

Paul's First Missionary Journey



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Acts 13, 2 Cor. 4:7–10, Rom. 10:1–4, Rom. 3:19, Acts 14:1–26, Romans 9–11.*

Memory Text: “Therefore, my friends, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is set free from every sin, a justification you were not able to obtain under the law of Moses’ ” (*Acts 13:38, 39, NIV*).

Most certainly, the gospel was to go to the Gentiles as well as the Jews. This was a message that, slowly but surely, the early Jewish Christians were starting to grasp.

Our first explicit report of Gentiles joining the faith in large scale relates to Antioch. In other words, it was in Antioch that the first Gentile church was founded, even if it also had a substantial contingent of Jewish believers (*Gal. 2:11–13*). Due to the missionary zeal of its founders and the new impetus provided by the arrival of Barnabas and Paul, the church there grew rapidly, and it became the first important Christian center outside Judea. In fact, in some aspects it even surpassed the church in Jerusalem.

With the apostles still stationed in Jerusalem, Antioch became the birthplace of Christian missions. It was from there, and with the initial support of the local believers, that Paul left on all three of his missionary journeys. It was because of their commitment that Christianity became what Jesus had intended: a world religion, one in which the gospel would be spread to “every nation, tribe, tongue, and people” (*Rev. 14:6, NKJV*).

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 18.

Salamis and Paphos

In Acts 13, Luke shifts the scene back to Antioch in order to introduce Paul's first missionary journey, which occupies two entire chapters (*Acts 13, 14*). From here through the end of the book, the focus is set on Paul and his Gentile missions.

This is the first missionary endeavor in Acts that is intentional and carefully planned by an individual church; yet, Luke is careful in highlighting that such endeavor originated in God, not in the believers' own initiative. The point, however, is that God can operate only when we willingly place ourselves in a position where He can use us.

Read Acts 13:1–12. What main points does Luke want to stress concerning Barnabas and Paul's activities in Cyprus?

A period of intercessory prayer and fasting preceded the departure of the missionaries; in this context, the laying on of hands was basically an act of consecration, or a commendation to God's grace (*Acts 14:26*) for the task at hand.

The island of Cyprus is in the northeastern corner of the Mediterranean Sea, not far from Antioch. It was a natural place to start, as not only was Barnabas from Cyprus but the gospel had also already reached the island. Yet, certainly there was still much to be done.

Once in Cyprus, Barnabas and Paul—and John Mark, Barnabas's cousin (*Acts 15:39, Col. 4:10*), who was with them—preached in the synagogues of Salamis. This was Paul's regular practice: to preach first in the synagogues before turning to Gentiles. Because Jesus was Israel's Messiah, it was more than natural to share the gospel with Jews first.

After Salamis, they moved westward, preaching (we can assume) as they went, until they came to the capital, Paphos. The narrative then revolves around two individuals: a Jewish sorcerer named Bar-Jesus, also known as Elymas, and Sergius Paulus, the local Roman governor. The story provides a good example of how the gospel was met with contrasting responses: on one hand, open opposition; on the other, faithful acceptance even by highly prestigious Gentiles. The language of Acts 13:12 clearly implies conversion.

Think how, in this case, it was a Jew who resisted the truth while a Gentile accepted it. How might this help us understand why sometimes those of other Christian denominations are harder to reach with "present truth" than are those of no faith at all?

Pisidian Antioch: Part 1

From Cyprus, Paul and his companions sailed to Perga, in Pamphylia, on the southern coast of modern Turkey. Before they moved on to Pisidian Antioch, Luke reports two significant incidental changes: Paul becomes the leading figure (up until here, Barnabas always is mentioned first) and Luke stops using Paul's Jewish name ("Saul") and starts referring to him only as "Paul" (*Acts 13:9*). This is probably because from now on Paul finds himself mostly in a Greco-Roman environment.

Acts 13:13 records John Mark's going back to Jerusalem. We are not informed in the texts themselves of the reason for John Mark's desertion. Ellen G. White wrote that, faced with fear and discouraged because of the hardship ahead of them, "Mark was intimidated and, losing all courage, refused to go farther and returned to Jerusalem."—*The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 170. God never promised it would be easy. On the contrary, Paul knew from the very beginning that his service for Jesus would involve much suffering (*Acts 9:16*), but he learned to rely entirely on God's power, and in that lay the secret of his strength (*2 Cor. 4:7–10*).

Read Acts 13:38. What was the essence of Paul's message in the Antioch synagogue?

Acts 13:16–41 contains the first of Paul's sermons recorded in the New Testament. It was not, of course, the first sermon Paul gave, and there is no question that it represents only a brief summary of what he said.

The sermon is divided into three main parts. It begins with shared beliefs about God's election of Israel and the kingship of David (*Acts 13:17–23*); this part is intended to establish a point of contact with his Jewish audience. Next, it presents Jesus as the fulfillment of God's promises of a descendant of David who could bring salvation to Israel (*Acts 13:24–37*). The concluding part is a warning against rejecting the salvation that is offered through Jesus (*Acts 13:38–41*).

