

Paul in Galatia

Before we start studying the letter that Paul wrote to the churches in Galatia, we need to do some 'homework' in order to better understand what he wrote and why he wrote it . . .

Galatia was one of several provinces of the Roman Empire in what is now Turkey. Bithynia was along the Black Sea coast in the north; Cappadocia was to the east; Lycia and Pamphylia were small provinces on the south coast, and Paul's home province, Cilicia, extended further east along the coast and round towards Antioch in Syria. Galatia was an irregular shape, running from the Black Sea southwards to the borders of Pamphylia, Lycia and Cilicia, and Asia was the more or less square block of territory to the west. New Testament references to 'Asia' always mean this Roman province, not the vast continent that we call Asia today. Each of these provinces had districts, some of whose names we shall encounter as we follow Paul's travels. You will find all these names – and a few more – in the maps in the the back of most Bibles.

In **Acts 13:1-3**, we find Barnabas and Paul (still called Saul) in the church in Antioch in Syria, along with three other 'prophets and teachers', Simeon, Lucius and Manaen. Barnabas had travelled from Jerusalem more than a year earlier to help this infant church and had quickly got Saul to join him there. For a whole year those two had taught the church there, the numbers had grown and word had spread in the city about these 'Christians' (**Acts 11:19-26**).

These five weren't having a 'leaders meeting' (thought they were obviously leaders!), they were 'ministering to the Lord and fasting', and the Holy Spirit took the opportunity to give them some rather unexpected instructions! The two men who had been mainly responsible for seeing this church established, were to be 'set apart' to carry on this same work in other places. It seems that they were sent on their way without hesitation, with the full endorsement of the church.

They sailed to Cyprus and started to proclaim their message in the Jewish synagogues, gradually working their way through the island from Salamis to Paphos. The local Roman ruler there had evidently heard about them, as he summoned them to come and tell him the message, too. Though they had started with Jews, once again Paul and Barnabas were sharing the good news with Gentiles, as they had back in Antioch. And Sergius Paulus became a believer! (**Acts 13:4-12**)

Sailing on from Paphos, they arrived in Perga on the southern coast of Pamphylia, but didn't stop there for long. It seems that they were intent on reaching Galatia, and specifically another city called Antioch in the district of Pisidia. Once again, they start their preaching in the Jewish synagogue, but within a week almost all the city want to hear what they have to say (**Acts 13:13-44**).

What was the content of their message? Paul starts with the basis of the people of Israel: the fact that God had **chosen** them, multiplied them and then had led them out of Egypt and eventually into the Promised Land. He highlights that God had **chosen** David as their king and then moves straight on to Jesus as a descendant of King David and as the fulfilment of the promises made to Abraham (**Genesis 17:4-6, 22:17-18**). "God has brought to Israel a Saviour, Jesus".

He then underlines the fact that Jesus is the promised Messiah by quoting from **Psalms 2 & Isaiah 55** (both recognised prophecies of the coming Messiah) and adding a quotation from **Psalms 16** to show that King David was not writing about himself but about Jesus

being raised from death. The fact that Jesus **was** raised and was seen by his disciples for 'many days' confirms that he is the fulfilment of these prophecies.

"Therefore", Paul says, "let it be known to you, brothers, that through him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you", and he then makes the astonishing statement that each person who trusts in Jesus is freed and justified (= made innocent, not guilty), something that simply could not happen under the old Jewish Law (**Acts 13:38,39**). Jews who were struggling to keep the Law of Moses (as Saul himself had done previously), who were failing and so were feeling condemned, were suddenly offered this amazing message! Not only had the promised Messiah come, but he had died and been raised from the dead, AND they could have all their failures forgiven!

No wonder there was an enthusiastic response, not only from the ethnic Jews but also from those Gentiles who had converted to Judaism. They were all there in the synagogue, but of course the word spread through the city and nearly everybody was there the next Saturday to hear what these newcomers had to say.

