

## CHAPTER 34: Acts 13 thru 21

Saul sets out on his first missionary journey. He is accompanied by his good friend Barnabas and a new convert named John Mark. This is the first church-sponsored mission trip. It has been nearly two decades since Saul's incredible conversion on the Damascus Road back in Acts 9. It's during this first missionary trip that Saul is no longer called Saul, but Paul. It is mentioned almost as an aside in the text: **But Saul (also known as Paul) ...** (Acts 13:9) From now on he will be referred to as Paul.

I need to correct a common misunderstanding. This is NOT a name change. He has had both names since birth. Paul's father was a Roman citizen and his family was Jewish. So, he had both a Jewish name, Saul, and a Roman (Gentile) name, Paul. So why does he start to go by Paul, his Roman name? The reason is that from now on Paul will mainly be ministering in a Gentile environment. This will be his focus.

Paul's first missionary journey results in **opening a door of faith for the Gentiles.** (Acts 14:27) The team sets sail from Antioch. Their initial stop is the island of Cyprus, which is where Barnabas is from. The first city they come to on Cyprus is Salamis. **When they arrived in Salamis, they began to proclaim the word of God in the Jewish synagogues.** (Acts 13:5) This will be Paul's method of operation everywhere he visits. He goes first to the local synagogue if they have one. Because Paul and Barnabas are Jews, they feel compelled to preach Jesus to the Jews first. After the Jews reject their message – and this will happen consistently – they turn their attention to preaching the Gospel to the Gentiles. Surprisingly, the pagan Gentiles that they meet are generally more open to the Gospel than are the Jews.

From Salamis the team heads on foot to the other side of the island of Cyprus to the city of Paphos. Here they will experience some success.

When the proconsul at Paphos, a Roman official named Sergius Paulus, hears the Gospel, he believes. **He was greatly astounded at the teachings about the Lord.** (Acts 13:12) So this man, Sergius Paulus, becomes the first recorded convert on Paul's missionary journeys. But Paul and Barnabas face opposition. A Jewish false prophet named Elymus attempts to turn the proconsul away from the faith. With the power given to him by the Holy Spirit, Paul overcomes Elymus who is temporarily struck blind for trying to thwart God's work.

From Cyprus the team sails north to the mainland. The plan is to travel over some difficult terrain to several major cities in the region of Galatia. But when their ship arrives something unexpected happens. **Then Paul and his companions put out to sea from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia, but John [Mark] left them and returned to Jerusalem.** (Acts 13:13) There is no explanation given for John Mark's sudden

departure. We learn later that Paul is not happy at all about him leaving. Paul and Barnabas have a mission to complete so they press on without him.

Their next stop is Antioch. This is not the Antioch in Syria where they are from, but an Antioch located in the mountainous region of Pisidia. It is commonly referred to as Pisidian Antioch to distinguish it from the other one. It is a long uphill climb from the Mediterranean coast into the mountains. It is worthwhile however because Paul and Barnabas see some Jewish converts here. But the Jewish leaders in this city confront Paul. They contradict his message and scold him. As a result, Paul turns his attention toward the Gentiles and many of them believe. **So, the word of the Lord was spreading through the entire region.** (Acts 13:49)

The Jewish leaders are not happy about the spreading of the Gospel. They go to the city leaders inciting them against Paul and Barnabas. They end up running them out of town. Now, you might think they would be discouraged because of this. But they are not. **So after [Paul and Barnabas] shook the dust off their feet in protest against them, they went to Iconium. And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.** (Acts 13:51-52)

At the next town Iconium the same scenario plays out. Saul and Barnabas go first into the Jewish synagogue and many Jews believe. But the Jews that do not believe stir up the city against them. They hatch a plot to kill Saul and Barnabas. But God protects them and they manage to escape. Despite their setbacks, Paul and Barnabas continue to proclaim the good news.