The climax of the sermon is verses 38, 39, which enclose the core of Paul's message on justification. Forgiveness and justification are available only through Jesus, not through Moses' law. This passage does not say that the law has been abrogated. It only highlights its inability to perform what the Jews expected it to do; namely, justification (Rom. 10:1–4). Such prerogative rests solely with Jesus Christ (*Gal. 2:16*).

What does it mean that salvation is only through Jesus? How do you reconcile the necessity to keep God's moral law with the fact that the law is unable to justify?

Pisidian Antioch: Part 2

Acts 13:38, 39, presents the issue of the law's inability to justify, an important doctrinal concept. Despite the binding character of its moral commandments, the law is unable to bring justification because it cannot produce perfect obedience in those who observe it (*Acts 15:10, Rom. 8:3*). Even if the law could produce perfect obedience in us, that perfect obedience cannot atone for past sins (*Rom. 3:19; Gal. 3:10, 11*). This is why justification cannot be earned, not even partially. We can receive it only by faith in Jesus' atoning sacrifice (*Rom. 3:28, Gal. 2:16*), a gift that we do not deserve. However central it may be to the Christian life, obedience cannot earn us salvation.

Read Acts 13:42–49. How did the synagogue receive Paul's message?

Notwithstanding the harsh way Paul ended his message, the reaction of most in the synagogue was highly favorable. The following Sabbath, however, things changed drastically. It is highly probable that "the Jews" who were rejecting the gospel message were the synagogue leaders, those who represented official Judaism. Luke ascribes their ruthless attitude toward Paul to jealousy.

In the ancient world, several aspects of Judaism, such as monotheism, lifestyle, and even the Sabbath, exerted a strong attraction among non-Jews, and many of them joined the Jewish faith as proselytes. Circumcision, however, was a serious hindrance, as it was considered a barbaric and disgusting practice. Consequently, many Gentiles would attend the synagogues to worship God but without formally converting to Judaism. These were known as "God-fearers," and it might have been the God-fearers, as well as the proselytes, of the Antioch synagogue (*Acts 13:16, 43*) who helped to spread the news about Paul's message among the people in general, and they came in great numbers. The possibility to experience salvation without first having to adhere to Judaism was no doubt particularly attractive to many.

This may help to explain the jealousy of the Jewish leaders. In any case, by rejecting the gospel they were not only excluding themselves from God's salvation but also liberating Paul and Barnabas to turn their full attention to the Gentiles, who rejoiced and praised God for including them in His saving plan.

Iconium

Under the instigation of the Jewish leaders in Antioch, the local authorities incited a mob against Paul and Barnabas and ran them out of town (*Acts 13:50*). The disciples, however, were filled with joy and the Holy Spirit (*Acts 13:52*). The missionaries then headed to the city of Iconium.

Read Acts 14:1–7. What was the result of Paul and Barnabas’s activities in Iconium?

In Iconium, Paul and Barnabas continued their practice of addressing first the Jews before turning to the Gentiles. Paul’s sermon in Antioch (*Acts 13:16–41*) offers the main reason behind the Jewish priority in their ministry: the election of Israel, with all that it involved (*Rom. 3:2; 9:4, 5*), and God’s fulfillment of His promise of a Savior from David’s lineage. Despite the fact that many Jews were rejecting the gospel, Paul never lost hope of a substantial Jewish conversion.

In Romans 9–11, Paul makes it clear that “not all who are descended from Israel are Israel” (*Rom. 9:6, NIV*) and that it is only because of God’s mercy that some of the Jews believe at all. God has not rejected His people, but “at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace” (*Rom. 11:5, NIV*). Paul continued to preach the gospel to Gentiles, though he believed that one day more Jews would come to faith in Jesus.

“Paul’s argument in Romans 9–11 offers a further explanation of the mission strategy he pursues in the narrative of Acts and confronts every generation of Christians with the theological importance of bearing witness to unbelieving Jews.”—David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), p. 401.

The situation was not much different from that in Antioch. The first reaction of both Jews and Gentiles to Paul’s gospel was highly positive, but again the unbelieving Jews, possibly the leaders of the local Jewish community, stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the missionaries, causing a division among the people. As the opponents were planning to attack and lynch Paul and Barnabas, the two missionaries decided to leave the town and move to the next one.

More than just hearing the gospel, Jewish people need to see it lived among those who profess the name of Jesus. If you have Jewish acquaintances, what kind of witness are you presenting to them?

Lystra and Derbe

The next place Paul and Barnabas visited was Lystra, an obscure village some 18 miles (about 29 km) southwest of Iconium. Though they spent some time there (*Acts 14:6, 7, 15*), Luke reports only one story and its developments: the healing of a lame man, probably a beggar, who suffered from that malady from birth.

Read Acts 14:5–19. What did their reaction to Paul reveal about just how steeped in ignorance the people were?

The crowd was so impressed by the miracle that they mistook Paul and Barnabas for gods—Barnabas for Zeus, the supreme god of the Greek pantheon, and Paul for Hermes, Zeus’s attendant and spokesman. In fact, the people wanted to offer them sacrifices.

