pleasures of sin and falling into miserable meaninglessness is the pattern of life. May God give us missionary vision.