From Iconium it is on to Lystra. Here the mission team receives a totally different kind of reception than they had received before. The people of Lystra welcome Paul and Barnabas... as gods! They believe that Paul and Barnabas are the Roman gods Zeus and Hermes, respectively. When Paul heals a man who had been crippled from birth the people are convinced that Zeus and Hermes are among them. They begin to worship Paul and Barnabas. Paul tells the people that they are mistaken. He and Barnabas are NOT gods. Paul then preaches Jesus. Because these people are pagans, Paul reasons to them from nature. The people of Lystra are focused on Paul's message and all is going well. But out of the blue the Jews from down the road arrive on the scene and stir up trouble.

**But Jews came from [Pisidian] Antioch and Iconium, and after winning the crowds over, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, presuming him to be dead.** (Acts 14:19) This is a pretty fickle crowd! Here they are worshipping Paul one minute and then trying to kill him the next. But God's hand of protection is upon Paul. He's not finished with him yet. **But after the disciples [from Lystra] surrounded**

**[Paul], he got up and went back into the city. On the next day he left with Barnabas for Derbe. (Acts 14:20)**

After a brief ministry in Derbe, Paul and Barnabas retrace their steps back thru Lystra, Iconium and Pisidian Antioch. They encourage the new believers in each of these towns. They establish churches and appoint qualified leaders. Paul and Barnabas then make their way back down to the Mediterranean coast and sail home to Antioch.

**When they arrived and gathered the church together, they reported all the things God had done with them, and that He had opened a door of faith for the Gentiles. So, they spent considerable time with the disciples. (Acts 14:27-28)** So there you have Paul's first missionary journey. Overall, it was pretty successful!

A problem arises among the various churches. Certain Jewish Christians have been going around insisting that all Gentile converts (those that are not from Jewish backgrounds) be circumcised in keeping with the Jewish Law. Basically, they've been saying that Gentiles who believe in Jesus also need to become Jews and keep the Mosaic Law. Paul and the apostles realize that, if this false teaching is not squelched, it will cause disunity in the church body. At the heart of this issue is the fundamental question: "Is faith in Jesus enough to be saved or does it require more?"

This is an important enough issue that all of the apostles and church leaders convene to discuss it. They meet in Jerusalem in what comes to be known as "The Jerusalem Council" and it is covered in Acts 15.

At the Jerusalem Council there is much debate. Each side has the opportunity to present their viewpoint. **But some from the religious party of the Pharisees who had believed stood up and said, "It is necessary to circumcise the Gentiles and to order them to observe the law of Moses."** (Acts 15:5) That is one side of the debate. Here we can see that a number of Jewish Pharisees actually came to faith in Jesus. We know about Nicodemus from the Gospels, but apparently there were many more Pharisees who believed, though their theology appears to be a little shaky.

Next Peter stands up and shares his testimony about what happened at the home of Cornelius the Roman centurion. He says, **"Brothers, you know that some time ago God chose me to preach to the Gentiles so they would hear the message of the gospel and believe. And God who knows the heart, has testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit just as He did to us, and He made no distinction between them and us, cleansing their hearts by faith. So now why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? On the contrary, we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they are."** (Acts 15:7-11)

Notice the pronouns that Peter uses. “We” and “us” refers to the Jewish believers while “they” and “them” refers to those Gentiles who have recently come to faith.

Barnabas and Paul are next up. They share their personal experiences of preaching to the Gentiles. **The whole group kept quiet and listened to Barnabas and Paul while they explained all the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.** (Acts 15:12) They recounted many of the highlights from their recently completed missionary journey.

James, the brother of Jesus, who has become one of the leaders in the Jerusalem church speaks up. He quotes from the prophet Amos. **“After this I will return, and I will rebuild the fallen tent of David; I will rebuild its ruins and restore it, so that the rest of humanity may seek the Lord, namely, all the Gentiles, I have called to be My own,’ says the Lord, who makes these things known from long ago.”** (Acts 15:16-18) His point is that what is happening with the Gentiles now is fulfilling Old Testament prophecy – what Amos and other prophets said was going to happen.