Latin poet Ovid (43 B.C.–A.D. 17/18) had earlier recorded a legend of these same two gods disguised as humans visiting a town in the same area (“the hills of Phrygia”) and seeking a place to rest. According to the legend, a humble, elderly couple treated them kindly and with hospitality; the rest of the people were indifferent. Because of their kindness and hospitality toward the incognito visitors, the couple had their house transformed into a temple and themselves into priests, while the rest of the town was completely destroyed (*Metamorphoses* 611–724).

With such a story circulating in this region, the reaction of the people to Paul’s miracle comes as no surprise. The story also helps to explain why the crowd assumed that the missionaries were those two gods, and not Asclepius, for example, the god of healing. Paul and Barnabas, however, were able to stop their false worship of themselves. In the end, some opponents from Antioch and Iconium caused a complete reversal of the situation, and Paul was stoned and left for dead.

Read Acts 14:20–26. Where did Paul and Barnabas finish their journey? And what did they do on their way back?

Paul said: “ ‘We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God’ ” (*Acts 14:22, NKJV*). What does that mean? How have you, perhaps, experienced what he is saying there? Most important, how can you learn to grow in faith from whatever “tribulations” you are facing?

Further Thought: “During the life of Christ on earth he had sought to lead the Jews out of their exclusiveness. The conversion of the centurion and of the Syrophenician woman, were instances of his direct work outside of the acknowledged people of Israel. The time had now come for active and continued work among the Gentiles, of whom whole communities received the gospel gladly, and glorified God for the light of an intelligent faith. The unbelief and malice of the Jews did not turn aside the purpose of God; for a new Israel was grafted into the old olive-tree. The synagogues were closed against the apostles; but private houses were thrown open for their use, and public buildings of the Gentiles were also used in which to preach the word of God.”—Ellen G. White, *Sketches From the Life of Paul*, p. 51.

“In all their missionary endeavors Paul and Barnabas sought to follow Christ’s example of willing sacrifice and faithful, earnest labor for souls. Wide-awake, zealous, untiring, they did not consult inclination or personal ease, but with prayerful anxiety and unceasing activity they sowed the seed of truth. And with the sowing of the seed, the apostles were careful to give to all who took their stand for the gospel, practical instruction that was of untold value. This spirit of earnestness and godly fear made upon the minds of the new disciples a lasting impression regarding the importance of the gospel message.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 186.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Dwell more on the story of John Mark’s fleeing when things got hard. Paul and Barnabas later had an argument over John Mark, when Barnabas wanted to use him again and Paul didn’t (see *Acts 15:37*). Years later, however, Paul wrote: “Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for ministry” (*2 Tim. 4:11, NKJV*). What lessons are here for us regarding those who, in certain circumstances, prove unfaithful to their calling?
- 2 Review Paul and Barnabas’s response to the Lystrians when they were mistaken for gods (*Acts 14:14–18*). How can we respond when tempted to take credit for what God has done?
- 3 Read *Acts 14:21–23*. Based on Paul and Barnabas’s example, what can we individually and as a church do to nourish or strengthen the faith of new converts?
- 4 How can we make sure that we don’t let man-made traditions, or even beliefs that we have held for a long time, get in the way of advancing in truth, as did the religious leaders who opposed Paul?

Pornography vs. Gospel

By TAKAHASHI TORU

The day was long and disappointing as I went door to door to sell Seventh-day Adventist books in the southern Japanese city of Shizuoka. No one wanted to buy a book.

Near the day's end, I suddenly found myself on a strange, dark street. Uneasily, I walked over to the nearest house. Pornographic magazines were strewn around the yard. Piles of the magazines were stacked up near the front door. The magazines were everywhere.

I backed away. Fear seized me, and I wanted to run. Then I panicked.

"Hello, my name is Takahashi Toru!" I yelled at the house. "I'm from the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and I have some books that will change your life!"

The words came from a speech that we are trained to give by Youth Rush, a student literature evangelism program. When I panicked, I began to blurt out the speech.

The front door opened, and a severely obese man stepped out. Still following my speech, I asked, "Would you like a health book?"

I expected the man to say, "No," and I was prepared to run.

But the man, his voice rumbling in a deep bass, said, "Yes, I'd like a health book."

I nervously held out a small missionary book. The man took it and opened it with interest.

"Yes, I want to get this," he said, pulling out some money.

After the sale, I fled. I was scared, and I wanted to get far away. As I ran, I prayed for the man and thanked God for His protection.

Then I stopped in my tracks. I had an epiphany. My heart was just as filthy as that man's yard. Still, Jesus had walked into my heart and offered hope. Jesus said, "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you" (Ezekiel 36:26, NKJV).

As I stood on the street, gratitude overwhelmed me. I felt so thankful that Jesus had dared to enter my heart. With that newfound appreciation, I marched over to the nearest house and immediately sold a book.



TAKAHASHI TORU, left, a 21-year-old media-journalism student, received his Youth Rush training at Tokyo's Setagaya Church, which trains Adventist young people from across Japan to share the gospel message. Part of this quarter's Thirteenth Sabbath Offering will help the church expand its work.