

Introduction:

This morning, we continue our study of Acts, moving into the second half of Luke's narrative. The book of Acts primarily establishes the authority of the apostolic witness, nature of the Christian mission, and confirmation of the Spirit's power and presence. In chapters 1-7, the Christian mission was revealed as the apostle Peter spreads the gospel throughout Jerusalem through the Spirit's power. In Acts 8-12, the Christian mission extends to Judea and Samaria as the Spirit works in power through the church to spread the gospel as it was scattered by persecution. As we move forward, Luke shifts the focus from Peter as the primary apostolic figure to Paul, and to the Gentiles as the primary recipients of the gospel message. And from chapter 13 on, the Spirit will empower God's people to actively engage in mission, sending the gospel to the ends of the earth, primarily through the work of the apostle Paul. Our next section of Acts, from Acts 12:25-14:23, covers what is known as the First Missionary Journey of Paul. Chapter 13 opens with the commissioning of Barnabas and Saul, or Paul, for this work. Then, the rest of chapters 13 and 14 recount their trips to Salamis and Paphos in Cyprus, on to Perga in Pamphylia, Antioch in Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe before returning by way of Attalia at the end of chapter 14. In this narrative section, Luke shows how the church in Antioch became the first missionary sending church and how Paul embraced his calling to become the apostle to the Gentiles. This makes this section in Luke's narrative vital for understanding what it looks like for us to be committed to the Christian mission. Today, we will consider two observations from Acts 13:1-12 and see how they shape our mission as a church. The first observation comes from verses 1-4, where we see,

The Spirit Sending Barnabas & Saul on Mission

We will start at the end of chapter twelve to notice how Luke moves the narrative forward. Look at Acts 12:25-13:2, "And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark. Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of 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.'" The word "now" propels the narrative forward while keeping what previously happened in view. Back in Acts 11:27-30, the church in Antioch received a prophetic word from the Spirit of a coming famine in Judea. So, they sent Barnabas and Saul to Jerusalem with relief for the church. At the end of chapter 12, Barnabas and Saul are shown returning from that service, bringing John-Mark with them. When we open up on chapter 13, we see the church in Antioch gathered together and the Spirit speaking before sending Barnabas and Saul out again. The summaries at the end of Acts 11 and here in Acts 13 mirror each other to highlight a consistent mark of this church. Consider what we see in verses 1-2 of chapter 13. Verse 1 shares a list of prophets and teachers in the church, with Barnabas and Saul bookending the list. Luke could be saying these men are both prophets and teachers, or some were prophets, and some were teachers. Outside of Barnabas and Saul, these men are not mentioned again in Acts but have interesting identifying characteristics. Simeon is described as also being called Niger, which is a Latinism for "black," suggesting he was from northern Africa. Lucius is described as from Cyrene, where Barnabas is from. And Manaen is described by his relationship to Herod the Tetrarch. The term "lifelong," could mean "foster brother" or "intimate friend," so he was an adopted brother or close friend of Herod Antipas. With the exception of Barnabas, these are very unlikely leaders for the church. Note what is taking place when the Spirit speaks. Luke says it is, "While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting." The Greek word for worshiping indicates a public or religious service and is used nowhere else in Acts. Fasting always indicates a concentrated and deep spiritual concern to know what God's desires. So, they are intentionally gathered to hear from the Lord.

Then, through what is likely a prophetic word, the Spirit tells them to set Barnabas and Saul apart for a work God is calling them to. Notice the response in verse 3, “Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.” It is unclear whether this is the whole church or just the church leaders. The involvement of the whole church in other places like Acts 6 and 15 suggests everyone is gathered and involved. However, Luke’s language reads as though they are set apart and commissioned by the church’s leaders, not the whole church. Either way, Luke is drawing out attention to them receiving and responding to the Spirit. Note the consistent mark of this church in Acts 11 and 13. At the end of Acts 11 and here, we see a sensitivity to the Spirit’s direction. Both times, the determining factor in how they moved forward was not through the opinions of man but through spiritual means of grace designed to hear clearly from the Lord. Family, if we are not committing ourselves consistently to these kinds of endeavors, we cannot be sure our thoughts and plans are being guided by the Lord. Pay attention to verse 4, “So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they [Barnabas and Saul] went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus.” Though the church is involved in commissioning Barnabas and Saul, Luke ensures we understand it is the Holy Spirit who sent them on mission. The Spirit is the one who spoke while they were worshipping and verse 4 tells us He is the one who sent them out. This brings me to the second observation from this story, from verses 5-12, where we see,