The conference concludes and settles three key issues: (1) Christianity is a belief system all its own and is not just a sect of Judaism – they are completely different; (2) Salvation comes by grace through faith in Jesus and not by keeping the Law; (3) Jewish traditions and ritual practices are fine but not essential. The witness of Holy Spirit has made it clear that even those who do not practice such things can be saved.

James speaking for the entire council says this: **“Therefore I conclude that we should not cause extra difficulty for those among the Gentiles who are turning to God, but that we should write them a letter telling them to abstain from things defiled by idols and from sexual immorality and from what has been strangled and from blood. For Moses has had those who proclaim him in every town from ancient times, because he is read aloud in the synagogues every Sabbath.”** (Acts 15:19-21) All Jews know about the Law. The main point James makes is this: Jewish believers are not to impose their traditions on the Gentiles, like forcing them to keep the Law. This is legalism. But neither are Gentile believers to participate in their old pagan practices which are considered offensive to their Jewish brothers. This is immorality. The Jerusalem Council drafts a letter outlining their conclusions. This letter is circulated and read to all the churches. It’s a major turning point in the Christian movement.

After spending some time in Antioch, Paul and Barnabas feel God leading them to return to the churches they had established during their first missionary journey. As they finalize their mission plans, a sharp disagreement arises between them. Barnabas wants to take John Mark with them. John Mark is the one who had left on the first missionary journey. Barnabas wants to give this young man a second chance. But Paul does not think this is a good idea. It becomes obvious that they are not going to reach

an agreement on this issue. So, they compromise. Barnabas will take John Mark with him and go to Cyprus. Paul will take another man named Silas with him. They will visit and strengthen the churches they started up in Galatia. So, in effect, two mission teams are formed.

The book of Acts follows the travels of Paul and Silas. Paul's second missionary journey gets underway and he and Silas depart from Antioch. But not by ship this time. They travel northward on foot and revisit the churches that had been established on Paul's first missionary journey. They go to Derbe, Lystra, Iconium and Pisidian Antioch. In each of these places they encourage and strengthen the believers.

**[Paul] also came to Derbe and to Lystra. A disciple named Timothy was there, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but whose father was a Greek. The brothers in Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him.** (Acts 16:1-2) A young disciple, Timothy, joins the mission team and is mentored by Paul and Silas. As they visit each house church, they inform the congregations of the decision reached earlier by the Jerusalem council. **So, the churches were strengthened in the faith and were increasing in number every day.** (Acts 16:5)

The team travels from the region of Galatia across Asia. The Holy Spirit prevents Paul and Silas from presenting the Gospel in Asia though no reason for this is given. They travel north but then are directed west by the Holy Spirit to the city of Troas located on the Aegean Sea. It is at Troas that a man named Luke, a medical doctor, a Gentile, and fellow believer, joins the team. This is the same Luke that would later write the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts.

While in Troas Paul sees a vision one night. **A Macedonian man was standing there urging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us!" After Paul saw the vision, we attempted immediately to go over to Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.** (Acts 16:9-10)

This is significant. Macedonia is not merely another region, but a whole new continent! For the first time the Gospel message is introduced to the people of Europe.

The first city the missionary team visits on the continent of Europe is Philippi. Paul preaches Jesus to some Gentile women gathered by a river there. One woman named Lydia, immediately responds to his message and is saved. She persuades Paul and the missionary team to stay at her house while they are in town. Due to Lydia's hospitality and the openness of the locals to the Gospel, the team remains in Philippi for a while.

While they are in Philippi Paul casts a demon out of a slave girl. This evil spirit had enabled the girl to foretell the future and her owners had been profiting nicely from her unusual "ability." But with the demon gone, the girl can no longer tell fortunes or predict

the future. This upsets the slave girl's owner. He drags Paul and Silas before the local magistrates and demands that they be punished. Our two heroes are falsely accused of turning the city of Philippi away from the worship of idols. Of course, this is a total lie. A mob forms and attacks them. Yielding to political pressure, the city leaders have Paul and Silas beaten and thrown into jail for inciting a riot.

