

Introduction

The book of Acts can be divided into two halves; chapters 1-12 record the beginnings of the church in Jerusalem and Judea, and then the remainder of the book records the expansion of the gospel and of the church into the rest of the world, beginning with Cyprus and present day Turkey. In the first 12 chapters the focus is on the apostle Peter, and in the rest of the book the focus is on the apostle Paul. Today we begin to study the beginning of this new outreach of the church, with Paul and Barnabas being sent out by the Holy Spirit as missionaries to the Gentiles.

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Acts 13 is a rich portion of Scripture, full of lessons from God. In the short time available I want us to focus on three things that we learn from it about God.

1. The greatness of God's love
2. The greatness of the Holy Spirit's power
3. The greatness of Christ's death and resurrection

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1. The greatness of God's love

Acts 13:1-5

In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus. When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues. John was with them as their helper.

The year was probably 46 AD, and we see here the beginning of the outworking of God's love in His plan to reach the rest of the world with the gospel. Barnabas and Saul take along Barnabas' nephew John Mark to help with their travel.

This new outreach by the church in Antioch is the fulfilment of Acts 1:8 **Slide**

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

And so we are reminded from this that the heart of God is a missionary heart. In John 3:16-17 we have God's great plan of salvation: **Slide**

John 3:16-17

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."

So God loves the world, and God gave His Son to save the world. But how is the world going to hear about this great salvation unless someone takes the message? As Paul writes in

Romans 10:14-15 **Slide**

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"

So God's heart of love is shown here by the action He takes to send Paul and Barnabas out on their first missionary journey. They were sent out from the church in Antioch, which is the first church that had begun to reach out to the Gentiles. It was a church with a gifted leadership, with prophets and teachers. We have met Barnabas before, and we know that he was a wonderfully compassionate and encouraging man. We do not know much about Simeon called Niger, except that he most probably was a dark-skinned man because of his nickname Niger. It has been suggested that he was the same person as the Simon of Cyrene who carried the cross for Jesus, since Simeon and Simon are variants of the same name. I think that this is possible, but we cannot be sure. Lucius of Cyrene is someone else we know nothing about. Manaen incredibly was brought up with Herod the tetrarch, which is not an environment calculated to produce a godly prophet and teacher! Herod the Tetrarch is also known as Herod Antipas, and he was the Herod who divorced his wife and married his brother's wife. When John the Baptist condemned him for this, he had him put in prison and later executed him. So in company with all the Herods in the New Testament, he was quite a piece of work. Manaen grew up with him as some sort of foster brother or companion to him, and somehow God reached out to this man and called him to himself. We would love to know more, but this is all we are told. And then there was Paul, still known by his Jewish name of Saul. So this was a gifted church, blessed with godly and gifted leadership, and God says to them "send two of your best men out as missionaries"

It is significant that this happened "while they were worshiping the Lord and fasting". It was while they were actively seeking God's heart and God's desire for them as a church that God spoke to them. And His message was clear; God commanded them to begin taking the gospel to the Gentile world so that His love could be known by more people.

So this raises a question for us; all of us, you and me and everyone else here today: Is your heart in tune with God's missionary heart? Are you open to the call of God to share His love with your world? And if so, are you seeking God's will for doing this with the same earnestness that the church at Antioch showed? They were worshiping God and fasting, and then they prayed and fasted; they were dead serious about hearing God and following Him. How about us? God will not call all of us in the same way he called Barnabas and Saul, just as He did not call the whole church at Antioch to go out as missionaries. So He may not call you to be a missionary, but He does have a ministry for you to serve Him in. One of the blessings of being an elder at BCF is to be able to see God calling so many of you to serve Him in a variety of ways, and to see how many of you have responded. But I have just two things to add:

1. God called two men who were actively involved in ministry to step out into a new ministry. Barnabas and Saul could have said "God is using us here in Antioch in an effective ministry; He is blessing the church here, and He is using us in this. Maybe we should just stay here." Thankfully they did not say this, because if they had the whole history of the church and thus the world would have been very different in a bad way. The message for us in this is that God may choose to call you to another ministry even though He is blessing your present ministry. An example of God doing this in BCF is when He called Tim and Leslie Black to serve Him in South Africa. Tim and Leslie were leading a vibrant High School ministry when God called them to serve Him in South Africa. They heard and obeyed God's call, and the church supported them and sent them out, and they are still serving there ten or so years later. And by the way, God also raised up and Wendy Kelley and to take over the High School ministry, and raised up other dedicated servants to co-labor with Joe and Wendy, and God continues to bless this ministry. And more recently Pat and Jodi Hilt moved to Ethiopia to work at Bingham Academy and serve the students and the church there. And so just because you are involved in some ministry or service does not mean that God is going to leave you there for the rest of your life. He could call you and say "John, or Mary, or David, or Jane, I want you to serve me in this ministry", just as He called Tim and Leslie Black and Pat and Jody Hilt.
2. God delights to use men and women from all sorts of backgrounds and all sorts of experience. Our Lord Jesus chose a really strange mixture of men as his disciples; can you imagine the arguments that must have developed between Matthew, a tax collector and collaborator with the Romans, and Simon the anti-Roman zealot? And here in Antioch God used Manaen, who came from a questionable background, and Saul, a former Christian hunter. God used people from out of town, like Simeon and Lucius and Barnabas. And if

God can use these men, he can certainly use you, whatever your background or your position in life. What matters is your trust in God and your willing obedience to God's call on your life, whether this be to Blacksburg or Baluchistan.

