

# **Truth for Today**

*The Bible teaching radio programme*

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## **Acts 13:4-14:27 – The First Missionary Journey**

The very first missionary journey in the life of the early Christian church is described for us in Acts chapters 13 and 14. Paul and Barnabas were the missionaries, together with John Mark as their assistant. I want to consider their journey under two major headings: first, the historical events, and secondly, the application of the scriptures to us. However, before beginning, I recall in my early twenties how my thoughts went to missionary service and whether I would be suitable. I considered my ability with languages - very unlikely to become passable, let alone competent! I next considered my personal skill level, to bring some practical dimension to missionary service - an unskilled odd job man would best describe my abilities! And so the thought process went on, until over a period of time the conclusion was reached that maybe my line of service for the Lord would be elsewhere.

When reading Acts 13 and 14, I noticed that Paul and those who were with him were men of strength and ability, prepared for the arduous and dangerous life on which they embarked. Their skills and abilities had already been acquired prior to conversion, plus a thorough grounding in the scriptures, only acquired by communion with their Lord and Master.

Let us look at the historical aspects of Acts 13 and 14.

### **Responding to the call of God**

Three days after Saul was dramatically converted on the road to Damascus, the Lord gave him a commission, "To bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel", Acts 9. In Acts 13, the Holy Spirit clearly indicates to the church at Antioch that Barnabas and Saul should be separated to a specific work which resulted in the first missionary journey. The first stage of the journey is the home country of Barnabas - the island of Cyprus.

### **The preaching in Cyprus**

When they arrive in Cyprus they immediately begin preaching, going from synagogue to synagogue as they move round the island. During the tour, they come into contact with the governor of the island and also a sorcerer called Elymas, who appears to have become a close associate of the governor. As his occupation indicates Elymas is a slave of Satan. He opposes the truth of the Gospel and Saul. Saul, in the power of God, confronts and brings blindness on the sorcerer. Such a demonstration of the power of God convicts the governor and he believes.

After this Saul and the others leave Cyprus to visit other cities on the mainland of Asia. As they depart, John, one of their companions leaves them and returns home to Jerusalem. About this time Saul becomes known as Paul.

### **Preaching at Antioch in Pisidia**

Antioch in Pisidia is the next city in which we have details of Paul and the others preaching. This time they visit a synagogue and wait for an invitation to speak. It was a custom that visitors to a synagogue were given opportunity to speak or give greetings.

Paul takes the opportunity and begins with opening remarks that are guaranteed to gain the attention of all in the synagogue, "Men of Israel, and you who fear God, listen." Then Paul takes them on a well known historical tour of the scriptures before referring to prophetic statements that speak of Jesus, "From this man's seed (David, the son of Jesse), according to the promise, God raised up for Israel a Saviour - Jesus." However, the rulers in Jerusalem had Jesus crucified, "But God raised Him from the dead." In this way Psalm 2 was fulfilled, "You are My Son, today I have begotten You." Jesus was brought forth in all the power of a risen life. His resurrection also fulfilled Psalm 16, "You will not allow Your Holy One to see corruption."

Finally, Paul brings his preaching to a close with the appeal found in verses 38 to 41: "Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins; and by Him everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses. Beware therefore, lest what has

been spoken in the prophets come upon you: 'Behold, you despisers, marvel and perish; for I work a work in your days, a work which you will by no means believe, though one were to declare it to you.'

Here was a clear and simple Gospel presenting Jesus as the only One in whom the forgiveness of sins can be obtained. Otherwise, the stark message was that without believing in Jesus you will perish eternally. This is still the challenge of the Gospel today.

The result is dramatic: some Jews believed, others did not. The Gentiles also asked to hear again this Gospel message. Those who did believe were encouraged by Paul and Barnabas to continue in the grace of God, to live this new life as having been delivered from a life where there was no hope or lasting blessing.

One week later, the whole city comes to hear Paul preach. This time the opposition comes from the religious Jewish people, not a sorcerer as in Cyprus. Paul now preaches directly to the Gentiles and many believe. Such was the impact of the preaching that the word of the Lord was spread throughout all the region. However, this only increased the opposition and Paul, Barnabas and the others were forced to leave. In doing so, this was not defeat but victory as they left behind Christians who were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit. The seed of the Gospel had been sown and was bearing fruit a hundred fold.