Instead of complaining about the way they had been treated or about the total miscarriage of justice, Paul and Silas pray and sing hymns while behind bars. Suddenly, in the middle of the night, there is an earthquake. It shakes the foundation of the jailhouse so hard that all the doors to the cells fly open. Even the prisoners' shackles are loosened. **When the jailer woke up and saw the doors of the prison standing open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, because he assumed the prisoners had escaped. But Paul called out loudly, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here!" Calling for lights, the jailer rushed in and fell down trembling at the feet of Paul and Silas.** (Acts 16:27-30)

**Then he brought them outside and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, you and your household." Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him, along with all those who were in his house.** (Acts 16:31-32) That night the jailer and his entire family believe in Jesus and are baptized.

The next day Paul and Silas are released and the team departs Philippi. They take Timothy with them but leave Luke behind to minister to the new converts there. They head west to another large city, Thessalonica. It is the major port of Macedonia. They preach the Gospel there for several weeks. Their message is embraced by Jews and Gentiles alike.

But again, some of the unbelieving Jews feel threatened by the missionary team. They stir up the crowds against Paul and Silas. Here we go again! This disturbance forces the city officials to intervene. They strongly urge Paul and his team to move on.

The neighboring town is Berea, but the Jews here are different. **These Jews were more open-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they eagerly received the message, examining the scriptures carefully every day to see if these things were so. Therefore, many of them believed along with quite a few prominent Greek women and men.** (Acts 17:11-12) Paul and Silas are received favorably by the Berean Jews and even some Gentiles. They listen to Paul intently. These Jews examine their scriptures to see if this Jesus that Paul is preaching about really did fulfill all of those prophecies that Paul claims He did. After determining that what Paul said is true, many of them believe in Jesus and profess Him as their Lord.

When the Jews in Thessalonica get word that Paul is having success next door in Berea, they travel there. Just as they had done in Thessalonica, they incite the crowds. **Then the brothers sent Paul away to the coast at once, but Silas and Timothy remained in Berea. Those who accompanied Paul escorted him as far as Athens, and after receiving an order for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they left.** (Acts 17:14-15) The Berean believers band together and protect Paul. They escort him out of the danger zone south to Athens, which is the cultural center of Greece. Paul will find the atmosphere and his audience here quite a bit different than in previous places.

On the outskirts of Athens there is a gathering place for “thinkers” called the Hill of Mars. It is an open forum where anyone can express their views about anything. Many people spend their time just sitting around listening to discussions about all the various cults and philosophies. When Paul’s turn comes, he stands up and presents his listeners with a way of life that is completely new to them. They are eager to hear Paul and listen closely to what he has to say.

Paul personally finds the rampant idolatry of Athens repulsive, but he does not express this. Instead, he uses it to his advantage. **So, Paul stood... and said, “Men of Athens, I see that you are very religious in all respects. For as I went around and observed closely your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: ‘To an unknown god.’ Therefore, what you worship without knowing it, this I proclaim to you.”** (Acts 17:22-23) Paul goes on to tell them about this so-called unknown God. He is the Creator God of the universe, who showed Himself through Jesus, His Son. Paul calls on his audience to come to repentance, to commit their lives to Him in faith, and to live in the hope of a resurrection from the dead. This is a brand-new idea to the Athenians. To them it all sounds quite strange. To some it is even nonsense. To others it is merely entertaining. To a few it is indeed good news and these are the ones who believe Paul’s message.

Any positive results Paul has here are short-lived. There is no evidence that a church forms in Athens. It becomes clear to Paul that his gospel message is nothing more to the Athenians than merely another philosophy for them to kick around. A bit discouraged by their apathy, Paul departs Athens and travels west to Corinth.

