

## “THROUGH THIS MAN”

Acts 13:13–52

Key Verse: 13:38

“Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you...”

What do you think you need most? Some may say, “I need a friend!” or “I need a better career!” or “I need a break!” Rarely will anyone say, “I need forgiveness of sins!” But that’s what today’s passage is about. Recently Paul rebuked a magician and made him blind, and through it, an intelligent Roman official came to faith in Jesus. Now, in a mostly Gentile city, Paul gives his longest recorded sermon. It’s a showcase of the gospel he’ll be preaching. In content, it’s very similar to Peter’s first sermon. So Paul isn’t really saying anything new—it’s just for a new context. He says several things here but has one main point: through this man Jesus comes forgiveness of sins. In fact, this is the main message of the Bible. In this study we want to learn how we can experience and grow in God’s forgiveness in Jesus. And in people’s response we find why Paul’s ministry turns mainly to the Gentiles. May God speak to us through his word.

Look at verses 13–14a. First, notice that “John,” also called “Mark” (12:12), is mentioned. Barnabas and Saul brought him from Jerusalem (12:25) and he’s with them as their helper (13:5). But now John leaves, with no explanation. Why? It may be due to the area’s geography (map). Perga is on a coastal plain. But traveling from there straight to Pisidian Antioch is hard. The journey involves “a steep climb over very rugged mountains to the inner plateau of some 3,000 feet or more and a distance of at least 80 miles. The time required would have been about 6 days...It was not merely the rugged terrain...that was treacherous, but its native people also had a fierce reputation...[Ancients described the area] as the home of marauding bandits.”<sup>1</sup> Knowing this, John may’ve been overwhelmed.<sup>2</sup>

But why is Paul so determined to get to Pisidian Antioch? 70 years earlier, the Roman Emperor Augustus annexed this entire central area of Asia Minor. It was now known as “Galatia” (map), because the Gauls had emigrated there a few hundred years before. Augustus created a brand new Roman colony in the old Greek one called Antioch. He settled it with veterans of the Roman legions and began building the famous Royal Road called the *Via Sebaste* (map). His

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<sup>1</sup> *Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, article on “Pisidia.”

<sup>2</sup> As Barnabas’s cousin (Col.4:10), John Mark also may have struggled to follow Paul’s leadership. Some believe Perga’s humid coastal climate is where Paul contracted his “bodily ailment” (Gal.4:13), a time he would really need help, making John Mark’s departure even harder on the team.

intention was to send troops to subjugate Galatia and improve the flow of trade. Pisidian Antioch is at a crossroads; it has a comfortable climate with nearby lakes, and beautiful views of the Sultan Mountains (picture). So, imperial family members began living in this newly rebuilt city (image). By now it's "an important and successful community" with "a large population of Roman citizens." The city center is "adorned with a magnificent series of buildings...a large colonnaded square, a colonnaded street named after the emperor Tiberius, [and] a triple arched gateway..." Sergius Paulus, the Roman proconsul at Paphos, and his family are from Pisidian Antioch.<sup>3</sup> Through that man's recent change, Paul must be even more inspired to engage in gospel ministry with Roman people.

Look at verse 14. Despite John's leaving, Paul presses on. When they finally arrive at Antioch they go to the synagogue. It may seem odd that there's a synagogue way out here. But every major city in the Roman Empire at this time had Jewish communities and synagogues (map). In fact, due to historic conflicts and economic hardships, at least four million Jews had already migrated to these cities, now by way of Roman roads. And the Romans had already given the Jews protected legal status because they were good at business and at paying taxes. Their synagogues (pictures) were places of worship, learning, community, and temporary lodging. Non-Jews were welcome to attend synagogue and learn from the Scriptures. Some Roman citizens were attracted because they liked the moral and ethical teachings of the Ten Commandments and the justice of the Creator God. Though few would get circumcised and become fully Jewish, a good number of Gentiles became God-fearers. We've already seen Cornelius, a centurion in the Roman army, a devout man who feared God with all his household and prayed regularly (10:1–2,22). Through the Jews' influence, many people throughout the empire became God-fearing and devout worshippers.<sup>4</sup>

Look at verse 15. The synagogue rulers notice their new guests and hope they have something encouraging to say. Paul takes this opportunity to share the gospel. He's aware of the mixed audience of Jews and Gentiles (16,26), but in his speech he begins reviewing what God has done in history. Luke is out to show that the gospel of Jesus is not a break from Judaism, but a fulfillment of it. So Paul first tells the stories of Israel, David, John the Baptist—then, Jesus.