(**Acts 13:40-52**) Surely Paul will have realised that his message was being well received, even as he was speaking, but he still added a word of warning to anyone who might despise or try to rubbish what he was saying. Just as well! A week later, when the Jews saw that everyone and anyone was interested in what they thought was their own private arrangement with God, they turned against Paul and Barnabas and their message. Result: Paul and Barnabas turned to the Gentiles (i.e. non-Jews), many of them believed and 'the word of the Lord was being spread through the whole region'.

The Lord had told Saul right back on the Damascus road, and again later, that he would send him to the Gentiles (**Acts 26:17, 22:17-21**) and had reassured Ananias that he was a chosen vessel, to bear his name 'before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel' (**Acts 9:15**). Most times in Paul's future work, he would start with the Jews but very soon find himself proclaiming the good news to Gentiles.

As the Lord Jesus had already warned him (**Acts 26:16-17**), Paul went on facing violent opposition from both Gentiles and Jews there in Pisidian Antioch. The Jewish leaders stirred up the prominent men and women of the city and Paul and Barnabas were forced out of their district. See that 'they shook off the dust of their feet against them' before they went on to Iconium. This was serious (see **Matthew 10:14, Mark 6:11, Luke 9:5, 10:11**). The kingdom of God had been proclaimed but had been rejected! But 'the disciples were continually filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.' (**Acts 13:44-52**) Was that Paul and Barnabas, or the new believers in Antioch, or all of them? !

In Iconium, a very similar train of events! (**Acts 14:1-7**) They speak in the synagogue, many believe (both Jews and Greeks), the unconvinced Jews stir up the Gentiles and embitter them towards them. But I like the next bit in **v.3** ! Therefore, because of the opposition, they spent a long time there – and saw the Lord backing up their words with miracles! And then, once more, a plot to attack and stone them, but the result is that they get away and spread the gospel to two more cities and the surrounding region.

In Lystra, their reception was even more dramatic. As a result of a healing miracle, Paul and Barnabas are regarded as incarnations of the Greek gods Zeus and Hermes (Jupiter and Mercury in the Roman system) and they only just manage to prevent the crowds offering sacrifices to them. Then, with the arrival of Jews from Antioch and Iconium (who had followed Paul and Barnabas), the crowd switches completely and stones Paul, thinking they have killed him. He survives, re-enters the city (!) and then travels on the next day to Derbe. (**Acts 14:8-20**)

Amazingly, it seems that the persecution did not follow them to Derbe, but they proclaimed the message there and 'made many disciples'. (**v.21**)

Perhaps even more amazingly, Paul and Barnabas then retrace their route and revisit Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, not hurrying away to avoid more trouble, but taking the time to encourage the believers and to fast and pray before appointing elders in each church. Those new Christians will have seen with their own eyes the truth of the warning that they were given: 'There will be trouble on our way to entering the kingdom of God.' (**v. 21-23**)

So, Paul and Barnabas leave the province of Galatia and return via Perga (where they **do** preach the gospel this time!) and then head back home to Antioch in Syria, where they report back to the church there. (**Acts 14:24-28**)

If we try to summarise how that first 'missionary journey' went, what are the headlines? Here are a few: Enthusiastic response – violent opposition – people's opinions easily changed – religious Jews cause trouble – many new believers – churches established with leaders – any more ?

That first journey was in about AD 47-49. Not long after they got back to Antioch, Paul and Barnabas were faced with a new challenge, and again it came from Judaism – but this time from *within* the company of believers! **Acts 15:1-35** gives us the whole sorry story . . .

The big question was 'If you are a Christian, do you have to follow the Jewish Law?' Some Christians from Jerusalem arrived in Antioch and started insisting on the Jewish rite of circumcision for all believers. Needless to say, with all their experience right there in Antioch and on their Galatian journey, both Paul and Barnabas disagreed very strongly with this and the church there decided to send them to the believers in Jerusalem to get the issue sorted out once and for all.

