

“Out of the Gate: the first missionary journey” - Acts 13 -

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ACTS 13 1 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. 6 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 him 10 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. 14 But when they departed from Perga, they came to Antioch in Pisidia, and went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day and sat down. 15 And after the reading of the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent to them, saying, "Men and brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say on." 16 Then Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand said, "Men of Israel, and you who fear God, listen: 17 "The God of this people Israel chose our fathers, and exalted the people when they dwelt as strangers in the land of Egypt, and with an uplifted arm He brought them out of it. 18 "Now for a time of about forty years He put up with their ways in the wilderness. 19 "And when He had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, He distributed their land to them by allotment. 20 "After that He gave them judges for about four hundred and fifty years, until Samuel the prophet. 21 "And afterward they asked for a king; so God gave them Saul the son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, for forty years. 22 "And when He had removed him, He raised up for them David as king, to whom also He gave testimony and said, 'I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after My own heart, who will do all My will.' 23 "From this man's seed, according to the promise, God raised up for Israel a Savior—Jesus— 24 "after John had first preached, before His coming, the baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. 25 "And as John was finishing his course, he said, 'Who do you think I am? I am not He. But behold, there comes One after me, the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to loose.' 26 "Men and brethren, sons of the family of Abraham, and those among you who fear God, to you the word of this salvation has been sent. 27 "For those who dwell in Jerusalem, and their rulers, because they did not know Him, nor even the voices of the Prophets which are read every Sabbath, have fulfilled them in condemning Him. 28 "And though they found no cause for death in Him, they asked Pilate that He should be put to death. 29 "Now when they had fulfilled all that was written concerning Him, they took Him down from the tree and laid Him in a tomb. 30 "But God raised Him from the dead. 31 "He was seen for many days by those who came up with Him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are His witnesses to the people. 32 "And we declare to you glad tidings—that promise which was made to the fathers. 33 "God has fulfilled this for us their children, in that He has raised up Jesus. As it is also written in the second Psalm: 'You are My Son, Today I have begotten You.' 34 "And that He raised Him from the dead, no more to return to corruption, He has spoken thus: 'I will give you the sure mercies of David.' 35 "Therefore He also says in another Psalm: 'You will not allow Your Holy One to see corruption.' 36 "For David, after he had served his own generation by the will of God, fell asleep, was buried with his fathers, and saw corruption; 37 "but He whom God raised up saw no corruption. 38 "Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins; 39 "and by Him everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses. 40 "Beware therefore, lest what has been spoken in the prophets come upon you: 41 "Behold, you despisers, Marvel and perish! For I work a work in your days, A work which you will by no means believe, Though one were to declare it to you." 42 So when the Jews went out of the synagogue, the Gentiles begged that these words might be preached to them the next Sabbath. 43 Now when the congregation had broken up, many of the Jews and devout proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas, who, speaking to them, persuaded them to continue in the grace of God. 44 On the next Sabbath almost the whole city came together to hear the word of God. 45 But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy; and contradicting and blaspheming, they opposed the things spoken by Paul. 46 Then Paul and Barnabas grew bold and said, "It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles. 47 "For so the Lord has commanded us: 'I have set you as a light to the Gentiles, That you should be for salvation to the ends of the earth.'" 48 Now when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified the word of the Lord. And as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed. 49 And the word of the Lord was being spread throughout all the region. 50 But the Jews stirred up the devout and prominent women and the chief men of the city, raised up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region. 51 But they shook off the dust from their feet against them, and came to Iconium. 52 And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.



Acts 13 actually picks up where chapter 11 left off, with the brief ‘sidebar’ of Peter’s spirit led ‘jail break’ of chapter 12. Acts 11, verses 29 and 30 record “*Then the disciples, each according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea. This they also did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul.*” Now here in chapter 13 we find Barnabus and Saul returning from that little ‘errand’ with Barnabus’ nephew (or cousin) Mark. These guys were plowing forward like many of us in the service of the Lord do, with no real idea that they were about to open perhaps the greatest chapter in church history. The church at Antioch had already grown in number and maturity to such a degree that as a fellowship they were ready to ‘reproduce.’ Accepting that call, they sent these men out onto the first missionary journey.

I remember aspects of our first missionary journeys out of this fellowship. They were some crazy adventures, to say the least! Harder in so many ways than I would have believed going in, but that seems to be the norm for we see in this chapter it was also very difficult for Paul and Barnabus! We were just a bunch of zealous rookies trying to get our arms around the whole world. Yet I read nothing about these guys taking part in pre mission elections or seminaries either. The criteria of this vetting process was seemingly very different than many mission organizations today. It was simply the acknowledgement of the gifting of God upon their lives and the track record of each one of them. Already they had proved that they could take a punch and keep going. A lot of folks have passed through the doors and pews of this church who arrogantly declared on their way out that they were going to the mission field. But we knew they wouldn’t and of course they didn’t. They wholly failed to understand the kind of person that God chooses for that position, nor the strength and humility that was required.

