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."

In the last passage, we studied how God established the first Gentile church at Antioch. Although this church was a mix of Jews and Gentiles, they were all one body because of their faith in the cleansing grace of Jesus' blood shed for their sins. What is more, they were missionary-minded due to their love for God and desire to share God's grace around the world. From this point on, the focus of Luke, the author, turns from the Jerusalem church to St. Paul's dynamic work among the Gentiles. Today's passage, chapters 13-14, covers Paul's first missionary journey. We are amazed to see the spiritual battle that Paul fought in order to plant the gospel seed in Gentile nations. It was dangerous and harrowing. However, Paul and Barnabas were clear that they were not doing their own work, but merely following the lead of the Holy Spirit. They were also confident that with the help of the Holy Spirit, they and their sheep would enter the kingdom of God. May God help us learn from this passage how to do God's work in a Gentile world.

I. 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 pagan 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 a good intention 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, "While they were worshiping 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 worshiping 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.

II. The work of God in Cyprus (13:4-12)

Cyprus was a Roman province and the island home of Barnabas, located off the Syrian coast (4:36). Obviously, Barnabas desired to share the gospel of Jesus first of all with his own people. Barnabas and Saul, led by the Holy Spirit, went down first to Seleucia, a port city near Antioch. From there they sailed to Salamis, the most prominent city of Cyprus, and proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ in the Jewish synagogues. They traveled through the whole island until they came to Paphos, the seat of Roman authority. There Sergius Paulus was the chief Roman official. He kept a Jewish fortune-teller, Bar-Jesus, or Elymas as his attendant. The governor was an intelligent man. But he was so fearful and superstitious that he hired a fortune-teller. He sent for Barnabas and Saul to hear the word of God so that he might be freed from his fear. But Elymas the sorcerer did not want to let him go 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 rebukiing, Elymas' eyes were blinded. In this way, Elymas could open his spiritual eyes to see the power of God. He could also recognize his own spiritual blindness,
which had made him a servant of the devil, against his own will. The
proconsul believed in Jesus. He was amazed at Paul’s teaching about
the Lord, and by his spiritual authority. Here we see that Paul had
rebuked Elymas out of his shepherd heart for the soul of a fearful
Roman governor. Paul won a convert when he had faith in Jesus and a
clear attitude toward a child of the devil. Rebuking is not an
expression of self-righteousness; it is speaking with the authority of
the Holy Spirit in order to release the prisoners of Satan.

III. The work of God in Pisidian Antioch (13:13-52)

In this part Paul explains that Jesus is the Savior of the world,
drawing on Jewish history to relate 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, left Paul and
went back to his mom’s in Jerusalem. Probably he was terrified by
Paul’s fighting spirit. For a time, Paul questioned his spiritual mettle.
However, in Jerusalem, he came to be a trusted aide of St. Peter.
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 speech we learn that
Paul had a clear sense of the work and history of God.

First, God sent the Savior of the world from David’s root (16-25). In this
part Paul began to recite the tedious history of Israel to the Jews and
Gentiles. It is because God has made known his plan of world
salvation through history. 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 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. They had to gather one day’s
portion of manna every day. If in their greediness they gathered more
than that, they found the next day that it had spoiled. They received this training for 40 long years. They were rebellious, but God endured their conduct. Finally God sent them to the promised land, where his people eventually asked for a king like other nations. God gave them a king, Saul. After removing him 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). David was the prototype of the Messiah. God himself had been with his people. Now, God wanted to raise up a shepherd for his people, like David had been for Israel. God was pleased with David and promised that he would send the Savior of the world from his root. God sent John the Baptist to reiterate his promise. 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. They feel that the world’s fortunes are rising and falling like a ship at sea. 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. History continues to progress under God’s guiding hand until the time of Jesus’ Second Coming as King of kings and Lord of lords to judge the earth.

Second, God raised Jesus from the dead (26-52). After explaining God’s plan to send a Savior of the world from his chosen people and from the root of David, Paul exclaimed, "Brothers, children of Abraham, and you God-fearing Gentiles...!" Paul described the Jews as God’s chosen people. But Paul accepted the Gentiles as his own brothers in Christ. We can aptly describe Paul’s feeling with the Lord’s prayer, "Our Father in heaven..." It was unthinkable for Jews to call Gentiles "brothers" or "children of Abraham." Read verse 26. "Brothers, children of Abraham, and you God-fearing Gentiles, 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.

Next, Paul tells them what the people of Jerusalem and their leaders had done to Jesus (27-35). 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. Instead, 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). 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). Read 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. 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." Everyone must face the power of death. What is more, everyone must face judgment for their sins. 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.

As Paul and Barnabas were leaving, the people invited them to speak again (42,43). The whole city was anxious to hear the gospel. 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 (46,47). 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. The new disciples were full of joy and the Holy Spirit, in spite of persecutions.

IV. In Iconium, Lystra and Derbe (14:1-28)

First, the work of God in Iconium (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 fight against the agents of the devil. Instead they only preached the gospel of Jesus Christ. To help them in their spiritual fighting, the Holy Spirit enabled them to perform miraculous healings and wonders. Still the enemies persisted. The city was divided into two camps, those of the Christian soldiers and of the enemies of God (4). There was a plot afoot among the Gentiles and Jews to mistreat and stone the apostles. Paul and Barnabas found out about the plot and fled to the cities of Lystra and Derbe. Here we learn that when Christians serve others with a shepherd heart, the Holy Spirit is with them to give them strength and victory.

Second, God's work in Lystra and Derbe (8-20). 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 treat them as 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 called Barnabas Zeus—the god of lustful immorality. They called Paul Hermes—a chief speaker. The priests of Zeus prepared to offer sacrifices to them. These ignorant people tried to deify them, like the crazed fans who deified Ben-Hur after his racing victory (10-13).
At first, Paul and Barnabas couldn't understand what they were trying to do. 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). The gospel is about Jesus, who is God's heart for all peoples of all nations. The gospel reveals that there is only one true God of all men, our Creator and our Father. However, 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 they had won to remain true to the faith. Young Christians must know that hardships lie ahead in the lives of faith. "To enter the kingdom of God" does not necessarily mean personal salvation; it can also mean to expand the territory of the kingdom of God and conquer the whole world with the gospel of Jesus 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 and pray earnestly, and that Christians are not easy-going civilians, but the soldiers of Christ. May God use us in this generation as Christian soldiers, to fight to expand the territory of the kingdom of God, particularly in Muslim nations.