

# **The First Mission**

Acts 13:1-12

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Most people enjoy travel. They enjoy seeing new places, having new experiences, and just going somewhere outside their normal, daily experience. Travel is a common choice for Americans when we go on vacation. The United States is such a huge place that we find it difficult to travel to all the corners of our own nation, let alone to see the world.

Generally, when we head out on a trip, we have a decent idea of what to expect. Inevitably, there will be hiccups (a plane that is delayed, a bag that is lost, a reservation that never happened, or some minor inconvenience), but generally speaking, we expect to have a fun and enjoyable time. Even if you're traveling for business, you expect to have a relatively enjoyable time. Saul and Barnabas engaged in a different kind of travel, knowing that what lay ahead was probably not 5-star hotels or even kind and smiling faces. They were going out to share the gospel. Their experience thus far had shown them that their trip was probably not going to be easy, but they both understood that what they would be accomplishing would make their hardships worth it in the end.

Today we shift to a new section in the book of Acts: the missionary age of the church. The church has been established, the gospel has spread into the Gentile world, and now God will send missionaries out with the sole intention of bringing the gospel to places it had never been before. Today, we're familiar with the concept of missionaries, but this was a new concept for the early church. It took the right kind of people to do what God had planned—which is why God chose two specifically for the job.

## **The Sending Church**

After the events surrounding Herod Agrippa's attacks on the church and his death because of his sinful pride, Luke tells us Barnabas and Saul returned to Antioch along with John Mark. They had been bringing the offerings from the Antioch church to the church in Jerusalem, and they returned to Antioch, this time with John Mark in tow. Luke begins chapter 13 by giving us a glimpse into the church there.

Among the prophets and teachers of the church at Antioch of Syria were Barnabas, Simeon (called "the black man"), Lucius (from Cyrene), Manaen (the childhood companion of King Herod Antipas), and Saul. <sup>2</sup> One day as these men were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Appoint Barnabas and Saul for the special work to which I have called them." <sup>3</sup> So after more fasting and prayer, the men laid their hands on them and sent them on their way. (Acts 13:1-3, NLT)

Luke tells us that there were prophets and teachers at the church in Antioch. This seems like it should be obvious, but it is important to recognize. The church was not solely dependent upon Barnabas, or even Saul, but there were several others who

helped to share the burden of leading and teaching the people there. Luke gives us a list of several of these leaders, though the list may not be exhaustive.

Barnabas is mentioned at the beginning of the list and Saul is mentioned at the end. The other men show us the great diversity among the leadership. Simeon was most likely a person with very dark skin, thus the reason for being called “the black man” (as the NLT refers to him) or Niger (as the underlying text says—a word that means black). Lucius was from Cyrene, which was in Northern Africa. He may have been part of the group that originally brought the gospel to Antioch. Manaen grew up with Herod Antipas, likely being something akin to a prince in the royal court! What a different path Manaen took than his childhood friend Antipas! We know Barnabas was from Cyprus, and Saul was a devout Jew from Tarsus.

Talk about a rag-tag bunch of people! They were from different countries, different backgrounds, different skin colors, and different cultures. But they were united in their submission to Christ! That was far more important than any of these trivial things that might have divided them. These men worked together to build up, lead, and teach the church in Antioch.

Luke tells us that one day when they were worshiping and fasting, the Holy Spirit spoke to them, telling them to set apart Barnabas and Saul for a special work. It is important to note that these leaders were worshiping and fasting together! There is no indication that this was during a large gathering of believers; we get the impression this was something they saw as an essential aspect of their ministry—worshiping and seeking the Lord together.

The concept of fasting is foreign to most people today. It is not a discipline that the modern church tends to emphasize. But fasting was something common among the Jewish religious leaders, and the early Christians also saw the value of it. Fasting simply means choosing to abstain from food (or something else) for a time to more fully devote yourself to God. Fasting allows you to dedicate the time you would normally spend preparing and eating your food to prayer instead. And fasting provides a physical prompting to pray. When you feel the pangs of hunger, you are driven to seek the Lord in prayer and remember that He provides for all your needs. Fasting is a valuable discipline because, done correctly, it draws us closer to the Lord and drives us to seek Him in prayer.

So, it is noteworthy that the Holy Spirit speaks to these leaders during a time of fasting. But, though they had clear instruction to set aside Barnabas and Saul for God’s work, they still wanted to make sure they were following God’s direction. So they spent more time fasting and praying before commissioning them and sending them out as missionaries.

The idea of laying their hands on them is symbolic, a form of identification. It is a way of saying that while Saul and Barnabas would be the ones traveling, their hearts would be with them and they would lift them up in prayer. In many churches, the same practice is

used any time we commission a person to the Lord's service (as a pastor, missionary, or some other Christian service.)

## **The First Leg**

So Saul and Barnabas, freshly commissioned by the church set out on what would later be known as their first missionary journey.