I like the way that, although they were on their way to Jerusalem for this important meeting, Paul and Barnabas took the opportunity to meet with believers on the way and shared with them the amazing news of many Gentiles coming to faith in the Lord Jesus – news which was received with 'great joy to all the brethren' (**v.3**).

They continued in the same vein when they arrived in Jerusalem and reported not 'all that they had done' but 'all that God had done with them' (**v.4**). I like that, too.

But the reason for their visit was soon brought into sharp focus! Some of Paul's ex-colleagues, Pharisees who had become believers, raised the same question of Jewish circumcision and a big debate resulted! (**v.5-7**) Peter, who had received quite a bit of criticism himself when he first went to Cornelius (**Acts 10:1-11:18**), settled it now in much the same way as he had done before. If God gave these Gentile believers the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us, how can we stand in their way? Paul and Barnabas backed that up by 'relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles'.

James had to agree 'how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles' (**v.14**). That was an enormous step for Jews to take, to agree that the promises to Abraham had been opened up to non-Jews, but he backed it up with a quotation from **Amos 9:11-12** and concluded that they should not 'trouble' those new believers by making them stick to all the Jewish Law. Everyone seems to have agreed and they drafted a letter that Paul and Barnabas could take to the churches in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia to reassure them, and even sent along two men from Jerusalem, Judas and Silas, to travel there with Paul and Barnabas. The result was tremendous joy and encouragement in Antioch (and presumably in the other churches as well).

Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch and it seems Silas did, too, ‘teaching and preaching the word of the Lord with many others’.

After about a year, Paul suggested to Barnabas that they should revisit the churches in Galatia. Sadly, they disagreed sharply about whether John Mark should go with them or not, and parted company. Paul had evidently developed a good relationship with Silas, and they were ‘committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord’ and set off together, initially through Syria and Cilicia and then on to Galatia. (**Acts 15:36-41**)

(Silas (aka Silvanus) would stay working with Paul for years to come – just check out how many of the letters that we think of as having been written by Paul actually say that they are from Paul, Silas and Timothy! This was the beginning of a long-term apostolic partnership.)

We don’t get much detail about what Paul and Silas actually said and did as they made this journey through the same places that Paul and Barnabas had visited about 3 or 4 years earlier, but 3 things stand out:

1) Paul added Timothy to his travelling group. A young man, with both Jewish and Greek background (useful!), and highly regarded by the believers in the locality, Timothy would become like a son to Paul (**1 Corinthians 4:17**) and became a reliable member of the apostolic team.

Paul refers to Timothy as his ‘true son in faith’ and also as his ‘brother’. (**Romans 16:21, 1 Corinthians 16:10, 2 Corinthians 1:1, Philippians 2:19, Colossians 1:1, 1 Thessalonians 3:2, 1 Timothy 1:2, 1:18, 2 Timothy 1: 2, Philemon 1:1**) Paul may have led Timothy to the Lord in the first place and then he selected and trained him to the point where he was an equal partner in the gospel. He encouraged Timothy to follow the same plan (**2 Timothy 2:2**).

2) Paul and Silas passed on the letter from Jerusalem, about there being no need for believers to follow all the Jewish practices, laws and traditions. This will have received the same joyful reception as it had done in Antioch. They were laying some useful foundations, although these would be challenged again later! (**Acts 16:4**)

3) The churches were being strengthened in faith and the numbers were increasing – daily! (**v.5**)

. . . and then Paul and Silas – and Timothy – moved on to other places, taking the gospel to Europe for the first time . . .

It was probably about 3 years later, not long after he had returned from an extended stay in Corinth, that Paul set out again, to travel ‘through the Galatian region and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples’ (**Acts 18:23**). It may have been soon after this visit, or perhaps some while later, that Paul felt the need to write the letter that we now know as the book of Galatians. In spite of all the input which the believers had received from Paul, Barnabas, Silas and Timothy over seven or eight years, there were some things that needed to be sorted out, as we shall discover when we start on the letter itself . . .

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