

# Acts 13—Missionaries to Everyone

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## The Holy Spirit calls Barnabas and Saul for Missions

*1 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. 2 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." 3 So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.*

This chapter begins and ends in a city called Antioch. However, they were different cities. Indeed, there were at least sixteen cities in the eastern Mediterranean world by that name. This Antioch could be called Antioch-on-the-Orontes or Antioch of Syria and was the third largest city in the Roman Empire and the Roman capital of the province of Syria. It had a population of about 300,000 "free inhabitants," probably 500,000 if slaves were counted.

The city was the western terminus of the Silk Road which had recently opened up trade with China. Camels arrived there bearing spices, silk and other exotic goods from beyond the Himalayas. Antioch's command of north-south and east-west roads contributed greatly to its growth and prosperity.

The city was also called "Queen of the East" because of its mixed population of Romans, Persians, Indians and even Chinese. Given its religions and ethnic mix it was quite cosmopolitan and earned the reputation of being an immoral city. If the Gospel was to become a world-wide religion that included Gentiles, Antioch was the right place from which to launch it. The "revival" that took place in Antioch was a clear signal that God intended his Gospel to reach all people. Even so, it is significant that these missionaries did not go east toward China but stayed well within their Roman world.

Previously, Barnabas had gone to Tarsus to get Saul. Together they had been laboring in Antioch for a year. It was during this time that the term "Christian" began to be specifically applied to those who followed Jesus. Among the five who are listed as prophets and teachers we find the names of Saul and Barnabas.

There are many elements to this calling of Paul and Barnabas for missionary work that could be highlighted. First, this calling took place in an atmosphere of worship and fasting. People are able to hear what God is saying when the other voices are stilled and when they have prepared a place in their hearts for God.

While everyone is called to the Lord, there are those who are called to particular works. This calling became apparent to everyone. It may be that Luke mentions these prophets because they were somehow instrumental in confirming the call of Barnabas and Saul to the particular assignment. The laying on of hands, in the New Testament is particularly related to commissioning for ministry. We think of it too narrowly when we restrict it to physical healing. In general, hands are laid upon people for works of ministry. In this case, it followed a period of fasting and praying.

The call did not come exclusively or even primarily to Paul and Barnabas. Rather, God spoke to the spoke to set apart Barnabas and Paul. Solo operations can and have worked but when a group stands behind individuals everything becomes much stronger. The Assemblies of God missionary model is that churches band together to support individual missionaries. When you see missionaries standing before the congregation they are either reporting back on what has

been accomplished or else sharing their vision of what they feel called to try to accomplish. From Acts 13 to today it has proved to be an effective model.

### **The First Missionary Journey of Paul—Encounter on Cyprus**

*4 The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus. 5 When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues. John was with them as their helper. 6 They traveled through the whole island until they came to Paphos. There they met a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus, 7 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. 8 But Elymas the sorcerer (for that is what his name means) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith. 9 Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, 10 "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? 11 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. 12 When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord.*

Although Barnabas and Saul have had hands laid upon them, and the church has encouraged them, it was clear to everyone that the Holy Spirit was, in fact, sending them on this journey. They left from the port of Seleucia, about 17 miles from Antioch. All that is left of the harbor and dock is a pile of stones jutting out into the water.

Once they arrived on Cyprus, they immediately focused their ministry in the synagogue. They continued in just this way through the whole island. Incidentally, we learn that John Mark is with them on this trip.

It is not surprising that the missionaries start with the Jews. There were large numbers of Jews on the island. They had been there for a very long time. Under Herod the Great large copper mines had been operating. Some years later, in 116 AD, the Jews on the island revolted and killed some 240,000 Gentiles. Hadrian put down the revolt with great severity and drove all Jews from the island.

Saul and Barnabas were not the first to preach to the Jews on the island. In Acts 11:19 Luke tells us, "*Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews.*" Both Antioch and Cyprus had heard the Gospel at the earliest time. This missionary effort is a follow-up to those early seeds planted on the island.

