

Last week we were introduced to the dynamic leadership team of the Antioch church. While they were worshipping and fasting, this group of godly men was led by the Holy Spirit to send Barnabas and Saul to become the first missionaries. We must consider that this came at a tremendous cost to this young church. Sending out their top leaders was a precarious move, but they knew their mission, and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, they obediently laid their hands on them and sent them off.

Right away, we learn a valuable lesson in these passages; as the church, we must be careful acquiring people and neglecting to release them as the Holy Spirit leads. We must be comfortable with sending people off into new works that will advance the gospel to the ends of the earth. However, as Luke emphasizes in verse 4, we must be confident that it is under the Holy Spirit's guidance. This is why we must be people of prayer and fasting.

As we look closely at this passage, let's keep in mind that much of Acts is descriptive rather than prescriptive. This simply means that Luke explains what happened during the early days of churches' formation. He's not necessarily saying that this is what we should do or what it should look like. The early church stands as an example for us today. With this in mind, there is a lot that we can gather from this short passage of scripture so let's look at some observations that we can make together to see what applies to us today.

PP 1. The Mission is **Hard**

"So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus. When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. And they had John to assist them." -Acts 13:4-5

The first observation that we can make upon reading this passage is that this mission is hard. From the beginning of the first missionary journey, Barnabas and Saul had very little fruit to show for their efforts. Luke had very little to write about except that they traveled from Seleucia to Cyprus, proclaiming the word of God in the synagogues. It wasn't due to lack of plan either or the result of poor leadership. They went to Cyprus, which was Barnabas' stomping grounds. Likely figuring that starting in an area they were familiar with would give them the home-field advantage. Not only did they start in an area they knew, but they went to the synagogues to proclaim the word of God. This followed a pattern Paul later explained for us in Romans 1:16 "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." Even though Saul's call was to the gentile's he knew that the Jews were heirs to the gospel, but he also knew that among the Jews in the synagogues there would be god-fearing gentiles who would respond to the word of God. Despite being led by the Holy Spirit and despite having what seemed like a solid plan, and despite having highly skilled leaders, their efforts seemed futile. Even to the point that John, Barnabas' cousin who tagged along, ended up deserting Barnabas and Saul after their first missionary journey proved to be too challenging.

This gives us a sobering picture of what ministry is really like, and it's important that in our culture of instant gratification, we don't minimize the mission to which we are called to a microwave dinner. Adventures are not always what they seem. After all, this is not an episode of Bear Grylls where he's seemingly in a remote location when in actuality, just out of the camera's view is a 5-star resort. Let's be honest, we have a hard enough time striking up a conversation with our neighbors about Christ, so consider the incredible challenge this must've been for Barnabas and Saul. As we reflect on the mission that we are called to as believers, let's be reminded that this is not a call for that faint of heart. Instead, this is a call to those willing to surrender everything with the possibility of seeing little progress. Without becoming disheartened, let's be honest about this fact, the mission is hard.

PP 2. Expect Obstacles

To emphasize the mission's difficulty, Luke drives his point home at the beginning of the next verse.

"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." -Acts 13:6

Even though much of their trip was fruitless, their efforts weren't entirely in vain, but their only conversion wasn't going to come without a fight, and it serves as an example for us to expect obstacles. The passage goes on to say...

"He was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. But Elymas the magician (for that is the meaning of his name) opposed them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith. 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." -Acts 13:7-11

Apparently, even though much of Barnabas and Saul's first missionary journey seemed fruitless, they created enough of a stir to get the attention of the Roman Governor of Cyprus, Sergius Paulus. However, a false prophet named Bar-Jesus stood in the way. His name means "Son of Salvation." His other name was Elymas, which means magician. Ironically enough, this false prophet was Jewish and would've been practicing forbidden magic to gain favor and power in the world. Similar to Simon Magus that we read about earlier in Acts. Instead of showing Sergius Paulus the way of salvation, he led him down the path of destruction. Suppose you've ever seen the movie Lord of the Rings. In that case, Elymas is similar to the character Gríma Wormtongue who was the chief advisor to King Théoden of Rohan before being exposed as an agent and spy of Saruman. It should come as no surprise that the enemy would target people who hold political power in our world. Saul clearly seeing that this false prophet is trying to prevent Paulus from converting shows that the power of the gospel is superior to all others. He

calls Bar-Jesus the son of the devil and curses him with blindness for a time, too which a mist and darkness fell upon him, and he looked for people to lead him by the hand. One can't help but be reminded of Saul's blindness on the road to Damascus, in which he was able to repent, but there are a few things that are clear from this passage.

