

Paul's First Missionary Journey

[PREPARATION]

✦ GETTING READY

How have you seen people sharing the gospel boldly, regardless of the personal cost to themselves? How have you seen people suffer or be persecuted for the gospel?

Read Acts 13–14.

Ask God to use these Scriptures to help you understand the cost that comes with following Jesus and give you a passion for sharing the gospel to the ends of the earth regardless of the personal cost.

[THIS WEEK AT A GLANCE]

✦ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

Ambassadors for Christ have a passion and boldness to preach the gospel regardless of the cost to themselves.

✦ THEOLOGY APPLIED

Paul and Barnabas were willing to endure anything to share the gospel to the ends of the earth. They endured much suffering for the gospel; this missionary journey was only the beginning. On their way back to Antioch, they went back to the churches they had planted and encouraged the believers there to continue in the faith, saying it is through many tribulations that we must enter the kingdom of God. Jesus told His disciples if they wanted to be His disciples, they had to “pick up your cross” and follow Him, that if you want to save your life you have to lose it (Matthew 16:24–26). He told us to count the cost of being His disciple (Luke 14:28). Peter said that as much as we partake in Christ’s sufferings, we will share in His glory (1 Peter 4:13). Paul told the Philippians that his ultimate desire was to know Christ and the fellowship of His sufferings (Philippians 3:10). He told the Romans that, as God’s children, we are coheirs with Christ; if we suffer with Him, we will be glorified with Him (Romans 8:17). The theme of suffering like Christ is all over Scripture. And yet most American Christians today don’t experience suffering or persecution the way Paul, Barnabas, Peter, and the other disciples did. For the early Christians, persecution and potential martyrdom were very real possibilities. Though our suffering may look different, the call to serve others

selflessly and sacrificially, as Jesus did, does not. Self-denial and a willingness to bear one's cross is a daily commitment to live out the sacrificial love exemplified by Christ.

✦ MEDITATE

"Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them" (Acts 14:15).

GETTING STARTED

+This section will introduce the lesson by identifying the main point of the passage and offering a preliminary application of it.

QUESTION *How have you seen or experienced suffering or persecution for the gospel in your life? Why does following Jesus come with suffering and sacrifice?*

QUESTION *How does your life point people to follow Jesus, not yourself?*

In Acts 13–14, Paul and Barnabas set out on their first missionary journey. They had great success in Cyprus, then hit opposition from jealous Jewish leaders when they got to Galatia. Though many Jews and Gentiles came to faith in Jesus, the Jewish leaders followed them to Lystra, where the people misunderstood their miracles and tried to worship them as gods. Then the Jews who had followed them stoned Paul. But God healed him, and he continued to Derbe and then back to all those cities to encourage the believers to endure through suffering for the gospel. These stories show us Paul and Barnabas's commitment to share the gospel "to the ends of the earth" even through suffering and struggle, whether their message was well received or not. Through it all, their attitude was humility, always pointing to Christ instead of themselves. As ambassadors for Christ, we should have the same passion for sharing the gospel, willingness to suffer for the gospel, and humility in pointing to Christ alone.

✦ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+This section details Paul and Barnabas's first missionary journey throughout Cyprus (where Barnabas was from) and several towns north of there in the southern part of Galatia, which was northwest of Paul's hometown of Tarsus. In Acts 13, they witnessed all over Cyprus, including to the proconsul, who was amazed by their teaching and became a follower of Jesus. Then they traveled to Antioch of Pisidia, where

Paul preached first to the Jews, who initially liked his message. But when they saw the great crowds who came the next week, the Jewish leaders were jealous and began to argue with him. Paul told them he would turn his focus to the Gentiles, and they stirred up persecution against him and Barnabas and drove them out of their district. In Acts 14, at Iconium, both Jews and Gentiles believed, but some unbelieving Jews stirred up the people against them and tried to stone them, so they fled to Lystra, where Paul healed a crippled man and the people tried to worship them as gods. But then Jews arrived from Antioch and Iconium and succeeded in stoning Paul this time. God healed him, and he went with Barnabas to Derbe, where more people came to faith in Jesus. They visited all the places where they had shared the gospel, appointing elders in each church, and then returned to Antioch.

1. *Cyprus: The Proconsul*
2. *Antioch of Pisidia and Iconium: The Shift to the Gentiles*
3. *Lystra: The Stoning of Paul*

[GOING DEEPER]

+This section will follow the points given above and look deeper into Acts 13–14.