When they arrived at the far tip of the island, they came to the seat of power for the province. In the Roman system, the Empire was divided into Imperial and Senatorial provinces. An Imperial province was governed by a representative of the Emperor. Senatorial provinces had their governor appointed by the Senate. These Senate-appointed Governors were called proconsuls. As was true in every part of the Empire there was a highly occultic and pagan religion in practice. Bar-Jesus would be a practitioner of such a religion. Luke is not particularly tolerant or admiring of this religion and honestly gives him the title of a false prophet. No doubt he was a prophet, just a false one. Bar-Jesus correctly saw in Barnabas and Saul opponents to his religion and tried to prevent the proconsul from accepting Jesus.

In verse nine, without explanation, Saul suddenly becomes Paul. Thereafter we know him by his new name.

Paul had no hesitancy in speaking to this opponent and he didn't make any effort to be nice about it. Luke wants us to know once again that being filled with the Spirit is the key to this kind of speaking and doing. Clearly, Paul did not worry about offending the opponent. He knew that the Holy Spirit was with him and this man was standing in the way of a major victory for the Lord's work. His tricks and deceit were trying to interfere with the salvation of an important key to future ministry in that area.

With that, Paul prophesied a curse of temporary blindness upon the man that immediately took place. Verse twelve is classic, "*When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord.*" There is nothing quite like a sign or wonder to convince people of the truth of the teaching. The salvation of such an important man was a great breakthrough and must have had implications for the future of ministry on that island.

In our day a whole bunch of Christians don't want to tell people they are wrong or to say things to them they would find controversial or with which they would disagree. They certainly would not want to have any laws that outlawed sinful behavior especially if it related to sexual identity or issues. Such folks would certainly criticize Paul for his approach and would suggest he change his methods. It helps to understand why Paul changed the world while so many contemporaries can't change anything.

### **Back to the Mainland and Paul's Preaching**

*13 From Paphos, Paul and his companions sailed to Perga in Pamphylia, where John left them to return to Jerusalem. 14 From Perga they went on to Pisidian Antioch. On the Sabbath they entered the synagogue and sat down. 15 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." 16 Standing up, Paul motioned with his hand and said: "Men of Israel and you Gentiles who worship God, listen to me! 17 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, 18 he endured their conduct for about forty years in the desert, 19 he overthrew seven nations in Canaan and gave their land to his people as their inheritance. 20 All this took about 450 years. "After this, God gave them judges until the time of Samuel the prophet. 21 Then the people asked for a king, and he gave them Saul son of Kish, of the tribe of Benjamin, who ruled forty years. 22 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.' 23 "From this man's descendants God has brought to Israel the Savior Jesus, as he promised. 24 Before the coming of Jesus, John preached repentance and baptism to all the people of Israel. 25 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.' 26 "Brothers, children of Abraham, and you God-fearing Gentiles, it is to us that this message of salvation has been sent. 27 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. 28 Though they found no proper ground for a death sentence, they asked Pilate to have him executed. 29 When they had carried out all that was written about him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb. 30 But God raised him from the dead, 31 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. 32 "We tell you the good news: What God promised our fathers 33 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.' 34 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." 35 So it is stated elsewhere: "You will not let your Holy One see decay." 36 "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. 37 But the one whom God raised from the dead did not see decay. 38 "Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. 39 Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses. 40 Take care that what the prophets have said does not happen to you: 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."*

Even though it is called Pisidian Antioch, this Antioch was just outside of Pisidia. There were large colonies of Jews in most of the cities in this area, including the one at Iconium where they would go next.

