



Paul's Missionary Journeys

SOURCE FOR QUESTIONS

Acts 13:1 through 21:17

KEY VERSE FOR MEMORIZATION

“And so were the churches established in the faith, and increased in number daily.” (Acts 16:5)

BACKGROUND

Jesus had said His followers would be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judaea, Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the earth (Acts 1:8). Persecution had caused the believers to be scattered throughout Judea and Samaria, and even into neighboring territories (Acts 11:19). By A.D. 44, the Roman Empire provided conditions conducive to expanded preaching of the Gospel around the eastern end of the Mediterranean world and westward to Rome, the capital. Paul was to lead this movement. Throughout his three missionary journeys, described in chapters 13 through 21 of Acts, the Holy Spirit guided by selecting the Apostle's fellow workers, signifying Paul's destinations, and directing decisions regarding the new churches.

Chapters 13 and 14 describe Paul's first and shortest missionary journey, circa A.D. 46-47, which began in Antioch, Syria. With the clear direction of the Holy Ghost, Paul and his co-worker, Barnabas, traveled initially to the island of Cyprus, and from there into the regions of Pamphylia, Pisidia, Lycaonia, and Galatia. Their method of evangelism was to preach first in the town synagogues, but when many of the Jews rejected Christ, the missionaries recognized the Holy Spirit's leading to witness to the Gentiles. It was on this first journey that Saul began to be referred to as Paul, his Grecian name, possibly in order to identify more closely with the Gentiles he was attempting to reach.

Chapter 15 describes the first session of the Early Church leaders held in Jerusalem (often called the Jerusalem Council), which probably occurred about A.D. 50. In the mixed Jew-Gentile church of Antioch, dissent and confusion had arisen regarding compliance with Jewish Law. In Jerusalem, converted Pharisees insisted that Gentile converts observe the Law. However, when Peter, Paul, and Barnabas related their experiences, including the outpouring of God's Holy Spirit on Gentile believers, the council concluded that Gentile converts should not be compelled to adhere to Jewish rites. This significant decision removed a potential barrier to the expansion of the Gospel into the Gentile world. Paul and Barnabas, along with others, took a letter summarizing this conclusion to Antioch.

OPENER

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two men doing when they were chosen? Why do you think this is significant? Acts 13:1-3

According to verse 2, Saul and Barnabas were ministering to the Lord and fasting when they were chosen. The word translated “ministered” here is often used in the Old Testament to describe the services of the priests and Levites. It can also be translated “worship,” so the two men clearly were engaged in holy tasks. They were also fasting, which is of spiritual value only in relation to prayer, so no doubt they were praying as well.

The activities of the two men are significant because they show that God and His service was their primary focus. Scripture does not reveal what they were fasting about, but they seemingly felt a need to seek God in a special way. Judging from the response of the Holy Spirit, their prayers probably focused on the need to spread the Gospel to all the earth. Point out that very often God prepares our hearts for His call to a special endeavor in His service by giving us a burden for that particular field or ministry.

2. The Early Church did not start or grow by its own efforts or enthusiasm. The early believers were empowered and directed by God's Holy Spirit. What role did the Holy Spirit have in the appointment of Barnabas and Saul? Acts 13:1-4

The Holy Spirit was the One who inaugurated this forward step in the expansion of Christianity by choosing Barnabas and Saul. Verse 4 indicates that it was the Holy Spirit who sent them forth. And we know it was the Holy Spirit who led in subsequent decisions regarding travel routes, church establishment, and doctrine. The point should be made that God has a perfect plan for the furtherance of His kingdom, and as we follow the leading of the Holy Spirit, we will be in step with the plan and will of God.

You may wish to conclude the discussion of this question by asking your group: What are some ways the Holy Spirit gives direction in our day? Perhaps a few of your student would be willing to share accounts of divine guidance in their personal lives.

3. Paul and Barnabas traveled for about two years on this first missionary outreach to the Gentiles, and covered many miles. After evangelizing in Galatia, the two could have finished their trip by returning through Paul's hometown of Tarsus. It would have been simpler and safer to do so. Instead, however, they retraced their steps and revisited the churches where they had been, going back into the very areas where they had been violently opposed and persecuted. According to Acts 14:21-23, what was their purpose in doing this?