The Spirit Removing Opposition to the Message

The main focus of the next story is found in its climax and resolution. Notice how Luke builds the story verses 5-7, “When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. And they had John to assist them. When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they came upon a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet named Bar-Jesus. He was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God.” Barnabas and Saul, with John-Mark’s assistance, are immediately engaging in proclamation of the word of God at Salamis, an important city in Cyprus. Then, Luke briefly details their 90-mile preaching tour across the whole island before being summed by the proconsul in the capital city of Paphos, whom he says, “sought to hear the word of God.” Do you see Luke’s emphasis? Twice, he focuses our attention on the word of God. In between, Luke details how they encountered a false prophet with the proconsul. This man is described as a Jewish magician, or sorcerer who is named Bar-Jesus, which means “Son of Jesus.” His name indicates he claimed association with Jesus, but him being a Jewish sorcerer shows a blatant rejection of God’s Word. This false prophet’s presence, and the proconsul’s summons of Barnabas and Saul, along with Luke’s note of him being a man of intelligence or understanding, indicate the proconsul’s spiritual hunger and openness to the gospel. All of this establishes the story’s tension being between a false prophet and the word of God, which is the gospel. Now, consider the climax of the problem in verse 8, “But Elymas the magician (for that is the meaning of his name) opposed them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith.” After re-identifying the false prophet as Elymas the magician, Luke emphasizes his opposition of seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith. So, the climax of the tension is a false prophet keeping a Gentile from responding to the gospel. What will happen? Look at verses 9-11, “But Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him and said, ‘You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord? And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and unable to see the sun for a time.’ Immediately mist and darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking people to lead him by the hand.” Note several things with me. First, this is the first time Luke identifies Saul as Paul. Church, Saul’s name was not changed to Paul. Paulus, meaning “little,” was either his Greek surname or nickname. Going forward, Saul will be identified as Paul because this Greek name served his role as the apostle to the Gentiles. Second, Paul is filled with the Spirit before he speaks, making the Spirit the primary character. Third, Paul begins with a play on words, calling him the son of Satan instead of the son of Jesus. Fourth, Paul uses biblical language in his descriptions and curse.

In fact, saying Elymas is making crooked the straight paths of the Lord, places his actions directly opposed to what God called for in Isaiah 40:3, to “make straight paths” before the Lord comes. Lastly, the curse and Elymas’ experience mirrors Paul’s experience on the road to Damascus of being blinded and having to be led by the hand. Could this have opened Elymas’ eyes to the truth of the gospel like it did for Paul? Pay attention to the conclusion in verse 12, “Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord.” The proconsul believed. Soak that in. He wasn’t kept from the faith as desired. And note the reason. His belief and astonishment weren’t primarily because of the miraculous power; it was because of the teaching about Christ. We aren’t given their teaching, but we can assume it involved the same gospel message we’ve continually heard in Acts. They proclaimed to him the life, death, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus as Lord and Christ, together with forgiveness and grace being available to those who believe. Family, Spirit’s power served to remove the opposition to the message of the gospel. Make no mistake about it, the ultimate power of the gospel lies in the message of the gospel. As Paul will later say in Romans 10:17, “faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.” Cling to this truth in your witness. And if you have not believed in the message of the gospel, hear it clearly today. Christ has died, Christ has risen, and Christ will come again. The sinless Son of God, Jesus Christ, lived the life of obedience we could not live, bore our sins on the cross, and rose victorious over the grave. Through His death and exaltation, He accomplished the atoning work necessary to forgive the sins of all who come to Him in faith. There is no way to be made right with God and find salvation apart from trusting in His saving grace given through the message of the gospel. Don’t delay, be astonished at the teaching of the Lord, and believe. This is what the proconsul was astonished by and what he believed in. Confess your sins, cry out for mercy, and find true life today. This interaction in Cyprus will be a catalyst for Paul’s mission as he will shift his approach in the coming chapter to going directly to the Gentiles with the message of the gospel. The Spirit sent Barnabas and Saul on mission, the Spirit removed opposition to the gospel message, and the Spirit transformed their witness. Before we close our time together, I want to draw out three things I see this story encouraging us to do to remain committed to the Christian mission. The first encouragement is to,