The preceding passage is a rather complete detailing of the kind of message that Paul was preaching to the Jews and “Gentiles who worship God.” He revisits the key elements of Israel’s history beginning with the Exodus and the conquest of Caanan. He glosses over the period of the Judges to arrive at the time of Samuel, Saul, and David. From David the linkage is directly to Jesus who is described as a descendant of David. John the Baptist is the next key figure but he points to Jesus. His appeal, in verse 26, is to those who are hearing him then. *"Brothers, children of Abraham, and you God-fearing Gentiles, it is to us that this message of salvation has been sent."* Paul distinguishes between those who were then hearing his message and those of the rulers who had crucified Jesus. Even their act of crucifixion fulfilled prophecy. However, Jesus was raised from the dead and seen by witnesses. The audience was now hearing the testimony of those two witnesses. In verse 34, Paul then showed them details regarding the Old Testament prophecy that pointed to Jesus. *"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."* Again he pointed them to Scripture. *"So it is stated elsewhere: "You will not let your Holy One see decay."* Obviously, David was dead and decayed. Jesus was the fulfillment of that prophecy.

Having stated who Jesus was, Paul cut quickly to the point of it all. If Jesus has indeed been raised from the dead, the point is that *"through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. 39 Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses."* Paul recognizes this must be difficult for them so he warns them not to be scoffers at what God is doing.

### **The Large and Positive Response to Paul’s Preaching**

*42 As Paul and Barnabas were leaving the synagogue, the people invited them to speak further about these things on the next Sabbath. 43 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. 44 On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord.*

The message of Paul was well received. Many wanted to know the Lord immediately. Others wanted to hear more. By the next week, the combination of preaching in the synagogue those who were responding must have converged in a great interest by all the people. Virtually the whole town showed up to see and hear the next thing.

## **Jewish Rejection and Gentile Acceptance of the Gospel**

*45 When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and talked abusively against what Paul was saying. 46 Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: "We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. 47 For this is what the Lord has commanded us: "I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth." 48 When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.*

While many Jews had received the word gladly, apparently the greater part were incited against Paul and Barnabas. Paul's response was to turn to the Gentiles with the same message of salvation. This was exactly what Jesus had already instructed them to do. Jesus told them, "*This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.*"<sup>1</sup> By turning to the Gentiles, they merely saw themselves as continuing to preach forgiveness to all the nations. The message was well received by the Gentiles.

## **More Negative Reaction**

*49 The word of the Lord spread through the whole region. 50 But the Jews incited the God-fearing women of high standing and the leading men of the city. They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region. 51 So they shook the dust from their feet in protest against them and went to Iconium. 52 **And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.***

In general, there was a very positive response to the preaching of the Gospel. However, through a campaign of innuendo, the Jewish opponents are able to use the "God-fearing women" as their tools. These women were Gentiles who had attached themselves to the synagogue. They were not Jewish but they were virtual converts to the Jewish religion. They became the point of the spear against Paul and Barnabas. They in turn, with the others, were able to bring the leading men of the city, possibly under the guise of keeping the peace against those who were divisive, to put Paul and Barnabas out of business in the city. Their motive might also have been religious. In the city were significant temples. There was a particularly beautiful one right on the Square of Augustus. Outside town, on a hill, was the temple to Men Askainos, an important deity in that part of Asia Minor. Paul and Barnabas left, but not before "shaking the dust off their feet" in protest.

Even this apparent defeat is recorded by Luke in a different way. They did not leave broken. They left full of joy and the Holy Spirit. They were not responsible for the success of their witness. They were responsible to speak. By noting that they were still full of the Holy Spirit, Luke is letting us know that the spiritual life is not measured by apparent success as measured by the number of people who respond. It is measured by faithfulness.

There is some reason to believe that Paul may have gone to Pisidian Antioch partly for the climate at that higher elevation. Some even think he may have been recovering from malaria. He said in Galatians 4:13 "*As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you.*" Since Pisidian Antioch was his first visit to Galatia, we can conclude that illness had something to do with this trip. The elevation and climate may have influenced the choice of Pisidian Antioch over some other great choices. Souls need saving everywhere so why not go where your physical health can also be addressed, not just through prayer but through normal things like diet, exercise, or even climate. Although we should add, if he went to Galatia for his health then getting persecuted and stoned and left for dead probably didn't improve things much.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 24:46-47