

The First Missionary Journey
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We started the fall working our way through the book of Acts, going in kind of a survey fashion to track what happened after Jesus left and He commissioned His followers to carry on the ministry with Him gone. And we said, 'What is it like with the church? What goes on as they continue to minister after Jesus is gone?' And we've been working through the book of Acts looking at that, and we've come to the thirteenth chapter, and fourteenth chapter, and we're gonna cover both chapters in one sermon today.

When you come to chapter 12, verse 1, you're introduced to the opening verses...the first four verses. You have described to you how Paul and Barnabas are sent out; and they're sent out on the first, deliberate, intentional effort on the part of the church to extend the testimony of Jesus Christ beyond their normal circle of contact, and relationships, and life. Up to this point the church hadn't intentionally said, 'Ok, we're going to try to take the gospel over to that region.' They just kept living their lives and talking about Jesus to people they met. And then, when they were forced to move by persecution in Jerusalem, they just kept talking about Jesus. But that wasn't intentional; that was just reactive to situations that came on them. And something different happens when they're up in Antioch. The church is established, and suddenly the Spirit moves among them and says, 'I want Paul and Barnabas to go out.' And the church responds and they send Paul and Barnabas out...the opening part of chapter 13. And when you read through the story you finally come to chapter 14; the very end of chapter 14 you'll find that Paul and Barnabas return once again to Antioch. And they begin to report to the church that sent them. They tell them all the things that happened on this particular trip.

Between those two chapters, chapter 13 and the end of chapter 14, we have two years transpire. It reads quickly; you just go through one event after one event and you just kind of fly through that material. You don't realize it took two years to live those two chapters. And in those two years Paul and Barnabas covered almost fourteen hundred (1,400) miles, most of it by foot. This wasn't a little walk down to the street corner...two years, fourteen hundred miles, giving witness to the reality of Jesus Christ everywhere they went.

The first leg of their trip began in Antioch, and it went to the island of Cyprus...down to the very center city of it, Paphos. And there they witnessed to Jesus. Then they turned north and they went to the coast. And then they went up inland to southern Galatia, to the city of Pisidian Antioch. And this was kind of a central hub, a governmental center. This was a crucial, strategic place to go and talk about Jesus. And after they moved out from there (they were eventually forced to move out from there) they went into another key city in the region. They went to a city called Iconium. And there again they gave witness to the reality of Jesus. And after that they continued on another probably eighty miles or so to a smaller town; it was the name of Lystra. And they were there for a little while, not long there, and then they moved on from there and they ended up at a small, backwater town called Derbe. And that was kind of the end of their extension out. And they turned around at that point and headed back, and they made their way all the way back to Antioch. And we have the report given.

When they get back to Antioch and they are ready to report back, they gather the church around them, and they begin to report. And the text tells us after two years, fourteen hundred miles traveling through that southern Asia Minor, an area we would now call Turkey, that when they report the report keys in on two things. Number one, they report "*all the things that God had done with them.*" It's not simply 'We did this; we went here, we said this.' They talk about *what God did with them*, and through them, and by them. God's the active agent when they give their report. In fact, they build on it. The second thing they report, as they talk about it, is what God had done with them, and how that "*God had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles*"—it was all God's doing—and how God had gone out with them, working with them to open up an opportunity for Gentiles who had never been looking for the Messiah, didn't understand the Messiah, were content with all the various gods they were worshipping there in Asia Minor...how God went to them and gave them the opportunity to respond in faith to the reality of Jesus Christ and begin to follow the one true God.

God had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. He had already opened it to the Jews, people who for generations had looked for the Messiah. Everywhere they went these apostles, Paul and Barnabas, had shared the gospel with Jews. But God had also opened the door to people who had never looked for the Messiah, who were worshipping pagan idols, and said, 'You can believe, too. The Messiah is for you also.'

And it really was a working of God. When they gave that report they told of dramatic things that God had done. For example, that first stop in Paphos where he was at the governmental center of Cyprus, and he was...Paul was giving the gospel, telling the proconsul, the governor, about Jesus Christ. We're told there was a magician there, and the magician was challenging them. And the story...Paul tells a story of how he looked at that magician, how he gazed on him intently, and he said, 'You're gonna be blind. You're gonna be blind for a time, and then God'll give you your sight back.' And it was a like a fog descended over this man's eyes, and suddenly he couldn't see. He was groping around, trying to find somebody to lead him. And they had to get him out of there. And Paul was able to keep telling the gospel to that governor.