1. *Cyprus: The Proconsul*

+ READ ACTS 13:1–12

QUESTION *How did the prophets and teachers at Antioch follow the leading of the Holy Spirit? Where else do you see the Holy Spirit guiding His people in this story?*

QUESTION *Why did Paul condemn the magician Elymas to blindness?*

This section begins the transition from Judea and Samaria to “the ends of the earth.” The story shifts from following Peter and the disciples and deacons from Jerusalem to following Paul and his coworkers. The “center” of the church also shifts from Jerusalem to Antioch, reflecting a shift from a primarily Jewish body of Christ to a mixed Jewish and Gentile body. This is seen clearly by the opening of Acts 13, which describes the diversity of the leaders of the church at Antioch.

As we learned in our last lesson, Antioch was a large city with an eclectic mix of ethnicities. But the city was intentionally built to keep them separate, each in their own communities. This is what made the church

shockingly different. In the church at Antioch, these different ethnicities joined together as one body and became a community no longer defined by their ethnic identity but by their allegiance to Christ and His kingdom. The five leaders mentioned here reflected the diversity of the church as a whole. Paul and Barnabas were Hellenized Jews. Manaen grew up in the household of Herod the Great as a close friend, like a brother, of Herod Antipas. Lucius of Cyrene, a Greek city in North Africa, was one of the founders of the church who had come from Cyprus and Cyrene to preach to the Hellenists there (Acts 11:20). Simeon was called “Niger,” which meant “black”; he was also from Africa, with very dark skin.

As they were worshipping and fasting, the Holy Spirit told them to set apart Barnabas and Saul for the missionary work Jesus called Paul to from his conversion, so they laid hands on them and sent them off. Throughout Acts, we see many moments like this, where the Holy Spirit spoke to them with specific instructions and the apostles obeyed without question. Though the book is traditionally called “Acts of the Apostles,” it could be called “Acts of the Holy Spirit.”

At this point, the church had been around about thirteen years, and Paul had been a Christian for about twelve years. Barnabas was part of the original church in Jerusalem; he was mentioned as one of those who sold his field and gave the money to the church (33 AD). Barnabas was a nickname that means “son of encouragement.” His original name was Joseph; he was a Levite (the tribe of priests and servants of the temple) from Cyprus, which means he was a Hellenistic Jew. He was “a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith” (Acts 11:24). Paul was called both Saul (Hebrew for “desired”) and Paul, his Roman name (“small”). This dual name reflected his dual citizenship; he was both a “Hebrew of Hebrews,” trained as a Pharisee under the famous rabbi Gamaliel, and a Roman citizen.

After Paul was converted (34 AD), he preached in Arabia and Damascus for three years before he went to Jerusalem, where the disciples at first feared him until Barnabas defended him (37 AD). When the Jews tried to persecute Paul, he fled to his hometown of Tarsus, where he preached the gospel in Syria and Cilicia for about seven years, when Barnabas came to get him to help him minister to the new believers in Antioch (44 AD). The church there had grown very quickly when some men of Cyprus and Cyrene had come to preach not just to the Jews but also to the Hellenists, and when the disciples in Jerusalem heard of it, they sent Barnabas (who was from Cyprus) there to exhort them. A great many were added to the church, so Barnabas retrieved Paul from Tarsus to help him. When a prophet predicted a famine, Paul and Barnabas took a collection to Jerusalem, then returned to Antioch with John Mark, the young man whose mother’s home was where the church had been praying when Peter escaped prison (46 AD). He was also Barnabas’s cousin (Colossians 4:10).¹

¹ All of these dates are approximate, pieced together from Acts 9-12 and Galatians 1-2
ESV Study Bible online resources - <https://www.esv.org/resources/esv-global-study-bible/chart-44-06/#chart-44-06-star-1>

Barnabas, Paul, and John Mark went to Cyprus, where Barnabas grew up. Cyprus is a small island in the Mediterranean, just south of Paul's hometown of Tarsus and just west of Antioch. They went to all the towns throughout the island, preaching in the synagogues. At their last stop, the proconsul of Cyprus, Sergius Paulus (the same name as Paul), "a man of intelligence," asked for Barnabas and Paul because he wanted to hear the gospel. A consul was a Roman magistrate, appointed by the Roman Senate and given absolute authority over a particular area of the Roman Republic as the head of state. A consul's term was typically one year; a proconsul was one whose term had been extended beyond that.

