

Paul's First Missionary Journey Begins

Acts 13:1-13

Acts 13:1-5: *“Now in the church that was at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. ² As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, “Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”³ Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away. ⁴ So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus. ⁵ And when they arrived in Salamis, they preached the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. They also had John as their assistant.”*

Background Notes

From Acts 13 on to the end of the book, the emphasis is on the missionary travels of the apostle Paul. Saul was his Jewish name, but Paul was his Gentile name. Saul was first called Paul in Acts 13:9: *“Then Saul, who also is called Paul...”* The name Paul means “little.” In Ephesians 3:8 Paul said that he was “the least of all the saints,” and because of that humble attitude, God was able to use him in a mighty way. Humility is the key to being used by God in a fruitful ministry.

Paul and Barnabas were involved in a very fruitful ministry in Antioch of Syria (Acts 11). Antioch of Syria became the base of operations for Paul's missionary travels. The Jerusalem church remained the “mother church,” as we'll see in Acts 15, but Antioch of Syria became the “missionary church.”

The spiritual nucleus of the church at Antioch was quite a cosmopolitan group (v1). There was Barnabas, who was from Cyprus. Simeon's Latin nickname Niger suggests that he was from Africa, but moved in Roman circles of society. Lucius was from Cyrene in North Africa. Manaen had been brought up in the household of Herod the tetrarch, or Herod Antipas, who ruled Galilee during Jesus' earthly ministry. (I wonder how Manaen was saved – I'd love to hear his conversion testimony!) And then there was the apostle Paul, who was from Tarsus, but had studied in the highest circles of Judaism in Jerusalem. What a great spiritual nucleus of prophets and teachers, from a variety of backgrounds, there was at Antioch – and all were united in purpose and in Christ!

Doctrinal Points

1. The work of the Lord should always be divinely directed.

As the prophets and teachers were worshiping and serving the Lord, the Holy Spirit said, *“Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them”* (v2).

Notice that Paul and Barnabas didn’t decide on their own to go on a missionary journey, and the decision to send them was not made by a “mission board.” The believers waited on the Lord for directions, and the Holy Spirit made the decision to send Paul and Barnabas on this special mission. The word from the Holy Spirit was probably given through those in their number who had the spiritual gift of prophecy.

The Lord sent Paul and Barnabas **together**. When there are two people involved in ministry together, there is **encouragement** and **accountability** and **teamwork**. In Mark 6:7, the Lord sent the disciples two by two with the gospel of the kingdom: *“And Jesus called the twelve to Himself and began to send them out two by two and gave them power over unclean spirits.”* And also Luke 10:1: *“After these things, the Lord appointed seventy others also and sent them two by two before His face into every city and place where He Himself was about to go.”* So the Lord sent His disciples out **together**.

Now here in Acts 13, God sent Paul and Barnabas out together. Again, when there are two people involved in the work together, there is **encouragement**, **accountability** and **teamwork**. When God chose Paul and Barnabas, He wasn’t choosing novices for the job. No, Paul and Barnabas already had a number of years of service to their credit.

Verse 3 is not an “ordination ceremony” for Paul and Barnabas, turning them from laymen to clergy. Ordination of clergy is not seen in the New Testament. The fasting and “laying on of hands” was a symbolic gesture of identification, association, fellowship, and support in this work that Lord had divinely directed.

Unfortunately, sometimes the work of the Lord is not divinely directed. The bottom line for some folks who sign on for mission projects, for example, is foreign travel, or getting away from boring everyday duties. God has ways of working, even through these un-ideal situations, but ideally the work of the Lord should always be divinely directed.

2. The work of the Lord will sometimes be extremely difficult.

Acts 13:6-13: *“Now when they had gone through the island to Paphos, they found a certain sorcerer, a false prophet, a Jew whose name was Bar-Jesus,⁷ who was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, an intelligent man. This man called for Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God.⁸ But Elymas the sorcerer (for so his name is translated)*

withstood them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith.⁹ Then Saul, who also is called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him¹⁰ and said, “O full of all deceit and all fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease perverting the straight ways of the Lord?”¹¹ And now, indeed, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you shall be blind, not seeing the sun for a time.” And immediately a dark mist fell on him, and he went around seeking someone to lead him by the hand.¹² Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had been done, being astonished at the teaching of the Lord.¹³ Now when Paul and his party set sail from Paphos, they came to Perga in Pamphylia; and John, departing from them, returned to Jerusalem.”

