

ACTS 13:1-15 "TO THE END OF THE EARTH"

We have been studying the book of Acts for a few months now. We are going to get into the transition where the focus of Acts shifts from Peter to Paul. This morning, we are going to be looking at Saul's first missionary journey. Here we see a picture called "to the end of the earth" and we see our men Saul and Barnabas about to embark on their 10-month trip. If you recall back in Chapter 9 our man Saul here – remember he was the one who was persecuting the early church and got saved – he was sent back to his hometown of Tarsus for his own safety because something happened. To refresh your memory, here is what happened...

"So, he [Saul] went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord." He is a new convert and he is on fire for Jesus preaching the word in Jerusalem. "And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists [Greek-speaking Gentiles]. But they were seeking to kill him. And when the brothers [his Christian brothers] learned this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus" (Acts 9:28-30). That is where we left off with Saul going off to Tarsus

To give you a timeframe for where we are at, it has now been 11 years since Saul's conversion on the Damascus Road and it has been eight years since he was sent off to Tarsus. Many changes have taken place in the life of the church during this time. Acts Chapters 9 through 12 cover many of those events. There is beginning to be a shift of the center of the Christian church authority away from Jerusalem to Antioch. That is the big change. This will prove to be pivotal in starting the great missionary movement. Now I want you to understand that there is still a vibrant church in Jerusalem made up of mostly Jewish believers; but new churches are forming with mostly Gentile congregations. The most prominent of these is the church at Antioch. The church at Antioch places a high priority on instructing new believers. We have a term for this today. We call it "discipleship."

We read in Acts Chapter 11 where Barnabas traveled to Tarsus to look for Saul (he has been there all this time). With the great increase in new converts at Antioch, Barnabas realizes that he needs a fellow worker to help him with the process of discipling all these new believers. When he finds Saul, he brings him back with him to Antioch. For one year these two men teach the many people pouring into that church. So, with Saul's return back onto the scene, his ministry becomes the focus of Acts Chapters 13 through 28.

Closely connected to the church at Antioch are such notable leaders as Barnabas, Saul (also called Paul), Titus, John Mark, Luke (the writer of Acts) and Silas. Many biblical scholars believe that there is evidence that one or two of the Gospels, possibly Mark or Luke, originated at Antioch.

When a famine hits Judea, the church at Antioch rallies to their aid and takes up a collection. This is the first time a public collection was ever taken up by one church to help another. Barnabas and Saul are chosen to take the collection to Jerusalem.

We left off with this passage last and we are going to open with it – this is our transition: “But the word of God increased and multiplied. And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service [taking the collection], bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark” (Acts 12:24-25).

It is from the comfort and sweet fellowship at Antioch, a growing and dynamic church, that Saul and Barnabas are sent out as missionaries. The idea of sending out missionaries may seem to us like old hat. We Southern Baptists have this huge mission effort. But you need to remember that this was a completely new concept to the early Christian church.

So, with that let's get into Chapter 13...

READ Acts 13:1

We have already seen that the church at Antioch is a great teaching church associated with many well-known individuals. Some are listed here.

What I want you to see is that it is their vision and strong burden for the lost world that sets them apart from all the other churches, including the church in Jerusalem. Leading this visionary church are spiritual men with deep faith. Five are mentioned by name in this verse and they are a diverse group:

Barnabas, a Jew from Jerusalem, nicknamed "the son of encouragement."

Saul, the converted Jewish zealot with the great evangelistic heart, known later as "the apostle to the Gentiles."

Simeon who was called Niger, a black man from Africa, a devout prophet and teacher. Some scholars have suggested that he could have been the same man referred to in the Gospels as Simon of Cyrene who carried Jesus's cross.

Lucius of Cyrene (present day Libya in North Africa), another devout teacher. We know nothing about him.

Manaen, raised in royalty, a Gentile, and the foster brother of Herod the Tetrarch. I find it fascinating that God is using one of Herod's family members in the church leadership at Antioch. We know Herod the Tetrarch was not a good guy. He had the Apostle James killed.

READ Acts 13:2

The Antioch church knows exactly what Barnabas's and Saul's calling is. It is to evangelize the Gentiles. No doubt Saul had given his personal testimony in his time with them of his calling which he has received from the LORD years before. The point to note here is that Saul's and Barnabas's missionary journey is God-directed. God has a specific purpose to be carried out at this particular point in time. This is not merely some brilliant idea that has been thought up by a group of spiritual men. It originates from God through the leading of the Holy Spirit.

READ Acts 13:3

By this time in church history, it has been more than a decade since Saul's conversion. During this time God has been molding and preparing Saul and Barnabas and the church for the task commissioned by the Lord Himself back in Acts 1:8. I keep bringing this up because it is the theme for the book of Acts. Jesus said just before He ascended back to heaven (talking to His disciples), "You will be My witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and [all the world]." So far we have seen the Gospel being preached in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and now through the rest of the book of Acts we are going to see it carried to the end of the earth or at least through the Roman Empire (the known world of their time). We know that it goes from there and eventually comes to us.