Then there's the story of when he went up north, remember up in the interior, and he was into the second major city up there, Iconium. And we're told there that the city polarized. There's a large group that got resistant to the gospel, became very aggressive about it and were assertive about it, and began to rally others against Paul and Barnabas and their message. And we're told that as this happened, at the opening of chapter 14, we're told that Paul and Barnabas...instead of leaving they just stayed longer. And it says that God was working through them with signs and wonders. I mean, they were doing things these people had never seen. They were healing the sick; they were helping the lame to walk. God was working through them with these apostolic miracles.

Probably the most interesting example comes when they made it to the little city of Lystra. It wasn't the smallest town they went through, but it was off the beaten path. And they were there, and we're told that Paul and Barnabas were walking along, and Paul saw a man who had been lame from birth. And as Paul went by him he looked at him, and the text says that he saw that the man had the faith to be healed. He saw that there was faith in this man, that this man really believed, as he'd been hearing the message. And Paul looked at him and told him to stand up and walk. And he did—he was healed! And then came the amazing reaction—the whole city decided that Paul and Barnabas were gods! They were gods disguised as men. They even had names for 'em. And they rushed and they were gonna sacrifice animals to these two gods in their midst.

A little bit of background. There was a legend in that area that two gods had come among them years before...they were Zeus and Hermes. And the community didn't recognize them, and the gods had been offended. But there'd been one old family that had taken them in, and they had been blessed because they had done that. Nobody wanted to make that mistake again. 'These guys gotta be gods. We're gonna take care of 'em; we're gonna be benefitted.' It says that Paul and Barnabas were distressed, and they had to vehemently argue with the people to stop it; said, 'We're not gods! There's only one God!' So it was some pretty dramatic stuff.

God was working through these men as they went through. But as they were doing that there was at least two lessons that Paul realized, and they really became...this trip, I'm convinced, left a lasting impression upon Paul. It was their first attempt to take the gospel out on their own...to just go into regions they hadn't been before. And as they did so it left a lasting impression physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually. I don't think Paul ever forgot this trip. He learned as he went on this two-year, fourteen-hundred-mile trip that number one, when God opens the door of faith, when God opens that door of faith for individuals and that opportunity for them to believe as the gospel is presented, there will be people that try to shut that door of faith. There will be people who try to close it. Everywhere Paul went, as God worked through him to open the door of the gospel, others tried to shut it. I already mentioned the magician, in verse 8 of chapter 13, that was on the island at Paphos, that began to resist 'em. And we're told very specifically that he was seeking to turn the Proconsul away from the faith. He was tryin' to shut that door that God was opening with Paul.

When you go to that city of Pisidin Antioch, we're told that there the Jews incited and instigated a persecution against 'em—verse 50 of chapter 13. The Jews...Paul and Barnabas, when they came into a community they would first go to the Jewish synagogue because those were the people looking for the Messiah. And they would go and they would share the gospel there, and some of the Jews would respond. But oftentimes others would resist 'em. And then they would go to other people in the community, and others would respond. And we're told that the Jews were upset with that. They were losing some of their own people to these traveling Messianic Jews that kept talkin' about Jesus. So we're told in Pisidin Antioch they incited and instigated a persecution, and they drove them out of that district. That's why they had to leave Pisidin Antioch. Crucial, strategic city...the place they wanted to be, they had to leave.

Then when they went to Iconium we're told that the Jews who disbelieved in that city stirred up the minds of the Gentiles. They began to argue against what Paul was sayin'. They began to lobby against 'em. And we're told that they embittered them against the brethren. And then we go a few more verses, verse 5 of chapter 14, we're told they made an attempt by both the Gentiles and the Jews, with the rulers of that city, to mistreat and to stone Paul and Barnabas. And they had to leave.

Lystra was even more dramatic. That city, when Paul had stopped them from offering sacrifices...we're told that people from Iconium and people from Pisidin Antioch came, and they turned that city against Paul. It became a divided city, and they stoned Paul. And they dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead. They left him in the dirt, convinced he's dead. Remember, this is the city where at first they thought he was a god, and they were tryin' to offer sacrifices to him. When they're done with him, they figure he's dead.

One of my favorite pictures here of the Apostle Paul, told in the verse that follows this, the verses that follow that, as the disciples are just sittin' there looking at this dead man, who they're convinced is dead, he stands up and he walks right back into that city, spent the night, and walked on to that little backwater town called Derbe to recover.

Everywhere they went someone tried to close the door. Interesting thing to me...in that little town of Derbe, that backwater place where he kinda recovered, and everything else...and we believe that some of the injuries were probably permanent for Paul from that stoning. We know he's still talking about it near the end of his life in letters. But he turned around and he goes back, and he decides to go back to every one of those cities and give the believers there encouragement. And hear how he does it. We're told in verse 22 of chapter 14 he returns "*strengthening the souls of the disciples,*" the Christians that were left in every one of those cities—polarized cities, cities where there were some hostile, some supportive of the Christian faith. He goes back and he's strengthening the souls of the disciples, and he's encouraging them to continue in the faith. He's saying, 'Stay with it. Don't back off.'