The first stop on this first missionary journey was on the island of Cyprus in the eastern Mediterranean Sea. Remember, Barnabas was a native of Cyprus, so he knew the island well. They preached throughout the whole island, beginning with the town of Salamos on the east side of the island all the way to the capital city of Paphos on the west coast.

One of the people who heard and believed the gospel was the Roman proconsul named Sergius Paulus. This was a great result, but it was not all smooth sailing. In fact, it was extremely difficult. A Jewish false prophet named Elymas, or Bar-Jesus (of all names!), tried to disrupt the ministry and keep the Roman ruler from turning to the Lord.

Elymas reminds us of Simon the sorcerer, with whom Peter had to deal Acts 8:18-23: *“And when Simon saw that through the laying on of the apostles’ hands the Holy Spirit was given, he offered them money,¹⁹ saying, “Give me this power also, that anyone on whom I lay hands may receive the Holy Spirit.”²⁰ But Peter said to him, “Your money perish with you, because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money!²¹ You have neither part nor portion in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God.²² Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you.²³ For I see that you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity.”*

Now here in Acts 13 the false prophet was a Jewish man named Elymas, or Bar-Jesus. This false prophet was typical of all false prophets. They are agents of Satan, and their bottom line is to try to turn sincere seekers away from the truth.

Paul said to him: *“O full of all deceit and all fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease perverting the straight ways of the Lord?” (v10).* With apostolic authority, the apostle Paul pronounced a temporary blindness to come upon this false prophet. Elymas, a Jewish false prophet, illustrates the present condition of the nation of Israel. Like Elymas, the Jews tried to keep the gospel from the Gentiles. As a result, a temporary judicial “blindness” has come upon Israel, and they will be blind to the truth until that blindness is lifted.

Another area of difficulty to the work of the Lord came from within the team - not persecution from without, but trouble from within. John Mark, who had come along as a helper, decided to leave the team and go back home to Jerusalem. We don't know why. Colossians 4:10 says that John Mark was a cousin of Barnabas, so maybe he didn't like the fact that Paul was becoming more prominent than Barnabas. Maybe John Mark was afraid, or maybe he didn't want to travel

inland over the rough terrain to their next stop. Maybe John Mark got sick - or maybe he was just tired and homesick. In any case, John Mark left. His departure caused so much difficulty for the team that Paul refused to take him with them on the second missionary journey (Acts 15).

So there was blessing on their missionary journey, but there was difficulty as well. Difficulty came from without, and difficulty erupted from within.

The same is true today. There will be “false prophets” from without, and “John Marks” from within our ranks. So don’t be surprised or discouraged when problems arise, because the work of the Lord will sometimes be extremely difficult.

Practical Application

Don’t forget “the rest of the story” about John Mark!

If we only had the book of Acts, we would conclude that because John Mark failed, he was set aside and shelved for good as far as the work of the Lord was concerned. But praise the Lord - that’s not the whole story!

About ten years later, Paul told the Colossian Christians to welcome John Mark. Colossians 4:10: *“Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, with Mark the cousin of Barnabas (about whom you received instructions: if he comes to you, welcome him.”*

And then in Paul’s last letter, written from a dungeon in Rome, Paul asked Timothy to bring Mark to Rome because he was useful to Paul for the ministry. 2 Timothy 4:11, *“Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you for he is useful to me for ministry.”*

And of course we know for sure that the Lord picked up the pieces in Mark’s life, because God chose Mark to write one of the four Gospels - the Gospel of Mark.

Do you feel like you failed the Lord at some time in the past? Do you feel that you left your fellow believers in the lurch in some way? Don’t forget the rest of John Mark’s story, and be encouraged!

Yes, it’s possible to fail, and it’s possible to desert the ministry that God has called you to - but if you’re willing to make a change and try again, God is willing and able to pick up the pieces. Don’t forget the rest of the story about John Mark!