A Jewish magician and false prophet named Bar-Jesus ("son of" Jesus or Joshua), or Elymas ("wise" in Arabic; "powerful" in Aramaic), was an advisor to Paulus and sought to turn him away from the faith. But Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him, called him "son of the devil" and "enemy of all righteousness, full of deceit and villainy" and rhetorically asked, "Will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord?" The Greek "stop" is a play on words of the name Paul/Paulus. Then Paul told him God was making him blind, like He had done to Paul on the road to Damascus. However, we never see Elymas turn to Jesus like Paul did. Elymas was immediately struck blind, and the proconsul believed the gospel, not only because of this miracle but also because he was astonished at their teaching.

Before this story, Acts refers to Paul as Saul ("desired"), which was also the name of the first king of Israel (from the same tribe of Benjamin), whom the people desired as king because he was tall, strong, and handsome. After this story, Acts refers to him as Paul ("little"), the opposite of Saul's height and strength, which reflects God's desire for humble leaders in His kingdom.

QUESTION *Why is it significant that a "man of intelligence" was astonished at their teaching and chose to follow Jesus? What does this tell us about the gospel?*

QUESTION *What kind of impact would the proconsul becoming a follower of Jesus have made on Cyprus?*

APPLICATION POINT #1/ As God's people, we are to follow the Holy Spirit. He may not speak to us verbally like He did in Acts, but we can hear still His voice today.

APPLICATION POINT #2/ Scripture talks about the wisdom of God sounding like foolishness to the world (1 Corinthians 1:25), but to this very intelligent and powerful Roman, their teaching sounded amazing. The gospel may be hard to understand for people whose hearts are hardened and whose eyes are blinded, but it makes sense intellectually. You don't have to check your intelligence at the door to follow Jesus. Many atheists criticize Christians for "ignoring reason" to choose faith, but that's not true. For many, like C. S. Lewis, Lew Wallace, Lee Stroebel, and Frank Morison, it was their intellect and reason that led

them to really study the historical evidence, find the gospel to be true, and follow Jesus.

QUESTION *How has the voice of the Holy Spirit guided you? How do you know when it is the Holy Spirit and not some other voice?*

QUESTION *Reflect on times you have heard (or thought yourself) that you had to reject faith to seem intelligent or reject your intellect to follow Jesus. Why did you/they think that? How have you used your intellect to follow Jesus, study Scripture, and grow in faith?*

2. Antioch of Pisidia and Iconium: The Shift to the Gentiles

✚ **READ ACTS 13:13-14:7**

QUESTION *What did Paul say about Jesus in his sermon at Antioch of Pisidia?*

QUESTION *Why did Paul and Barnabas say they were turning to the Gentiles in Antioch of Pisidia?*

In this section, Paul and his companions went to Perga in Pamphylia. There John Mark left them and returned to Jerusalem. Scripture doesn't say why he left, but we learn later that Paul considered it a desertion and no longer trusted John Mark; he didn't want to take him on their second missionary journey (Acts 15:38). Paul and Barnabas got into such a heated argument over it that they split up; Paul took Silas, Barnabas took John Mark, and they went separate ways.

Paul and Barnabas went on to Antioch of Pisidia without John Mark. This second Antioch is north of Cyprus, in modern day Turkey. Both cities were established by Seleucus Nicator and named after his father Antiochus. This Antioch was strategically situated on a plateau in the Taurus Mountains, providing a natural defense and a vantage point over the region. As a Roman colony, it enjoyed certain privileges, including self-governance and exemption from some taxes, which attracted a diverse population.

On the Sabbath, they went to the synagogue, and the rulers asked them to share a "word of encouragement," which was fitting, as Barnabas means "son of encouragement." Paul proceeded to give one of most detailed sermons in Acts: the history of God choosing Israel and making them His people and giving them

the land; how, after the judges, they asked for a king and God first gave them Saul, then David, “a man after my heart, who will do my will.” Then he declared that Jesus, a son of David, was the Savior God had promised them. Paul described the death and resurrection of Jesus and how He knew no corruption, so that through Him forgiveness of sin had come, and everyone who believes in Him is “freed from everything which you could not be freed by the law of Moses.” This sermon was specifically for the Jews, as they were in the synagogue. Afterward, the people begged them to speak again the next Sabbath, and many Jews and proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas.