\* ***The story of Israel (17–21)***. We see in these verses how God called, blessed, formed and established Israel to be a nation, despite themselves. It proves that God rules history and that he keeps his promises. It took hundreds of years, and his people failed him over and over again, but God made it happen. God worked in Israel's history to bring his salvation to the whole world.

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<sup>3</sup> *Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, article on "Antioch."

<sup>4</sup> Cf. 10:35; 13:16,26,43,50; 16:14; 17:4,7; 18:7.

\* ***The story of David (22–23)***. These verses show us how God raised David as a prototype of the coming Savior. David was the youngest son of Jesse and grew up as a shepherd boy. But God made David a man “after God’s heart.” It means David came to know and love God as a genuine shepherd of his people. God enabled David to serve “all his will.” Through David’s offspring God preserved a spiritual lineage and finally sent the Savior, Jesus, as he promised (23).

\* ***The story of John the Baptist (24–25)***. Just before Jesus’ ministry, God sent John to help his people repent. It was to get his people ready to receive Jesus. John’s coming tells us that without repentance, no one can receive Jesus. We can study the Bible intellectually until we’re blue in the face, but without repentance, no one will ever truly receive Jesus. What’s more, John modeled what repentance looks like. Like John, repentant people are aware of how unworthy they are, and they keep laser-focused on Jesus. So, if we’re still thinking we’re better than others, we haven’t deeply repented.

\* ***The story of the Jerusalem leaders (27–29)***. These leaders had the blessing of hearing the Scriptures every Sabbath. But they rejected and crucified Jesus. They scoffed at him and would not believe. In this, they unknowingly fulfilled the prophecies about him. It warns us what a mistake privileged people can make.

\* ***The story of Jesus (30–39)***. Of all the things he could have said, Paul stresses just one: God raised Jesus (30–31). This Risen Jesus appeared for many days. Many witnesses saw him. God also promised and prophesied his resurrection in Scripture (32–33). God fulfilling all his promises and prophecies in the resurrection of Jesus is such “good news.” God raising Jesus is the best “word of encouragement” (15b). The word “corruption” is repeated here four times (34–37). Unlike David, Jesus did not see corruption. The Risen Jesus is far greater even than the greatest king David. His resurrection proves Jesus is God’s Son (Rom.1:4). This man, the Risen Jesus, is our Savior (23). This man, the Risen Jesus, brings the message of salvation to people of any race (26,47). This man, the Risen Jesus, is the giver of eternal life to all who believe in him (46,48).

Finally Paul gets to the heart of the good news. Read verses 38–39. These people in the synagogue were seeking salvation through the law of Moses. But it could never work. The law can only point out our sins; it can never forgive them. The law might control outward behavior to some extent but it can’t change our hearts. Jeremiah 17:9 tells us, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” While keeping the law outwardly we can cherish sin in our hearts (Psalm 66:18). Secret sins and guilt trouble our souls. We may agree with the law of Moses but have no power to carry it out. (Rom.7:7–25). Only knowing the law leaves us in the prison of our own hypocrisy. As a former Pharisee, Paul experienced this. He was disciplined; he knew all the law of Moses; but he was so self-righteous; he didn’t know forgiveness of sins.

“Forgiveness” literally means “release from bondage or imprisonment,” to let our sins go as if they’d never happened. So in verse 39 Paul repeats the word “freed.” Why does such freedom, such release, such forgiveness come only through this man Jesus? Hebrews 9:22b says, “...and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.” God is holy and just. He never condones sin or pretends it didn’t happen. His righteous character demands just payment for sin. In the law he taught his people to sacrifice animals for their sins. Of course it was impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. But these sacrifices reminded them of their sins and made them more conscious of sin. And this was only a shadow of the good things to come (Heb.10:1–4).