And then here's his words of encouragement; he says "*...through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.*" Now, he doesn't say you can only enter if you...*if you suffer*. That isn't a requirement; that isn't how you get into the kingdom. The reality is...when Jesus calls you, you're gonna respond in faith; you're gonna enter the kingdom; but you know what? Along the way there's gonna be some hits. There's gonna be some times it hurts. And that was Paul's message as he went back through these cities. We're gonna take some hits, because everywhere God opens the door of faith someone will try to close it.

And Paul, later in his ministry, will try to describe how it's not just cantankerous people. There's a darkness, there is an evil in the unseen realm that does not want the gospel shared. It's a little bit like goin' to the huddle and tellin' the other players 'Somebody's gonna get tackled on this next play, most likely. Some of you are gonna get hit in a blocking pattern. A linebacker is gonna crunch ya. It's gonna happen. That's the nature of the game we're in.'

But then he adds there's somethin' else he learned as he went through that journey and that trip. Two years, fourteen hundred miles, the second thing—not only did he learn that some will try to close the door of faith; he learned very much, very clearly, that some will enter through the door of faith. There will be people who respond to that gospel message as it's shared. You talk about Jesus, there will be people who believe.

Interesting thing that happened in that major city, Pisidin Antioch, where they eventually instigated a persecution and forced him out. Interesting thing happened there, and it's described this way. Paul...Luke, the writer, describes it as...he says "*...and as many as were appointed to eternal life...*" looking back at what happened in that city as the gospel was shared, he says, "*...as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.*" There were people there who believed; and not just a few...there were a lot of people in that city who believed. Polarized, hostile community towards the gospel, and yet there were people who believed.

Now, some people want to spend a lot of time, get into theological debate and discussion here about predestination and free will, the sovereignty of God and the free choice of man, and that based on the statement here. But on a simple, simple, practical level what they're talkin' about here, what Luke's talkin' about...he's sayin', 'You know what? They discovered in these communities that there were people who were ready and responsive to the gospel. It was like God was ahead of them in these places, preparing people so that when they shared the gospel they responded. It was like every city they went, there were appointments with people that God had arranged. And when they shared the gospel these people were eager to receive it and to respond to it. God had arranged the meeting. God had arranged the gospel. God had prepared these people to receive it and to hear it. And it was amazing! You didn't know in any community who it might be. You didn't know if it would be the lame man outside in the street begging, or it would be the governor of the community, or it would be a homemaker who was trying to get by, or a businessman, or a slave, or one of the Jewish leaders in the synagogue. You didn't know who it would be, and how many it would be. You were just amazed when you shared the gospel—there were people who God already had ready and responsive, and they believed! You felt like you were almost on a divine appointment calendar, and the timing was even intricate. And you knew God was moving in people's lives before you even got there and while you were with them. And it would carry on after them.'

I don't believe Paul walked into cities wondering if anybody here will believe. I believe he walked into cities believing that God had appointments for him and there were people there who would believe. Didn't know who, didn't know how, didn't know when, but there were people who would respond. And those people, when they responded...in these hostile, polarized situations...they're described this way. It says "*And the disciples...*" This is after Paul left one of those cities that was polarized and hostile. It says the disciples were continually, verse 52 of chapter 13, it says

And the disciples were continually filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.

Something happened to these people as God opened the door of faith and they stepped through it. Their lives took on a new depth of joy. I'm not talkin' about giddy happiness. I'm talkin' a rock-centered joy that was rooted in and linked to the reality of the Holy Spirit released in their life, just as God promised, through faith in Jesus Christ.

That was the first trip, and those were the major lessons comin' out that the Apostle Paul learned...that when God is working with us and He's opening a door of faith, there are gonna be people who try to close that door. At the same time, there are gonna be people, by divine appointment, that walk through it.

Question: What's the relevance for us? I've given us history to this point. I've given us analysis to this point. What about the relevance? What about for you and I? Here's my response. God will use you to open the door of faith in people's lives. God will use you to open the door of faith in people's lives, to give the opportunity to others to respond to the reality of Jesus Christ in faith. God will use you to do that. It may be to open the door of faith in your family, extended family. It may be to open the door of faith in your circle of friends. It may be to open the door of faith in your business associates, or your school mates, or the dorm, or your business. Or it could be to open the door of faith in this community. It could be to open the door of faith in some far off land. God will use you to open the door of faith for others. You say, "But I'm not an apostle. I don't do signs and wonders. You got it wrong here, Larry." No, I don't. God will use you to open the door of faith. If His Spirit has come upon you as a believer, you have acknowledged Jesus and the promise of His Spirit, you will be a witness for Jesus.