On the next Sabbath, almost the whole city gathered to hear the word. But this time, the Jews saw the crowds who had come to hear Paul and Barnabas, and the very people who a week before had begged them to teach them more were filled with jealousy and argued with Paul. Paul and Barnabas condemned them because they had rejected the gospel, they were now turning to the Gentiles. In this instance, because the Jews had rejected their message, they shifted their focus to the Gentiles. In every city they visited on all their missionary journeys, this and future ones, Paul and his companions preached in the synagogues first, because the Jews knew the story of God’s relationship with Israel, the promised Messiah, etc. Then they preached to the Gentiles in the marketplace.

Paul and Barnabas shook the dust off their feet as they left the district. This was something Jews typically did when leaving a Gentile area to return to Jewish lands so they wouldn’t bring Gentile dust into their holy land. But Jesus told His disciples to do this also with Jewish cities that rejected the message of the gospel. This demonstrated that God’s people were not defined by ethnicity but by faith in the gospel (Mark 6:11).

Then they went to the nearby town of Iconium, where a great number of both Jews and Gentiles believed. But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles against them. They stayed a long time there, preaching boldly and doing signs and wonders, but the city was divided, some for them and some against. When an attempt was made by both Jews and Gentiles to stone them, Paul and Barnabas fled to Lystra, another nearby city.

QUESTION *Why did these Jewish leaders turn against Paul and Barnabas on the second Sabbath?*

QUESTION *What was the result of their jealousy? What happened to the Jewish leaders? What happened to the rest of their community?*

APPLICATION POINT / These Jewish leaders initially received Paul and Barnabas's message with excitement, but when they saw the crowds they drew (both Jew and Gentile), they were filled with jealousy and spoke out against them. Instead of being happy that so many people were hearing the message of salvation, they were jealous that someone was gaining a greater following than them. This even caused them to miss salvation for themselves and caused many others not to come to salvation in Jesus.

This is in stark contrast to Paul, who later said that even if other people preached the gospel out of envy or rivalry, he would rejoice that the gospel had been preached (Philippians 1:15–18). And he didn't care if people followed him, Peter, Apollos, or any other leader; none of them mattered; they were all just servants of Christ, and that's who he wanted people to follow (1 Corinthians 3). The difference is in the attitude.

We may see jealousy and rivalry between leaders in the church today. People get jealous when someone listens to another preacher or goes to another church instead of being thankful that person is being fed. Or a pastor may be jealous of another pastor who has a bigger church or bigger following on social media instead of being thankful that person is impacting people for the gospel. Churches in the same town may seem competitive instead of cooperative, as the body of Christ should be. People seem more focused on you following them instead of Christ. These attitudes are not Christlike and can even lead people away from salvation. Instead of being jealous or comparing crowd sizes or number of followers, those who preach Christ should be thankful when someone else's ministry is successful, because it means the gospel is being preached and more people are being saved! We should work cooperatively with other churches to grow the kingdom of God instead of seeing each other as competition for growing our individual churches.

QUESTION *How has jealousy and competition between churches or ministries hurt the spread of the gospel and the growth of the kingdom?*

QUESTION *How can we work cooperatively with other churches in our area to build the kingdom of God together? How can we encourage other churches and ministries instead of being jealous or competitive with them?*

3. Lystra: The Stoning of Paul

✚ READ ACTS 14:8–28

QUESTION *Why did Paul heal the crippled man? How did the Lycaonians respond?*

QUESTION *Why did the Jews stone Paul? What happened when the disciples gathered around him?*

When Paul and Barnabas fled the Jews in Iconium, they went to nearby Lystra to continue to preach the gospel. There Paul healed a man, who was crippled from birth, because he saw that he had “faith to be made well.” But the crowds had an interesting reaction. Instead of praising the God Paul had been preaching, they worshipped Paul and Barnabas, calling them Zeus and Hermes come down in human form. Zeus is the chief god of Greek mythology, and Hermes is the herald of the gods, which is who they called Paul because he did the speaking. The priest of Zeus even brought sacrifices to offer to them.

Paul and Barnabas vehemently rejected this idea, tearing their garments and shouting that they were just human beings like them, bringing them the good news of Jesus. This is another stark contrast to the Jewish leaders in Pisidia, who were jealous at the great following they had. Paul and Barnabas didn’t want a following for themselves; they pointed only to Christ. Paul encouraged them to turn away from these “vain things” (false gods like Zeus and Hermes) to follow “the living God, who made the heaven and the earth.”

But Jews had followed them from Antioch of Pisidia and Iconium and riled up the crowds against Paul and Barnabas. They stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, leaving him for dead. The crowds went from worshipping Paul to stoning him based only on the Jews’ persuasion! They must have been really persuasive!