Through Israel’s history God was preparing to send into this sin-sick world the Holy One, his only Son in the form of a man. Forgiveness of sins did not come through Israel’s leaders like Samuel the prophet, or David the King, or John the Baptist, but only through this man Jesus. Only this man Jesus shed his holy blood for our sins. 1 John 2:2 proclaims that this man Jesus “...is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.” “Propitiation” means to turn away wrath. Only the holy, shed blood of Jesus turns God’s righteous wrath away from us. Only his blood releases us from the spiritual prison of our sin and guilt. Romans 3:22–25a puts it this way: “...the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.” Jews faithfully trying to keep the Law of Moses need this good news. Rich and ungodly Romans need this good news. People of every race and background today need it. The precious blood of Christ, the Lamb without blemish or spot (1 Pet.1:19), justifies us and frees us from God’s wrath. His blood brings us God’s forgiveness. As we receive his blood by faith, it cleanses us from all sin (1 John 1:7). No matter who we are, God wants us to be reconciled to him. He wants to restore our relationship with him. For this, he punished his own Son in our place. For our sake he made him to be sin who had no sin (2 Cor.5:21).

Paul’s message tells us what our real problem is. It’s not what other people did to us, no matter how much they hurt us, or our human condition—our lack of human blessings. Our problem is being cut off from our Creator, the One who made us. In light of who he is, our problem is living for ourselves. Sin is not only separation from God, but also perversion, turning inward to self. A person full of self is living against God. God made us all in his own image (Gen.1:26–27) to be like himself—unselfish and full of love. But since the Fall, we’re all born with an ugly sinful nature we can’t even see, much less get rid of. On our own, we can’t change, we can’t get right with God. Only through this man Jesus and his shed blood can our broken relationship with God be restored. Only through this man

Jesus can we turn our hearts away from our ugly selves to the living God who loves us despite our sins. When we repent and believe in him, his forgiving grace saves, heals, and restores God's loving image in us. We can't save ourselves with our efforts, abilities, or discipline. All our achievements, other people, family, or possessions can't save us, either. Only Jesus our Savior can save us from our sins. Though it's painful, we need to see how sinful we are, how helpless we are, how much we need saving, how much we need his forgiveness.

As a teenager I was good at school but lived a rebellious life with my friends. I used people for my own ego and gratification and became enslaved by secret sins. I ignored my inner self and put on a good show. But in college God led me to UBF Bible study, and his word began to work in my heart. Within a few months I made many decisions: I cut off my girlfriend and unbelieving friends. I publicly confessed all my shameful sins. I wrote out my devotions every day and my Bible reflections every week. I started praying, often on my knees. I memorized lots of Bible verses. I sang hymns. I invited fellow students, taught them one-to-one, brought them to worship services and Friday meetings, and gave conference messages. But even all this couldn't heal me of my sin. Hiding in a holy community couldn't help me, either. My soul was still sick with sin and guilt. Finally, through the work of the Holy Spirit, God convicted me that in my rebellion and sins I participated in crucifying Jesus. And through the Holy Spirit I accepted God's promise in Jesus to save me (Matt.1:21b), that he shed his blood for all my sins. The Holy Spirit gave me faith in Jesus, and God's grace filled my heart. For the first time I experienced freedom from sin and guilt. Through the Holy Spirit I became sure that all my sins are forgiven through this man Jesus. It wasn't the intense discipleship program, but a person, my Risen Savior Jesus, who set me free. In him I became joyful and free to love. The spiritual disciplines are just a means of grace the Holy Spirit uses to lead us to Jesus. Only in his forgiveness can I serve his ministry and point others to him. His forgiveness is still my strength and joy. It's what we all need most.

How do people respond to Paul's message? The first Sabbath, some genuinely receive the grace of God (42–43). The next Sabbath, almost the whole city gathers. When the Jews become jealous of Paul and start contradicting and reviling him, he tells them he'll be turning to the Gentiles, in obedience to God's command (44–47). Through this rejection, Paul experiences becoming more like Jesus. As Jesus became a light to the Gentiles through rejection, so Paul is becoming a light to the Gentiles. When the Gentiles hear it, they begin rejoicing and glorifying the word of God, many appointed to eternal life believe, and God's word starts spreading to the whole region (48–49). Then, through manipulation of leaders, Paul and Barnabas are driven out of the district (50). But they shake the dust off their feet and leave (51). And the disciples are filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit (52), because they've truly tasted the forgiveness of sins.

Read verse 38 again. May God help each of us experience the forgiveness of sins through this man Jesus, and share this good news with many others.