1) Seek the Lord’s Strength & Guidance through Worship, Prayer, and Fasting

Last week, we saw the consistent pattern of the church in Acts was to gather to be strengthened before being scattered for mission. When we live on mission, we will recognize our need to be strengthened and prioritize gathering with the church. Yet, as we learn from this passage, we don’t gather only for our faith to be strengthened. We also gather to pursue and be sensitive to the Spirit’s guidance. Worship, prayer, and fasting often serve as the means God uses to speak to His people and send them out. Do you come to worship asking what the Lord desires of you? Do you fast and pray to seek the Lord’s guidance for how to live on mission? Do you expect the Spirit to speak while you worship in a way that encourages you to scatter and spread the gospel? If not, raise your expectation, and start seeking the Lord’s strength & guidance through worship, prayer, and fasting. The second encouragement is to,

2) Prepare Your Heart for Opposition as You Live on Mission

I wonder if the freedoms we’ve enjoyed have caused us to forget that spiritual warfare we are in. Are you surprised when you face opposition to the gospel? At many moments of gospel advancement in Acts, if not all, the gospel message is met with opposition in some form, like our passage. This is because there is a real and powerful enemy of the gospel. Paul says in Ephesians 6:12, “we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” Family, when we start to live on mission, we step into a spiritual battlefield. Opposition will come in various forms. It may be direct attacks like Barnabas and Saul experienced with Elymas, spiritual attacks that seek to discourage our faith, or physical attacks on our bodies or other aspects of life.

These things will come because our enemy doesn't want the gospel advancing and we should prepare our hearts for opposition. Yet, we also need to know deeply that our enemy will be overcome. Which brings me to the final encouragement,

3) Trust the Spirit's Power to Accomplish All of God's Purposes

While we consistently see opposition to the spread of the gospel in Acts, we also consistently see the power of the Spirit overcoming that opposition. As He does in Acts 13, the Spirit is constantly providing clear direction, removing opposition, and flooding hearts with faith. Yes, our enemy may be powerful, but our God is all-powerful. And the Spirit will overcome the spiritual forces of evil. This is why Paul says in Ephesians 6:10-11, "be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil." Church, as we live on mission, we never live in our own strength. We put on God's armor and live in His strength. Notice the armor of God in Ephesians 6:14-17 and think about what each piece is. The "belt of truth" is His declared truth. The "breastplate of righteousness" is the righteousness of Christ. The "shoes for your feet" are His gospel message, "shield of faith" is in His promises, "helmet of salvation" is His deliverance, and "sword of the Spirit" is His Word. Every piece of armor is what God has done and will do for us. It is no accident Paul follows this immediately with a call to pray at all times in the Spirit. He is reminding our hearts to trust in the Spirit's power to accomplish all of God's purposes. We trust, God fights, and God wins. Family, does that not give you bold confidence to rush onto the battlefield and share the gospel today? You are called to speak, while the Spirit does the work. This how God has worked throughout redemptive history. At Jericho in Joshua 6, the people shouted and blew trumpets. Then God did the work and brought the walls down. In Gideon's victory over Midian in Judges 7, God reduced the army to 300 men and when they shouted and blew the trumpets, the Lord did the work and set the men of Midian against each other. In 2 Chronicles 20, King Jehoshaphat faced a massive army and sent the singers into the battlefield first. When they began to worship God, "the Lord sent an ambush" against the army. We speak and God works.

Conclusion:

As the worship team is coming to lead us in a time of reflection and response, ask what the Lord is calling you to believe, desire or do. Maybe He is calling to believe in the gospel message for the first time today. Perhaps it is to desire to hear from the Spirit as you worship and pray. Or could it be God is calling you to go on mission, trusting the Spirit will accomplish His purposes? However, the Lord is leading, respond to His word in faith today. As you respond, you are invited to sit and reflect, stand and sing, or come and kneel before the Lord. We also have a team of people ready to pray with you and for you for anything you need, and I am available to talk if you desire to trust in the gospel message today. Let me conclude with these comments from Kent Hughes on the Christian mission, "There is a cost to sincere service for Christ....Never go to Cyprus and you will never be subjected to a dizzy, heart-convulsing confrontation with Satan. Seriously follow Christ and you will experience a gamut of sorrows almost completely unknown to the unbeliever. But of course, you will also know the joy of adventure with the Lord of the universe and of spiritual victory as you live a life of allegiance to him." (R. Kent Hughes, Acts—The Church Afire, p. 178). Would you pray with me as we respond together?