The book of Acts starts with Jesus' statement. He says, "*You will be My witnesses.*" That is not a command; that is not an instruction, that is not a suggestion; it is a statement of fact. It is the formative words of Jesus, spoken over His people to shape their future. And His words are powerful, His words are effective, and His words are shaping us. We will be His witnesses—we will, in word and deed. If you acknowledge Him as Lord, His Spirit is upon you and you, just by virtue of that, are gonna end up being a witness. It's gonna happen. You may not cover fourteen hundred miles; it may be just down the block. But you will be a witness. And when you are...when you are a witness God works in you and through you—through your prayers, through your words, through your deeds.

When God works through you to open the door of faith I want you to understand, I want you to be prepared for it, I don't want you to shook up by it, but somebody will try to close the door. It'll happen. Sometimes it's just an irritant. Just found out recently that our domain name for our internet site as a church, our web site as a church is wasillabile.org. Just recently found out somebody else has bought up the web site domain name wasillabilechurch.org, and has turned it into an anti-Christian web site. That's irritating! That is really irritating. Somebody trying to close the door.

Sometimes it's not just irritating, it's problematic. Somebody pours accelerant, lights a match.

Sometimes it's almost humorous. In fact, last fall when everybody's going through our web site because of the national media attention, I mean we got campaign workers, we got bloggers, we got reporters—goin' through all my sermons on the web site. And then you start readin' the comments...I mean, I was called a lunatic, I was called a fanatic, I was called insane, I was called a fraud. And my favorite one is the one who likened me to Pooh Bear. Ok. Listen, we live in an amazing place, an amazing country, and what we get is nothin' compared to what happens to believers in other places. Our brothers and sisters in the Gaza Baptist Church that we're supporting and helping right now—one of their people was kidnapped and murdered about a year ago.

Someone's gonna try to close the door, ok? It's gonna happen. Don't panic, because there's somethin' glorious and wondrous and powerful. There'll be those who walk through the door, and they're gonna meet the reality of Jesus, and there's gonna be a new joy in their life, and they're gonna have the reality of the Holy Spirit filling their lives, and they are gonna live forever in the reality of Jesus.

The young man left the airbase. It's was kinda late at night. It was a foolish time to go. It wasn't a good time of day. The weather reports were horrendous. And he was gonna be traveling up and over a mountain pass, and he was gonna be goin' on a motorcycle that wasn't a road cycle. It was a dirt bike. And he wasn't going to be goin' slow because that wasn't his nature...he was fast. But all those things didn't matter to him, because he was drunk.

He took off from the airbase, and he was oblivious to everything and he's just flyin' up and over the pass. And on the way down he starts hitting snow. And everything's out of control. And at one point he finds himself finally stopping, and he looks, and he's just missed a semi, and he's right on the edge, and he looks over and it's this huge drop off. He stopped about inches from death.

When he finally reached the bottom of the mountain, shaken and now more sober...just out of fear, he pulled in; he drove his motorcycle into this little truck stop. And as he got off four young people came up to him, college-age, three girls and a guy. And they came up and they said, "Are you ok? Are you alright?" And he's stuttering and he's shaky, he's frozen, he can hardly uncurl his hands. And they start...they say, "Let us help you!" And they took him into the little restaurant. They got him hot chocolate, they got him a hot dog, and they began to warm him up. And they began to encourage him, and everything else. And they began to talk about Jesus. They just told him about the reality of Jesus Christ.

They were four college kids who went to a Bible school, and they were on a spring break. And they were headed up, and they'd come near this mountain pass and they really...they wanted to tell somebody about Jesus. And suddenly they were.

Twenty...oh, not twenty; somewhere between thirty and forty years later that man's in our church. And there's a joy to his life. I mean, he's one of these persons...every time I'm with him, every time I'm with him I end up laughing at some level. And the Holy Spirit is in him—His care, His compassion, His peace, His gentleness, His self-control—you see that in this man. And I'd never known this story about him 'til couple weeks ago in a men's group we were just asking, 'When do you remember first hearing the gospel?' And he says, "I'll never forget it." His road to faith started with four college kids giving him a hot dog, a hot chocolate, and talking about Jesus.

People will walk through the door of faith when God opens it. Don't back off. When He works in you and through you to open it, don't back off.

Let's stand.

Our Father in heaven,

We thank You for Your grace, Your mercy, and Your wonder. And Father, we thank You for those who, ahead of us, You used and worked with to open the door of faith for us, those who did not back off when others tried to shut the door. Father, You've called us to be your witnesses. We answer to that, and we say "LORD, let it be."

In Jesus' name, witness through us. Open that door. Amen.

Go in His grace.