Involved in this venture was more than just those who would actually *physically* go. In every mission, there are those who get on the plane, and those who hold the fort when they are gone. Both groups are equally needed and equally blessed! In 1 Samuel 30 David took some men out to recover goods that were stolen by the Amalekites, and at the same time he left people back to guard the equipment. Both groups of people shared equally in what was recovered. David said “*We share and share alike — those who go to battle and those who guard the equipment.*” It takes the church in its totality to pull off a successful mission. For sure, if you can’t be part of the care of the home front while others go on mission, it is likely you will never be a part of the ‘going.’ If you can’t support the missional endeavors of this church year’ round, there will be no church or missional infrastructure to send out people. If you aren’t missional and engaging here and in this community, what makes you think you are a good candidate for a mission abroad?

The passage before us shares the names of at least *part* of the “senders.” Barnabas, who we know, and Simeon who was called Niger. “Niger” is Latin meaning “black,” leading us to believe he was a man of black African descent. Many Bible scholars believe this is the same Simeon that carried the cross of Christ to Golgotha. There was also Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen, who was of the family of Herod. God had gifted different individuals to fill the specific needs of the church. Each sacrificing individually and corporately as a fellowship to see such missional outreaches come to pass. Thus the first missions board was a racially, ethnically, and socially diverse group coming together for the kingdoms advance. Together they were a body, each fulfilling their specific place, their specific need, at the specific time, all within that body. Some would go out. Some would stay with the stuff. But together they changed the world.

We need to note that God chose Antioch to move the gospel out to the world, not the ‘home church’ back in Jerusalem. It was likely that those in Jerusalem were still too narrow-minded and traditional to successfully reach out to the broad masses seeking salvation. Their exclusive mindset would have hampered the spread of the Good News. So God bypassed the Jerusalem church and raised up another who would not flinch from the task ahead. God is uniquely qualified to call the right people, at the right time, to the right place.

These guys “stepped up to the plate” in their calling from God. They ministered **for the Lord**, and in their obedience they ministered **to the Lord!** “Minister,” in its simplest terms, means “to serve!” God chose them for a path laid out just for them. Some today want to doubt and criticize terms and phrases such as the “calling of God,” but they wouldn’t be able to convince Barnabas and Paul of such! For them, they were on a “mission from God.” Engineered for them “before the foundations of the earth were laid.” (Isa 51:16) This as their destiny. This was part of why they were born.

Both these servants of God and the church as a whole fasted. Fasting is the “denial of the legitimate claims of the body so as to give oneself more undistractedly to spiritual exercises.” (Believer’s Bible Commentary) The purpose of fasting is not to try in any way to change the mind of God, or strong arm Him to act in a particular manner, but rather to change the heart and mind of the individual doing the fasting.

“But as for me, when they were sick, My clothing was sackcloth; I humbled myself with fasting; And my prayer would return to my own heart.” (Ps 35:13)

“When I wept and chastened my soul with fasting, That became my reproach.” (Ps 69:10)

Again, let us note that these men were not alone in their pursuits. It seems that the whole church body was behind this endeavor. They all fasted and prayed and subsequently “sent them out” to do what they had been called to do. Those who were sending, “laid hands” on those who were going. Not to pass on some sort of cosmic empowerment, but to acknowledge that they, the church, was identifying and affirming the mission that God had called these men to.

Here we have a clear presentation of the body of Christ in action, the importance of the local church. When we are without, we stand alone to “face the music.” There are many today who will immediately kneejerk at such a premise, while the resounding cry goes up “en masse”, **“but all we need is God!”** Indeed such a idea, in its rawest form, is the truest of truths. But to somehow believe that we can stand apart from others, to minister to men without participating with men, is naïve at best, and a prideful suicide at worst! One need only read the scriptural accounts to see that God has chosen to minister via the hands and involvement of men, even though it is clear He need not do so.

Why would He do so? I do not doubt God’s ability and willingness to communicate with men. I do however have grave misgivings about man’s faithfulness to listen and hear God’s specific direction! The truth is that we so often naturally shut our ears to a “still small voice” that tells us that we are being stupid, but it is much harder to block out the shouts of a faithful friend saying the same! To deny the calling and place of the corporate church and its unity of purpose is to arrogantly deny the whole book of Acts, and in fact the vast remainder of the book we call the holy Word of God.

While the whole church was behind them, and the body of Christ was “sending them out,” it was in truth the Holy Spirit which did the sending! Let us remember Matthew 16:19, *“And I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. Whatever you forbid on earth will be forbidden in heaven, and whatever you permit on earth will be permitted in heaven.”* The fellowship was in support of them and the Holy Spirit was behind them. They were off to their mission and to fulfill their calling.

Please note that these particular men were not novices. Having been in the intensive ministry for a minimum of eight years, these individuals were already seasoned and experienced. They had already experienced the “blood, sweat, and tears” of ministry. Now they “hit the ground running.” They didn’t drag their feet or attempt to juggle their old secular life while at the same time still attempting to fulfill their “spiritual contract.”

Admittedly, such an “all-out commitment” is rare, but that’s why such a calling and position is just as rare. Ministry on the grand scale is never found on the heels of mediocrity! Those whom God has designated cannot ever hope to be greatly used if they attempt to control the stage, manipulate the criteria, or straddle the line between the call of God and the world. For the call to serve God is profound and, quite honestly, extreme. Nothing but everything will suffice.