2. The greatness of the Holy Spirit's power

Acts 13:6-12

They traveled through the whole island until they came to Paphos. There they met a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus, who was an attendant of the proconsul, Sergius Paulus. The proconsul, an intelligent man, sent for Barnabas and Saul because he wanted to hear the word of God. But Elymas the sorcerer (for that is what his name means) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith. Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, "You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord? Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind, and for a time you will be unable to see the light of the sun."

Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he groped about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand. When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord.

What an amazing story! Can you imagine the headlines in the Cyprus Daily News the next day?

GOVERNOR'S ADVISOR BLINDED: GOVERNOR A CHANGED MAN

The story is fairly straightforward. Barnabas and Saul, sent forth by the church in Antioch, sail for Cyprus, which is Barnabas' home country.

Slide They land in Salamis, and then traveled down the southeast part of the island until that came to Paphos, the seat of the Roman proconsul, the governor of the island. They must have been preaching and teaching as they went, and word of their new teaching reached the proconsul. Luke tells us he was an intelligent man, and he appears to have been a God-seeker just as was the centurion Cornelius that we met earlier in Acts. In any event, he sends for Barnabas and Saul to hear more about this message they were bringing. This in itself is amazing; Barnabas and Saul were nobodies in the Roman world, and here is the most important man on the island sending for them. But God was at work, and so the message went out and Barnabas and Saul show up and begin to tell Sergius Paulus about Jesus. But there was a problem, because the proconsul had a man named Elymas in his entourage. Elymas a Jewish man, perhaps from Persia in the east who brought a mix of Jewish mysticism and eastern astrology to Sergius Paulus' enquiring mind. Be this as it may, he immediately saw that the message Barnabas and Saul were bringing was a threat to his position with the proconsul, and he started to oppose them and he tried to turn the proconsul from the faith. And so Saul, whose Greek name was Paul, "filled with the Holy Spirit" pronounces a curse on Elymas for opposing the gospel, and Elymas is temporarily blinded. The proconsul is amazed at this demonstration of power, and he believes in Jesus.

Just three simple conclusions from this passage

1. **Slide** The devil is real and will do anything he can to hinder or stop the spread of the gospel. We see this throughout Paul's missionary journeys; an English bishop once compared himself unfavorably with Paul by saying "Wherever Paul went they had a riot; wherever I go they serve tea". So do not be surprised if you are faced with opposition when you try to tell people about the Lord.
2. **Slide** The judgment of God falls on those who oppose His Son. In Elymas' case the judgment was immediate and very obvious. Today the judgment is not likely to be so dramatic, but it is equally certain.
3. **Slide** God is stronger than the devil. Although the devil tried to use Elymas to prevent the proconsul from believing, the exact opposite happened, and Sergius Paulus came to faith in Jesus. What a wonderful truth to ponder on during the week; Satan is a defeated foe; he may rage, but he cannot prevent God's purposes.
Slide John Bunyan, in his wonderful story "Pilgrim's Progress", tells of Christian arriving at the Palace Beautiful where he wants to spend the night, but the pathway to the front door is guarded by lions. But Christian hears from the Porter "Fear not the lions. They are on long chains. If you keep strictly to the

beam of light, in the center of the path, they cannot reach you.” Peter tells us that “Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8), but ultimately he is a devil on a chain, subject to God’s ultimate authority.

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3. The greatness of Christ’s death and resurrection

Slide Acts 13:13 - 43

From Paphos, Paul and his companions sailed to Perga in Pamphylia, where John left them to return to Jerusalem. From Perga they went on to Pisidian Antioch. On the Sabbath they entered the synagogue and sat down. After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the synagogue rulers sent word to them, saying, "Brothers, if you have a message of encouragement for the people, please speak."

Standing up, Paul motioned with his hand and said: "Men of Israel and you Gentiles who worship God, listen to me! The God of the people of Israel chose our fathers; he made the people prosper during their stay in Egypt, with mighty power he led them out of that country, he endured their conduct for about forty years in the desert, he overthrew seven nations in Canaan and gave their land to his people as their inheritance. All this took about 450 years.

Slide "After this, God gave them judges until the time of Samuel the prophet. Then the people asked for a king, and he gave them Saul son of Kish, of the tribe of Benjamin, who ruled forty years. After removing Saul, he made David their king. He testified concerning him: 'I have found David son of Jesse a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do.'