So, there is this big mission to take the Gospel out. How do Saul and Barnabas know where to go first? Well, the next verse tells us...

READ Acts 13:4

The Holy Spirit is directing them. It is a good thing to plan. Maybe they did have a plan. Maybe it was the Holy Spirit who was directing their plan. I don't know. But whatever your plans are, if the Holy Spirit redirects your previously planned paths in a different direction, it is highly advisable to revise your original plan and follow His. I don't know what the case was here. Perhaps they prayed about it and the Holy Spirit laid on their heart to go to Cyprus. I don't know. But they are being Spirit led. That is what I want you to see.

If the LORD does not direct our paths, then our work is in the flesh and the results will be minimal at best. It is good to see that the Holy Spirit is directing them.

The missionary team sets sail from Antioch more than likely in March (the Spring is generally a good time to sail). The first leg of their journey is the 130-mile trip across the Mediterranean to the island of Cyprus. Cyprus is where Barnabas grew up. He undoubtedly still has family and friends there. So, the missionary team arrives at their first stop...

READ Acts 13:5

At this time the harbor town of Salamis is the largest city on Cyprus. It is here that we are first made aware that John Mark is with Saul and Barnabas. John Mark is a nephew or cousin of Barnabas (see Colossians 4:10). We learned last week in Acts Chapter 12 that the church in Jerusalem frequently met in John Mark's family's house. He is with the mission team.

In Salamis the mission team preaches to the Jews in the synagogues. This will be Saul's standard operating procedure on his mission stops. Just because he has been called to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles does not mean that Saul ignores his Jewish brothers. He loves them. He has a heart for them. No mention is made of any fruit that results from the missionary effort in Salamis. If there were any it is not mentioned in Acts.

From Salamis the three-man missionary team walks 100 miles across the island to the other side to Paphos on the western end of the island.

Paphos is a port city. It is the Roman capital of Cyprus at this time and it has a bad reputation. It is known for its loose morals and superstitions. *[a member of our class compared it to the New Orleans of our day].*

READ Acts 13:6-8

The Roman Proconsul, the governor of the island, Sergius Paulus, has employed a renegade Jew named Bar-Jesus Elymas as a sort of court astrologer. The proconsul is a confused intellectual who is greatly influenced by Elymas. When the proconsul hears of the arrival of this missionary team, he sends for them and invites them to teach him, to tell him their message. He is one of those people who wants to hear whatever the latest "thing" is. He invites them in. However, the magician Elymas is determined to prevent the proconsul's conversion to the Christian faith. Why would that be? His motivation is purely selfish. He probably fears that he will be out of a job. It is in the presence of such demonic resistance that God empowers Saul.

READ Acts 13:9-11

Saul, now called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, confronts Elymas with his sin and exposes him for what he is. Paul tells Elymas that God's hand will strike him blind. And He does! "Immediately," it says.

READ Acts 13:12

So, when the proconsul witnesses what happens, he believes. This makes the Roman Proconsul of Cyprus, Sergius Paulus, a very significant figure in the Bible. He is the answer to the trivia question, "Who was Saul's first recorded convert on his missionary journeys?" You can look them in the eye when they ask you this question and say with confidence, "It was Sergius Paulus," a Gentile.

Let me talk briefly about Saul's name transition to Paul. We've actually discussed this before but now is a good time to bring it up again. This is NOT a name change. This is a common misnomer. Saul (literally "Shaul" in Hebrew) is his Jewish name and Paul (literally "Paulus" in Greek) is his Roman or Gentile name. He had both names at birth. He was raised in a Jewish family in the predominately Gentile city of Tarsus. It is in Acts 13:9 that the writer of Acts, Luke, begins using Paul's Gentile name when referring to him. The reason for this is that Paul will primarily be working around Gentile audiences in a Gentile environment.

Something else to note about the transition from Saul to Paul: instead of describing the missionary team as "Barnabas and Saul" (Acts 12:25, 13:2, 13:7), from now on Luke changes the order of precedence to "Paul and his companions" (Acts 13:13) or "Paul and Barnabas" (Acts 13:42, 43, 46, 50...). So, he rises in prominence. Paul's name now gets listed first. So, there is not only the name transition but also a transition in his prominence.

OK, so now we rejoin our team who are in Paphos where we left them. They are ready to make the next leg of their journey back across the Mediterranean to the mainland to Perga. That is a 160-mile voyage to Perga in the region of Pamphylia in Asia Minor (present day Turkey).

It is on the heels of a remarkable triumph – they had their first convert – that our mission team suffers its first major setback.