Corinth is a wealthy commercial center. It is also a very corrupt and pagan city. But surprisingly, it proves to be fertile ground for the Gospel. When Paul arrives in Corinth, he looks for lodging and employment. He finds both with a Jewish couple, Aquila and Priscilla. Like Paul, they are tent-makers by trade. At some point early in their relationship, Paul leads Aquila and Priscilla to faith in Jesus. This mission trip is not being funded by the church at Antioch. They sent him out, but Paul has to raise his own financial support and he does so as a tent-maker.

Paul proclaims the Gospel in Corinth every Sabbath in the local synagogue. Paul receives much-needed encouragement in his ministry when his good friends, Silas and Timothy rejoin him. He is also encouraged at the openness of the Gospel by the Corinthians.

But it doesn't take long for some of the Jews in Corinth to oppose Paul and discredit him. When this happens Paul simply moves his "pulpit" from the synagogue to the house next door. Among many who believe during Paul's preaching at the house next door is the ruler of the synagogue himself, a Jew named Crispus. Despite the constant threat of opposition by the Corinthian Jews, Paul's ministry among the Gentiles here flourishes.

**The Lord said to Paul by a vision in the night, "Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent, because I am with you, and no one will assault you to harm you, because I have many people in this city. So, he stayed there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them. (Acts 18:9-11)**

After a lengthy stay in Corinth, Paul begins to make his way back home. On the way he stops off briefly in Ephesus. He leaves his friends Aquila and Priscilla (who had been working with them at Corinth) in Ephesus. He will return as soon as possible. We'll talk more about Ephesus later. Paul sails for home and lands in Caesarea.

Paul travels to Jerusalem to visit his brothers there. He informs them of his missionary endeavors the last 2-plus years. Paul then goes back to his home church in Antioch where he stays for only a few months before hitting the road again on what will be his third missionary journey.

When Paul sets out on his third mission trip he is without Barnabas or Silas or Timothy or Luke. He is on his own. He basically follows the same route as his second missionary journey. He travels through the region of Galatia strengthening the churches that had been started on his first missionary journey – in Derbe, Lystra, Iconium and Pisidian Antioch. From there he makes his way across Asia to the city of Ephesus. Here he reunites with Aquila and Priscilla. Ephesus will be the focal point of this mission trip.

Paul encounters several former disciples of John the Baptist. They do not realize that Jesus was the One to whom John's baptism of repentance pointed. So, Paul presents the Gospel message to them. **Paul said, "John baptized with a baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus." When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus, and when Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they began to speak in tongues and to prophesy. (Acts 19:4-6)**



This is the fourth time recorded in the book of Acts that new believers in Jesus receive the Holy Spirit in the presence of one or more of the apostles. The first time was on the day of Pentecost which involved the eleven apostles and primarily Jewish believers (Acts 2). The second time involved the conversion of some Samaritans by Philip (Acts 8). The third time was when Peter witnessed to Cornelius and Gentiles believed (Acts 10). Now it happens again here with these former disciples of John in Ephesus. In all four cases the witness of the Holy Spirit lets everyone know that all of these various groups of people are, in fact, a part of Jesus's church.

Under Paul's powerful preaching and healing ministry many people in Ephesus are saved. Lives are radically changed. Paul spends a long time here. Because Ephesus is a cosmopolitan city it draws visitors from all over the region. Many who visit the city hear Paul's preaching and believe. They in turn carry the gospel message to other cities in the region. It is a productive ministry.

**Now after all these things had taken place, Paul resolved to go to Jerusalem, passing through Macedonia and Achaia. He said, "After I have been there [Jerusalem], I must also see Rome."** (Acts 19:21) Paul sets his sight on Rome, the capital and most important city in the entire Roman Empire. Paul's ultimate dream is to travel to Rome and preach the Gospel there.