"From this man's descendants God has brought to Israel the Savior Jesus, as he promised. Before the coming of Jesus, John preached repentance and baptism to all the people of Israel. As John was completing his work, he said: 'Who do you think I am? I am not that one. No, but he is coming after me, whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.'

Slide "Brothers, children of Abraham, and you God-fearing Gentiles, it is to us that this message of salvation has been sent. The people of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognize Jesus, yet in condemning him they fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath. Though they found no proper ground for a death sentence, they asked Pilate to have him executed. When they had carried out all that was written about him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb. But God raised him from the dead, and for many days he was seen by those who had traveled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. They are now his witnesses to our people.

Slide "We tell you the good news: What God promised our fathers he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus. As it is written in the second Psalm:

"'You are my Son; today I have become your Father.'

The fact that God raised him from the dead, never to decay, is stated in these words:

"'I will give you the holy and sure blessings promised to David.'

Slide So it is stated elsewhere:

"'You will not let your Holy One see decay.'

"For when David had served God's purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep; he was buried with his fathers and his body decayed. But the one whom God raised from the dead did not see decay.

"Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses. Take care that what the prophets have said does not happen to you:

"Look, you scoffers, wonder and perish, for I am going to do something in your days that you would never believe, even if someone told you."

Slide As Paul and Barnabas were leaving the synagogue, the people invited them to speak further about these things on the next Sabbath. When the congregation was dismissed, many of the Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who talked with them and urged them to continue in the grace of God.

Slide After preaching the gospel in Cyprus, Paul, Barnabas, and Mark take ship for Perga, and then head inland to another Antioch, this time in Pisidia. In Perga an event happens that will later on cause a rift between Barnabas and Paul; John Mark ups and leaves the party; they are now down to two people from three. We are not told why Mark leaves; it was probably because he saw the difficulties ahead, and was afraid, but it could have been because he saw his uncle Barnabas being replaced as the leader of the team by Paul. Whatever the reason he leaves and goes home, and later on he is the cause of a split between Paul and Barnabas. That is all I can say now, but no doubt this split will be discussed in a future sermon. The good news is that God used the split to create two missionary teams from one, and also that ultimately Mark and Paul are reconciled.

In this part of Luke's story he gives us an extended sample of Paul's preaching. Paul, because of his gift of speaking, has now become the leader of the group, and so it is Paul's message that is recorded here. There are a couple of things to note about this message

1. It was given in the synagogue. Throughout Paul's journeys he made it a point to take the message first to the Jews, and the natural place to do this was in the Jewish synagogues.
2. It began in a comfortable place for his Jewish hearers. Paul, like Stephen before him, took pains to share the good news about Jesus in the context of Jewish history
3. But Paul quickly gets to the heart of his message, which is the death and resurrection of Jesus from the dead. "The people of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognize Jesus, yet in condemning him they fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath. Though they found no proper ground for a death sentence, they asked Pilate to have him executed. When they had carried out all that was written about him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb. But God raised him from the dead, and for many days he was seen by those who had traveled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. They are now his witnesses to our people."
4. Paul then quotes various OT Scriptures to show that this was something God had promised years ago

And this is our take-home lesson; the gospel is centered around the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Any other so-called gospel that fails to proclaim the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is no gospel at all; it is a false gospel. Paul will later write these powerful words to the church at Corinth:

1 Cor 15:17-20

And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.

So let me conclude by asking you this question:

Slide How important is the death and resurrection of Jesus in your life? Have you experienced the power of the cross? Because it is so powerful; as Paul tells the people in the synagogue: "Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses." So what is your view of the cross of Christ?

If you answered "it is important; in fact it is the most important thing in my Christian life" then may the Lord bless you and keep you in His love and use you for His glory. Martin Luther famously said "I live as though Jesus Christ died yesterday, rose again today and is coming again tomorrow." And you are living the same way

But if you may have said something like this to yourself “well, I know I am a Christian, but somehow I have forgotten about the cross of Christ and the sacrifice that was made for my sins, and I do not give it any thought from one week to another.” If this was your response, may I say lovingly and yet clearly that you are in danger of forgetting your love for Jesus your Savior. I urge you to go home and read the account of Christ’s death and resurrection in one of the gospels, and then get down on your knees and thank Him for giving His life for you and your salvation. And I would also encourage you to develop the habit of coming to the Lord’s Supper at 9:00 am each Sunday, where the focus of that service is on remembering what Jesus has done for us on the cross.

And some of you may have said “I have never given it any thought; it does not mean anything to me” If you said that, then listen to what God says to you through Paul’s words:

Take care that what the prophets have said does not happen to you: Acts 13:40-41

“Look, you scoffers, wonder and perish, for I am going to do something in your days that you would never believe, even if someone told you.”

And I would love to talk to you after the service, so that I can share in more detail what it means to put Jesus Christ at the center of your life, and to experience the forgiveness and new life that He offers.

Amen