Our text reflects that Satan wastes no time showing up on the scene of such efforts! A hostile environment surfaced immediately. Young ministers in training know this reality. Satan will seldom risk letting someone get something big going and then have to work ten times as hard to destroy it later. He’s no dummy! It is better to try putting it down before it really gets off the ground. So immediately the gloves come off; the trials begin. The enemy has arrived.

Paul and Barnabas was just minding their own business and engaging the work of the mission when a sorcerer shows up! A false prophet! Imagine that! This sorcerer withstood them, by intervening...by getting between them and this proconsul, in attempt to keep him away from the faith. Such is a common tactic...one still used today when you are trying to share the gospel with a friend. He’s out there you know. Waiting at every turn and behind every bush. Bent on turning the curious seeker away from the truth, and away from the bearer of that truth.

Saul had no choice but to pull out the “heavy artillery.” Please note that he did not move in personal anger or independent of God. He acted “filled with the Holy Spirit.” That is the crucial element in this recipe. Without it, this kind of action is certain disaster. We see that Paul laid it on thick and heavy. No messing around. No politically correct terminology or “pastoral niceties.” It’s a “nose-to-nose” stand down and God’s on one side! Ultimately Paul lets God do the fighting, and God is taking no prisoners! This “son of the devil” immediately goes blind.

Verse 12 says that following this event, the proconsul believed! Oh, I’m sure he did! The miraculous was the ignition, but what “astonished” him was the teaching of the Lord. It was the Word that brought him home... What a lesson for us! However many miracles God blesses us with, it is ultimately the teaching of the Lord that wows them. Ultimately, it is always the Word of God that “brings them to their knees.”

It seems that it all was just another day of ministry for Saul. He takes his “gang” and heads on to the next town, the next mission, and of course, the next “son of Satan” that would be waiting for him. Paul seemed to grasp the reality that the star of the show was Jesus. *His* job was to just show up and engage! Indeed there would be many trials, tribulations, and battles ahead. But in the end, there would be no regrets. There would be no apologies (2 Corinthians 11:23-31).

In verse 14 we read how Paul and Barnabas had the opportunity (as was often the custom in that day) to stand and speak in the synagogue. This was a fairly common thing to do in a situation such as this where a person was recognized for being a scholar such as Paul. Thus Paul takes the unique and individual “open door” that presented itself, and was available because of the particular gifting that God had prepared in these men. He shares a brief historical perspective, as well as the gospel of Jesus Christ, and how the two fit together. It was the gospel in the context of the audience before him. This technique is something we all need to learn.

The words of Paul caused quite a stir, especially among the Gentile converts to Judaism. They wanted to hear more! Like so many in this world today, they were truly hungry for the Word of God. Paul’s message to them was to “continue in grace,” and not to fall back into the futile attempts to be righteous before God by their own works. They were free, and Paul encouraged them to not let legalism creep back into their lives.

The synagogue Jews however were happy to hear these curious words until they started losing some of their people to Paul and Barnabas and the Word of Jesus Christ. Suddenly, there was envy! Suddenly, those from within the temple began to contradict and lie concerning what Paul had said. “Church competition” is not a new concept! Apparently, neither are the attack methods of those who involve themselves in such! Sadly, such is a very real reality in our own local community.

Verse 46 tells us that through such attacks, Paul and Barnabas did not back down or cower. They instead grew bold. The boys pointed out that they had first brought this Good News to the Jews and the temple, but upon their rejection, they were “taking it to the streets.” They were going to the Gentiles! While Paul and Barnabas and the rest of the early church would continue to offer the gospel to the Jewish world, this event would be a turning point in the direction of their mission. Remaining flexible before God in ministry, they moved toward the ‘open doors.’ They would move in the directions and pursuits where God had gone before them and where people were eager to listen.

Many preachers today can, with a good heart and right intentions, waste a lifetime of work and ministry on a group of people that don’t have the slightest desire to change their thinking or their lives. In fact, a vast segment of the religious world today would fit into this category. However crass it may sound, we would factually do well, like Paul and Barnabas, to leave them to rot in their stubborn self-righteousness and to take the gospel to a new crowd, to those who still “have ears to listen.”

The “street” was open to the gospel and willingly received this message of grace! There was joy and glory given to God. But Paul would increasingly be persecuted by those within the established and traditional Orthodox church. Eventually in fact, they became his greatest distracters and persecutors. What a sad truth that has lasted down through the ages within the mission of grace! It’s not like Paul and Barnabas didn’t *try* to make peace! However, realizing that spending time trying to make peace where there was no heart of peace was a useless waste of time. So they “shook the dust from their feet,” symbolizing their acknowledgment of that town’s rejection.

The first missionary journey had begun. With all of its inherent trials as well as it’s innate joy. A joy in knowing that their purpose was the grandest of life, and that God had inexplicably allowed them to participate in its delivery. A joy that comes by being “filled with the Holy Spirit,” and then actually walking it out...