Paul's preaching in Ephesus is so affective that it adversely impacts the sales of statues to the goddess Artemis (also known as Diana). This goddess has a magnificent temple dedicated to it in Ephesus. One leading businessman, a man named Demetrius, decides to take action. He stirs up the citizens of Ephesus against Paul. Big surprise! He charges that Paul is a threat to their economy and is undermining their religion. Once again false accusations are brought against Paul. This is similar to incidents that had occurred in previously in Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea.

**When they heard this, they became enraged and began to shout, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" The city was filled with the uproar, and the crowd rushed to the theater together, dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus, the Macedonians who were Paul's traveling companions. But when Paul wanted to enter the public assembly, the disciples would not let him.** (Acts 19:28-30) The two men mentioned here had been ministering with Paul. This is a tense situation.

After two hours the city secretary, fearing the Roman government, settles the crowd down. This incident serves as the catalyst for Paul to leave Ephesus. He dearly loves the Ephesian believers, but realizes it's time to move on. Paul says farewell to his brothers and sisters and, after three years ministering to them, he leaves Ephesus.

He heads northward back through Troas and then over to Macedonia. For several months Paul travels to various cities where he had started churches on his second

missionary journey – Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea and Corinth. He encourages and teaches the believers in these places. After spending a few months down in Corinth, a plot to kill Paul is uncovered. So, the Corinthian believers usher Paul away secretly back up the coast to Troas.

While Paul is in Troas something very unusual occurs. One evening Paul is preaching to a group of believers. It is getting late. A young man named Eutychus sits in an open window listening to Paul. As Paul talks, Eutychus slowly drifts off to sleep. He falls out of the window three stories to his death. Luke, a medical doctor who is writing this account in Acts states that “he was taken up dead.” **But Paul went down, threw himself on the young man, put his arms around him, and said, “Do not be distressed, for he is still alive!” Then Paul went back upstairs, and after he had broken bread and eaten, he talked with them a long time until dawn. Then he left. They took the boy home alive and were greatly comforted.** (Acts 20:10-12) So Paul raises Eutychus back to life the same way that Elijah had raised the widow’s son back to life in 1 Kings 17. It’s a miracle!

The next day Paul boards a ship bound for home. He has been away for a while so he is in a hurry to get back to Jerusalem. The ship makes one stop in Miletus. While he is being held over there, Paul sends a message to Ephesus. He requests that the church leaders meet him in Miletus. Wasting no time, they go to him. Paul talks to the Ephesian leaders at length. He exhorts and encourages them. When he finishes, Paul kneels down and prays with them. **They all began to weep loudly, and hugged Paul and kissed him, especially saddened by what he had said, that they were not going see him again. Then they accompanied him to the ship.** (Acts 20:37-38) Here we get the strong sense of just how much Paul and the church at Ephesus love each other!

The ship carrying Paul makes its long voyage across the Mediterranean Sea passing near the island of Cyprus where Paul had first started his missionary journeys. I like to imagine Paul looking out over the port side and seeing the island and reflecting back on all that had happened all those years ago when he and Barnabas first visited there.

After a long voyage Paul’s ship arrives back in Caesarea. Paul remains there in the home of Philip (the one who had witnessed to the Ethiopian official). A prophet of God named Agabus arrives to speak with Paul. He has an important message for him. He dramatically warns Paul NOT to continue on to Jerusalem. He ties up his own hands and feet and says, “This is the way the Jews in Jerusalem will tie you up and hand you over to the Gentiles.” When the people standing around hear this, they urge Paul not to go to Jerusalem – “Don’t go, Paul!”

But Paul insists. He knows that God wants him to go. **Then Paul replied, “What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be tied up, but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.” Because he could not be persuaded, we said no more except, “The Lord’s will be done.”** (Acts 21:13-14) Notice that the pronoun “we” is here. Apparently, Luke is with Paul here.

And so, he continues on down the road to Jerusalem. Little does Paul know that his plans to visit Rome are about to change dramatically.