According to verse 22, the missionaries chose that return route with the purpose of encouraging and strengthening the new converts. Though they recently had been threatened and even physically attacked in

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In Paul and Silas' situation, their songs of praise undoubtedly were a powerful witness to the other prisoners, and ultimately resulted in the conversion of the jailer and his household. While we may not see such dramatic results, we can be sure God notices every effort to honor Him by our praises, and that is especially true when our earthly circumstances are difficult.

6. In view of the shameful treatment Paul and Silas had endured in Philippi, preaching the same message at their next stop in Thessalonica took God-given courage! Still, they went ahead and taught boldly in the synagogue of that city, making it clear that the Jewish ceremonial way of being reconciled to God was obsolete and that Jesus was the promised Messiah. While some believed, others of the Jews stirred up a mob. What accusation was leveled against the missionary team? Acts 17:6

The accusation was that they had "turned the world upside down." This is reflective of the impact the Early Church was already having on the culture.

While Paul and Silas had not incited any violence, there is a sense in which the charge ought to be true of any follower of Christ. Ask your group: In what ways should we, as Christians, be turning our world upside down? Lead them to the conclusion that Christians do so by confronting the world with the truth of the Gospel and by living holy lives. The fact is, ever since the fall of man, people have been acting in rebellion against their Creator. All are born in sin and continue in sin unless confronted by the Gospel message that reveals sin and makes possible a change in direction.

This question could provide an opportunity to encourage your group to be unafraid in their witness for Christ, even when they face opposition.

7. In chapter 17, we read that Paul visited Athens, the intellectual and cultural center of the ancient world, where he began his sermon on Mars Hill by referencing an altar with the inscription "TO THE UNKNOWN GOD." Based on Acts 17:16-21, how would you describe the men of Athens? In what ways do you think they were similar to people in the "Christian" society of our day?

Your group should identify the following characteristics of the men of Athens.

- *They were steeped in idolatry (verse 16).*
- *The philosophers (the Epicureans, who focused on the sensual pleasures of life, and the Stoicks, who emphasized moral strictness and a life free of passion and feeling) were derisive and mocking of Paul's message (verse 18).*
- *They were curious and drawn by the novelty of anything new (verse 21).*
- *They were religious but not serving the true God. (The word "superstitious" in verse 22 could also be translated "religious.")*

Discussion of the second question should bring out that, although we live in a “Christian” society, many people have no real knowledge of God. An interest in spirituality does not necessarily equate with an understanding of who God is and what He did for humanity by His Son. Even those who claim Christianity may not have a real experience of salvation.

Point out that Paul’s address to the men of Athens gives us a good example of how to communicate the Gospel effectively. He began by establishing common ground with his listeners by alluding to objects or situations they could identify with (verses 22-23). Then he declared the truth about how God interacts with man (verses 24-29), and concluded by urging his hearers toward a decision (verses 30-31).

8. In his farewell address to the Ephesian elders, recorded in Acts 20:18-35, Paul warned of grievous wolves and false prophets who would attempt to destroy the church. The admonition Paul gave is good today. What two key words in verse 31 give us a vital clue regarding how to avoid being led astray by any “grievous wolf”?

The key words are “watch” and “remember.” These two actions are still very necessary in our day. We still must vigilantly guard against being swayed by false teachings from any source, and we must remember the teachings of those who have been faithful.

Ask your group: What are some of the sources of false teaching in contemporary society that could impact us if we are not careful? Responses may include such things as blogs and other online sources that are just a click away, religious books and magazines that typically present an eternal security perspective, so-called “Christian” music, religious programming on television or the internet, and friends or associates with doctrinal beliefs that do not align with the Bible.

Lead your group to the understanding that the first and most important step we can take to guard against being influenced by false teaching is to study the Word of God regularly. The Bible was given to instruct and guide us, so the most critical question we can ask when evaluating any teaching is, “What does Scripture say?” With the help of the Holy Spirit, we must take great care to hold spiritual input from any source against the light of God’s Word.

CONCLUSION

Paul’s missionary journeys took the Gospel to regions along the northern shores of the Mediterranean Sea. New churches were started, and new believers began to mature and grow in their Christian lives. Paul was able to conclude his third missionary journey with joy, and with a testimony proclaiming the grace of God. In spite of intense opposition, he had been faithful to the souls of both Jews and Gentiles. Now his heart’s desire was to spread the Gospel in Rome.