In 2 Corinthians, Paul described the suffering he had endured for the gospel, which God said would happen to him from the moment he was converted/called to ministry (Acts 9:16). Paul was imprisoned, flogged, and exposed to death again and again. Five times he was given thirty-nine lashes by the Jews; beaten three times with rods; stoned once; shipwrecked three times; spent a night and day at open sea; was constantly on the move and in danger from rivers, bandits, Jews, Gentiles, and false prophets; was in danger in the city, in the country, and at sea. He had labored and toiled and gone without food, water, and sleep; been cold and naked; and constantly faced the pressure of concern for the churches (2 Corinthians 11:23–28). This is the story of his stoning.

The crowd stoned him so severely that if he wasn't actually dead, they believed he was. He was certainly at least unconscious. He would have been bruised, bloodied, and broken. But when the disciples gathered around him, he "rose up" and walked back to the city. This is the language of resurrection. Even if this wasn't a complete resurrection (if he was only unconscious and not actually dead), it was still a miraculous, immediate healing because the next day, he was healthy and strong enough to travel with Barnabas to Derbe, where they preached the gospel and made many disciples. Then they went back to the places they had been persecuted—Lystra, where he had just been stoned, and Iconium and Antioch, where they had threatened to stone them—and encouraged the believers there to continue in the faith, that through "many tribulations" we must enter the kingdom of God. For the disciples at the time, suffering and persecution for the sake of the gospel were a physical reality and one they endured with joy because they considered it a privilege to suffer for the gospel (Acts 5:41; Philippians 1:29).

Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in every church and consecrated them to leadership with prayer and fasting. Then they returned to all the other towns they had visited in Cyprus and then back to Antioch, where they told the church all God had done.

QUESTION *How did Paul suffer for the gospel? What was his attitude about it?*

QUESTION *Imagine you were a new believer in one of these cities, having witnessed Paul and Barnabas's physical suffering for the gospel. How would you feel? How would their encouragement to continue in the faith impact you?*

QUESTION *What does it tell us about the gospel that people were excited to follow Jesus even though it meant physical suffering? Would you respond with excitement if you knew you had to endure physical suffering and persecution to follow Jesus?*

APPLICATION POINT / Paul and Barnabas were committed to preaching the gospel no matter what, through any kind of suffering or persecution the world threw their way. Though there were times they fled an area because of persecution, when they were beaten, imprisoned, or persecuted, they endured it with faith and even joy because they knew their current suffering was nothing compared to the glory of their inheritance in heaven (Romans 8:18), and they knew the gospel was being spread through their suffering. Do we have that same attitude toward suffering? Are we willing to endure true persecution for our faith? Do we see it as a privilege to suffer for the gospel? Or are we not even willing to go outside our comfort zone for the gospel?

QUESTION *You may not be faced with physical persecution like stoning or prison, but what might it look like for you to live a life of suffering, sacrifice, or struggle for the gospel?*

QUESTION *How does suffering connect you more deeply to Jesus?*

[NEXT STEPS]

This section shows us Paul and Barnabas's wholehearted commitment to sharing the gospel "to the ends of the earth," even if it meant physical pain and suffering, sacrifice, discomfort, and rejection. This week, reflect on ways you can step outside your comfort zone to share the gospel with someone who is different from you, far from God, and/or outside your normal circles of influence. Reflect on ways this might be difficult for you and how you can find the boldness to endure whatever may come your way to share the gospel.

[PRAY]

Jim Elliott was a young missionary who felt called to move to Ecuador to reach the savage native tribe of the Auca, a tribe feared by all the other tribes and who had never heard the gospel. After five years of missionary work and finally befriending three of the Auca, a group from that tribe killed the five men of their missionary team. Jim was only 28; his only child, a daughter, was only ten months old.

But the missionaries didn't give up. After a great outpouring of prayer, Jim's wife Elizabeth took their daughter, along with the sister of Nate Saint, another missionary who had been killed, and went to live among the Auca tribe with the help of an Auca woman who had accepted Christ. Later, Nate Saint's son also lived with the Auca tribe who had killed his father. Many of the Auca became Christians, including those who had murdered their loved ones.

"He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose"

—Jim Elliott

+Use the following prayer of Jim Elliott for strength and passion to share the gospel no matter the personal cost to yourself.

"God, I pray Thee, light these idle sticks of my life and may I burn up for Thee. Consume my life, my God, for it is Thine. I seek not a long life but a full one, like you, Lord Jesus." Amen.