<sup>4</sup> So Barnabas and Saul were sent out by the Holy Spirit. They went down to the seaport of Seleucia and then sailed for the island of Cyprus. <sup>5</sup> There, in the town of Salamis, they went to the Jewish synagogues and preached the word of God. John Mark went with them as their assistant. (Acts 13:4-5, NLT)

They decided to head to Cyprus, which was a nearby island in the Mediterranean. We don't know why they chose Cyprus in particular. It's possible the Holy Spirit had instructed them to go there, but it's also possible that since Barnabas was from there, he felt a compunction to go and evangelize the island. Whatever the case was, we know that at least Barnabas, Saul, and John Mark (and maybe others) got on a boat and headed to the island.

I should point out something about John Mark at this point. He was likely a young man. He had probably been raised in a wealthy home (since his mother had a large house the church in Jerusalem often used). Since his home was a common meeting place for the church, John Mark had surely been instructed in many of the things of God and probably had a good foundation to build on. He had probably heard many stories about how God had moved amongst believers sharing the gospel in various places. My assumption (and that of many others) is that John Mark asked if he could accompany Saul and Barnabas because he wanted to be on the front lines of what was happening. I would like to believe that his heart was in the right place, though he probably wasn't ready for this.

I say this because shortly after they left Cyprus, John Mark headed back home. Paul viewed this as an abandonment of the work, though Barnabas (who was John Mark's uncle) still saw reason to believe he could be of value.

The reason I go on this diversion about John Mark is that this is a common pitfall of ministry. Many Christians have a positive experience serving the Lord: on a mission trip, at a conference or rally, at camp, or even somewhere in the church, and they conclude that they want to be able to do that all the time. The idea of riding that high all the time is exciting. But many of those people are quickly disillusioned by the fact that ministry is often hard, thankless, and frustrating. Every day is not a spiritual high. While serving the Lord is wonderful and offers blessings nothing else in this world can, it also provides challenges that nothing in this world does either. I wholly encourage you to take a step of faith and serve the Lord in some capacity, but I also encourage you to enter with open eyes; it will not be a vacation. There will be times that are incredibly difficult, times that are frustrating, and times when you may even question your decision to serve, but the Lord can and will continue to use you if you persevere. Nothing will bring you to the end of yourself more quickly than choosing to minister to others!

## On Cyprus

Luke tells us that when they went to Cyprus, their general pattern was to go to the Jewish synagogues and preach to the people. Since Saul was a well-educated man, he would likely have been seen as a visiting rabbi and would have been afforded the opportunity to speak. So he and Barnabas seized upon these opportunities to share the gospel with people already familiar with the scriptures.

Cyprus was not a large island, roughly 100 miles from one end to the other, so they took their time, traveling from city to city, until they finally reached the capital city, Paphos, on the far side of the island.

<sup>6</sup> Afterward they traveled from town to town across the entire island until finally they reached Paphos, where they met a Jewish sorcerer, a false prophet named Bar-Jesus. <sup>7</sup> He had attached himself to the governor, Sergius Paulus, who was an intelligent man. The governor invited Barnabas and Saul to visit him, for he wanted to hear the word of God. <sup>8</sup> But Elymas, the sorcerer (as his name means in Greek), interfered and urged the governor to pay no attention to what Barnabas and Saul said. He was trying to keep the governor from believing.

<sup>9</sup> Saul, also known as Paul, was filled with the Holy Spirit, and he looked the sorcerer in the eye. <sup>10</sup> Then he said, "You son of the devil, full of every sort of deceit and fraud, and enemy of all that is good! Will you never stop perverting the true ways of the Lord? <sup>11</sup> Watch now, for the Lord has laid his hand of punishment upon you, and you will be struck blind. You will not see the sunlight for some time." Instantly mist and darkness came over the man's eyes, and he began groping around begging for someone to take his hand and lead him.

<sup>12</sup> When the governor saw what had happened, he became a believer, for he was astonished at the teaching about the Lord. (Acts 13:6-12, NLT)

When they got to Paphos, they were invited by the governor to come and speak. Sergius Paulus would have had the official title of proconsul, meaning he was the ruler of the region; the only authority to whom he answered was the Roman Senate. As such, he was a very powerful man. Luke described him as very intelligent (which referred not only to book-knowledge, but also meant he was wise). So it was no surprise that he invited Saul and Barnabas to speak to him.

But there was a problem. There was another man who already had the ear of the governor. He was a false prophet, a magician who called himself Bar-Jesus, a name which literally meant "Son of Jesus." We don't know if he used this name to trade on the respected name of Jesus Christ or not, but he used this name instead of his given name, Elymas. Luke describes him as a sorcerer or magician, likely meaning he attempted to use demonic power to accomplish things in this world. Somewhat surprisingly, we also discover that Elymas was a Jew, though clearly had no real respect for the Lord.

When Saul and Barnabas showed up, he recognized that they were a threat to his position. He was quite comfortable and felt like an important person on the island. After

all, he had the ear of the proconsul. So, Elymas began to oppose Saul and Barnabas and told Sergius Paulus to pay no attention to what they were saying.