### **The preaching at Iconium and Lystra**

When the missionary party arrive at the city of Iconium, again there is power in the Gospel preaching. In 14:1 we read, "a great multitude both of the Jews and of the Greeks believed." As before, opposition came from those who did not want to believe the wonderful Gospel of free salvation through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. However, Paul and Barnabas stayed a long time, also doing signs and wonders (we are not told what) but these things confirmed that the Gospel message was indeed from God.

When the violence became too great, the missionaries moved on to Lystra. Here a cripple man is healed. Paul perceived that this physically disadvantaged man had faith to be healed. Paul therefore commanded him to stand up. Again we see the power of God through Paul working this miracle.

Unfortunately, those who believed in "man made gods" of Greek mythology sought to promote Barnabas and Paul as objects of worship. Paul and Barnabas refuted this, and another opportunity to preach was made available.

After this, those who persecuted Paul and his companions in previous towns and cities, arrived at Lystra and caught Paul and stoned him. This was a very Jewish form of killing. Thankfully Paul was not killed; he revived and was able to continue on his missionary work undeterred.

### **The return journey**

As Paul, Barnabas and the others returned through all the cities where they had preached, they suffered no further persecution. This gave them time to strengthen and encourage the new believers in the Christian faith. Seeing that Paul was now a living example to the new believers, he could say, "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God", Acts 14:22. From among the new Christians, Paul establishes "elders in every church", verse 23. This ensured the maintaining of the teachings and the orderly procedure of church life. Eventually Paul and his companions return home to Antioch and a report of the events is given to the whole church.

### **Lessons for today**

Can we learn from the experiences of this first missionary journey taken by Paul and his companions? The answer must be yes. "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work", 2 Timothy 3. Let us look at some of the lessons.

### **It is God who directs**

We noticed that it was the Holy Spirit who called out Barnabas and Paul. At all times we must remember that each of us are responsible to the Lord in our service. This does not rule out responsibility to each other. Possibly John, who left the missionary company after Cyprus, acted irresponsibly and his departure became a problem between Barnabas and Paul, see chapter 15.

## **Is preaching any different today?**

Early in our witness for the Lord Jesus Christ, we need to declare our new allegiance back home. This was done at Cyprus, the home country of Barnabas. In chapters 13 and 14, Paul utilised opportunities to preach in the synagogues. For us today it would be recognised places of Christian activity. Invitations to speak were given to Paul. Are we always ready to preach God's word? In 2 Timothy 4 we have the encouraging words, "Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season". There are no out of season times in Christianity; we should always be ready.

## **Confrontation**

Confrontation is always a difficult situation, and yet Paul knew when to stand and when to move on. Knowing when to stand was seen in Cyprus. A sorcerer named Elymas opposes the Gospel being presented to the governor of the island. Paul with the power of God is able to neutralise Elymas, and Satan who controlled him. In 1 Peter 5 we have a supporting scripture, "Your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith". Elymas was seeking to prevent Paul and the others talking to the governor, verses 7 and 8. Paul by the Holy Spirit, verse 9, assesses and describes Elymas as follows, "Full of all deceit and all fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease perverting the straight ways of the Lord?"

It is just the same today. There are many who take an aggressive stance and oppose believers and the work of the Gospel. In chat shows on television, pagans and atheists oppose the one true God. The forceful presentation of evolution has been presented as a pseudoscience for the deception of people. The hypothesis of Darwin concerning evolution, which cannot be proved, is just another presentation of the same old story of deception. Where does this opposition come from? From Satan. Missionaries and every home worker are in the forefront of the Christian battle line. The challenge is: am I in the battle line?

In this country and around the world we are also seeing a rising tide of opposition to the presentation of Christianity. Under the guise of nationalism, Christians in the Philippines are beheaded. During the recent so called race riots in the Oldham and Burnley areas, Christians were specifically attacked, their property damaged and at least one church set on fire. Is the unrest in this country to do with race riots or are Christians becoming more open targets? The government and media focus on the race aspect! All kinds of reasons are given, from social deprivation to the need for tolerance to other ways of life and belief. It is God and His people who are still standing in the front line of opposition from the devil as the roaring lion. As the scriptures remind us, we are here to present the only true way for lasting peace and happiness which can only be found by faith in Jesus, the only Saviour and the only way to know God as Father.