READ Acts 13:13

Notice that Paul's name is listed first. Without any explanation John Mark, a fine young man of God, leaves Paul and Barnabas and returns home to Jerusalem. Luke gives us no reason for Mark's departure. All we know is what v 13 says: "And John left them and returned to Jerusalem." Was John Mark homesick? Was he seasick? Could it be that Mark was still strongly entrenched in Jewish exclusiveness and was turned off by the evangelistic effort aimed at Gentiles? Did he fear the hardships ahead? We just do not know for sure. He just leaves. I want you to understand me. This is not meant to be a harsh criticism of John Mark at all, just an observation. What happens to Mark here actually happens to a lot of well-meaning Christian workers during the course of their ministries. They are just not prepared for the tough challenges ahead. Young pastors face this a lot. The criticism, the demands, the hard work with low pay, etc. It is tough! A lot of people that are young in the ministry are just not prepared for it. Life's hard in general, but especially in the ministry. So, for whatever reason John Mark gets discouraged and goes home.

Fortunately, we have the benefit of knowing how Mark's story ends. Later, in Acts Chapter 15, Mark will express a willingness to try again and, with Barnabas's support and encouragement, he will get a second chance. Years later, just before his death, Paul will speak positively of Mark saying that he "is useful to me for service" (2 Timothy 4:11). At some point Mark and Paul reconcile. We also know that this is the same Mark who will later author the Gospel of Mark. God is not done with Mark yet.

So then, we can learn something from Mark's failure here. Sometimes we may undertake a task for the Lord, one that we are inadequately prepared for. We are eager to do the right thing but for whatever reason become discouraged along the way. Sometimes we may even quit. At this point we retreat to our knees and we ask God to help us learn from our

failure. We shore up the weak areas as they become exposed by the light of God's word and through the revelation of His Holy Spirit to us. Then we prepare ourselves spiritually for whatever area of service God opens up for us next.

Perseverance is one of life's great virtues. We see it demonstrated time and time again in Scripture in the lives of Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Job, Jeremiah, Daniel, Peter, Paul and, yes, even John Mark. When you get thrown off your spiritual horse, it hurts. But you must get up, brush yourself off, get back on it and ride it again. Praise God for second chances! Praise God for the Barnabas's in our life that encourage us and refuse to give up on us! Mark's story has a happy ending. But at this time our team faces a setback.

Paul and Barnabas now proceeded northward from Perga near the coast up into the mountains. The trip to Antioch of Pisidian is a long and dangerous journey, 100 miles through robber-infested country via steep winding mountain trails like they have in Colorado. It is not the easiest trip in the world.

I need to point something out. There are two Antioch's. There is the Antioch in Syria (Paul's and Barnabas's home base). Then there is the Antioch in Pisidia. From now on I will refer to this Antioch as "Pisidian Antioch" to distinguish it from the larger and better-known Antioch in Syria. Paul and Barnabas now arrive in Pisidian Antioch and they introduce Christianity to the large Roman province known as Galatia. This is all part of present-day Turkey. It is highly probable that the letter that Paul will later write to the Galatians (the first of his many letters) is intended for the churches that Paul will establish on this missionary trip.

READ Acts 13:14

I love the first four words in this verse, "But they went on..." I like that it says that. Though it was a bit of a setback that John Mark had left, Paul and Barnabas pressed on with their mission of preaching the Gospel. They realized this is what they had to do.

The town of Pisidian Antioch is set among olive trees on a vast tableland 3,600 feet above sea level in the mountains. It is quite scenic. As is their usual practice, the first place the missionaries go is to the local synagogue.

READ Acts 13:15

After the preliminary prayers and reading from the Old Testament scrolls, the presiding ruler of the synagogue invites them to speak. Paul, never one to shy away from any opportunity to share the Gospel, begins to preach. This is Paul's first recorded sermon in the Book of Acts and we'll cover it next time. This sermon will be preached to a mostly Jewish audience. Later on, we will see some of his sermons preached to Gentile audiences and we will contrast some of the differences.

A few applications from today's lesson:

- A successful missionary work requires the full support of the local church. We often think about the great missionary that Paul was. But the mission vision to take the Gospel out across the Roman Empire was bolstered with the church at Antioch's leadership, their support. He and Barnabas could not have done it alone. They needed that support of the local church (a shared vision).
- When we do the work God has directed, we can expect opposition and setbacks. Stay the course and press onward!
- Lessons learned from what happened to John Mark: Even with the best of intentions we can sometimes fail God and others. When that happens, we need to pray and ask the Lord to help us learn from our failure(s). As He teaches us, we shore up the weak areas of our lives and serve Him more effectively. **The Christian life is a growing process!**
- Trust God. He knows what He is doing.
- The Holy Spirit is the One who gives us success and allows us to speak the truth.