Before we see their response to him, we should pay attention to a quick note Luke just drops in here. He said that “Saul, also known as Paul” responded to Elymas. It’s a simple statement, but from this point on, Luke refers to him as Paul. And that became the name by which he is best known.

Many incorrectly assume that God changed Saul’s name to Paul at his conversion (which would seem reasonable, as God changed people’s names many other times in scripture), but that’s not what happened. Saul was a Jew, but was born in a Roman province. He was even a Roman citizen. In certain circles, he was likely already known as Paul, which was a much more Roman-sounding name. Saul was an obviously Jewish name. Most likely, when working among the people in the Roman world (which is how Paul would spend the remainder of his life), he went by this more Roman-sounding name.

Paul had enough of Elymas’ efforts to derail their evangelism. He wasn’t about to take Elymas’ attempts lying down though. He spoke boldly to him, condemning him for standing in the way of God. And not only was he standing in the way of God, he was actively perverting the ways of God! Paul begins his attack on him by calling him a son of the devil, which would have been an obvious contradiction of his chosen name (Bar-Jesus), which meant son of Jesus. Paul, under the leading of the Holy Spirit put this false teacher in his place.

And not only did he dress him down with words, but he backed it up by cursing him, telling him he would be blind for some time. I’m not sure how Paul knew he would be able to do this, but he knew the Lord would blind this man as a result. Paul knew what this was like, as he had experienced the same thing on the road to Damascus a decade earlier. I wonder if he hoped that this blindness would shake Elymas as deeply as it had shaken him. We don’t know what happened to Elymas after this. We can assume he eventually regained his sight, but we don’t know anything of his spiritual condition. My hope is that, like Paul, Elymas recognized the error of his ways and began going in a different direction.

After this spectacle, Sergius Paulus believed in Christ. Luke does not say he was convinced by the miracle, but by their teachings. He was an intelligent man, and he saw that what Paul and Barnabas taught was absolutely true, and he therefore believed. We have archaeological evidence that supports the fact that Sergius Paulus, the proconsul of Paphos did indeed become a Christian. Though it was rough going, Paul and Barnabas were making headway. They traveled the length of the island and preached the gospel. They likely didn’t get to see all the fruits of their labor during that journey, but they believed that by sharing the message with others, God would cause those seeds they had planted to grow and yield a rich harvest. But their work wasn’t done; they had even more places to visit.

## Conclusion

As always, it's not enough to look at an account in the bible and simply marvel at the neat story we've just heard. The question we must always ask is, "What does this passage teach us?" I've got a few suggestions of lessons we can learn.

**First, ministry is hard, but the payoff is worth it.** As you may know, I just celebrated my 19<sup>th</sup> anniversary of serving at the Union Church. My dad served 43 years in ministry. Ashlee's dad has also served over 40 years in ministry. Each of us would tell you that ministry is often difficult, it is a grind, and Satan wants to attack and discourage those serving the Lord. Though it sounds a bit self-serving, let me ask you to pray for those whose work is full-time ministry. They are targets and it is easy to lose heart. Be patient with them and encourage them, because there are plenty of things to discourage them.

But I also want to encourage you as you serve the Lord in your life. It will not all go smoothly. Any time you begin to serve faithfully, Satan will oppose you. Do not let that discourage you. When things get hard, work to remember the truth that the payoff of seeing God work through you is far greater than any difficulty you may face. Keep persevering, no matter what obstacles you face. God is enough!

**Second, sometimes it is necessary to confront those distorting the Word of God.** I'm not a confrontational person. I can let a lot of things slide. But when people distort the things of God, when they are deliberately leading people astray, I feel a responsibility to correct those things. Paul had that same instinct. We do not have to be mean or belligerent, but we do need to call out false teaching for what it is. The false teacher may dismiss it, but others who may be listening may finally see the truth. Many today seek to distort or abandon the truth of God. They are more concerned with building a following than standing on the truth. We must speak the truth, even when (maybe especially when) it directly goes against the teachings of others. There is too much at stake to remain silent. Paul understood this, and we should too.

**Finally, we will fail in our work unless the Lord is in it.** The church did not send Paul and Barnabas out lightly. They spent much time praying and fasting. They were seeking the Lord's leading and the Holy Spirit's empowering to do their work. But we often don't recognize this need. We cannot be effective without God empowering us. So, like the church in Antioch, we should regularly fast and pray, seeking to align our hearts with God's, and ask Him to lead us and empower us for the work He's called us to. Because if we go in the power of the Lord, nothing can stand in our way.

Most of us would not feel comfortable doing the kind of travel that Paul and Barnabas took on. The good news is, most of us aren't called to that kind of travel either. But we are each called to travel to others and minister to them. That may just mean traveling across the room, across the lawn, or across the street. The challenge for us each is to recognize that God has called us to be His witnesses just as He called Paul and Barnabas. If we go with our eyes open and in the power of the Lord, He can use us mightily...just as He did with them.

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