It is interesting to see that the greatest opposition came from religion: from those who held to idol worship and from Jews. In Acts 19 for example, there was opposition from supporters of the goddess Diana. The Jews refused to believe that their Messiah had come as a man and been rejected by way of the cross. Well might the scripture say of non believers, to whom the cross is preached, "to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness". So whether one is religious or not, without Christ as Saviour, Christianity is impossible to understand. Let us continue to preach that salvation is only through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

## **Putting the preacher on a pedestal**

At Iconium, Paul and Barnabas were in danger of becoming objects of worship by the Greek idol worshippers. Paul and Barnabas prevent this and turn the opportunity into another Gospel preaching. Let us be sure that at all times we present Christ and not self! How many Christian leaders have become the focus instead of Jesus and led astray so many believers. Paul condemns the idolising of leaders at the beginning of 1 Corinthians, as he did here in chapter 14. Whatever our service, it must always be Jesus first. In youth work many years ago, a chorus taught to children was based on the word JOY, (J-O-Y). The message of the chorus was, Jesus first, Yourself last, and Others in between.

## **Signs and Wonders today?**

At Iconium we have the only mention of signs and wonders being done by the missionaries, apart from the specific actions relating to Elymas in chapter 13 and the lame man in chapter 14. Do miracles, signs and wonders happen today? I think it would be extremely foolish to say categorically, no! Who would dare limit God? Let us consider the context of 14:3. The signs and wonders were supporting the preaching of the word of His grace. The signs and wonders therefore helped and confirmed that the preaching was indeed from the one true God. The message of salvation concerning a risen Christ and the work of redemption was being supported by extraordinary events. Still today there are reports of a variety of events which can only be considered as something special from God. In the main, Scripture uses such events to confirm that the Gospel is from God.

## **Pastoral care**

We should not miss one of the fundamental and important conclusions from this first missionary journey. That is the revisiting of believers to encourage them in the Christian pathway. If we are involved in the Gospel, there also needs to be the following up of these new believers. Paul and his companions encouraged and strengthened, and established in practical ways the working of a new church. Why was this important? The missionaries viewed their activity and involvement as largely short term, before moving on to seek fresh fields of harvest. Although their involvement was short term, it did not preclude revisits and letters, which were essential. We must complete the establishment of believers in their Christian faith. In this country, new believers are likely to be near a suitable church where others continue the pastoral and teaching care. However, it is possible that there is no suitable church near and a new group of believers will need help to establish a local church group. Repeat visits should be part of our responsibility. In the epistle of John we are reminded of the three basic stages of growth in believers: little children, young men and fathers, see 1 John 2. Those at the first two stages certainly need the right teaching from the scriptures in order that they might grow strong.

Part of the initial follow up work was the appointment of elders, those who early in their Christian development showed signs of Christian maturity. Paul and others established elders to be the pastors of the Christian company. In Hebrews 13, we find some of the characteristics of pastors and elders:

1. They teach the word of God, not their own private thoughts.
2. Their own personal faith was consistent with the things they taught; such a faith could be followed.
3. They show a genuine interest in the spiritual development of others.

And finally, in general terms, such responsible elders were aware that their actions would be reviewed by their Lord in the day of judgement, when they must give an account of their service.

## **To conclude**

The historical events of the first missionary journey are very interesting. However, the challenges, warnings and help found in the narrative are as up to date today as when written. The world in its various guises has not changed, whether openly hostile or subtle in its opposition. The Christian message is still the same: salvation through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and His finished work of redemption accomplished at Calvary. Let us seek opportunities to faithfully witness, encourage new believers, resist the devil and in wisdom know when to move on, but always be ready to return to further the work of God.

Let us pray

Our God and Father, help us to be wise in our service which we seek to do for our Lord Jesus Christ. Help us to see that there is no compromise with this world which in all its many forms is against Yourself and Your people. Support and keep Your dear people everywhere and let our hearts be ever thankful for Your kindness towards us, we who are eternally safe through Your great salvation in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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