It becomes clear that Saul is determined to remove any obstacle that stands in the way of someone's conversion. Not only does he silence the false prophet and render him blind, but suddenly Luke refers to him as Paul, his Roman name, which means "little" or "small one." Like Paul, we ought to expect obstacles as we are working to accomplish our mission, and we ought to be prepared to remove any obstacle that stands in the way of the gospel. Whether it be false teaching or something we need to adjust in ourselves. If we can do something to make the gospel more readily received, we ought to do it. That doesn't mean we compromise our faith, but perhaps it does mean we are careful with what we post on social media. We must also consider that we are doing battle with the enemy every time we share our faith. Evangelism isn't just a simple rational conversation in which we try to win someone to our side. Instead, it's the battle for an individual's soul, and if you think for a second that the enemy is going to go down without a fight, you'd be wrong. Our mission is hard, and we ought to expect obstacles and be prepared to deal with them.

PP 3. Anyone can be saved

"Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord." -Acts 13:12

On this seemingly fruitless journey, Paul and Barnabas have the opportunity to present the word of God to Sergius Paulus, a Roman governor. After dealing with Elymas, they offer the gospel to him, and he believes. God purposed for this governor's salvation to occur in this manner. It's as if their entire journey happened only for this one salvation. As Paul and Barnabas traveled all over the island, God drew a straight line to this one man. It's incredible because other writings outside of the Bible indicate Sergius Paulus was a real governor in this region of the Roman empire. As it turns out, not only he but his family believed also. I know I am speculating a little, but imagine what influence for the gospel this man must've had in his position. Unfortunately, Luke doesn't give us all of those details, but this passage does provide hope that people from all places in life can be saved. Paul later says that it's hard for the rich to be saved, but it's clearly not impossible. For whatever reason, God in his sovereignty allowed for the only real fruit from this first missionary journey to result in the salvation of this one. Now I know what you're thinking. If two guys showed up and cursed one of my closest allies with blindness, I may be compelled to believe them too, but let's look closely at what Luke wrote. The proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished, at what? The teaching of the Lord.

While the miracle was compelling, it's the teaching of the Lord that saves. We don't have to perform miracles to lead others to Christ. We simply need to trust in the power of the gospel, because as we read earlier from Romans, it is "It is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." Bar-Jesus or Elymas, a Jewish magician

practicing forbidden magic, was the rightful heir to the gospel. Still, he chose to stand in the way, and because of his pride, God blinded him, yet this proconsul, with no prior knowledge, responds to the gospel in a way that results in the saving of his soul. Truly anyone can be saved.

Conclusion

As we read this passage, we can observe the realities of what it is that we are called to do. Our mission is hard; we should expect obstacles while remembering that anyone can be saved. In closing, I have one final point, and it's perhaps the most important, so if you remember anything from this message, let it be this.

While studying this passage, I couldn't help but become enamored with Paul. What we actually see happening in these verses is what it looks like for a person to live on mission. Saul switches to his Roman name Paul from this passage, and from this point on, we reference him. As this story develops, it's evident that Paul is emerging as the prominent leader within the group. As we will see in the following account, it switches from Barnabas and Saul to Paul and his company. What gives Paul this ability to step up like this and become so useful in the hands of God. Is that something we can do too? Yes. I believe it is, and while our call may not be Paul's calling, I think we can learn from his example. Typically, we look at someone like Paul and believe that he is too intense or even prideful, but I would argue that the opposite is true. Paul was willing to go to whatever lengths to advance the gospel, even if it meant changing his name or stepping out in boldness to curse a man with blindness. Paul was full of humility, and where we think that humility means to think less of oneself, the reality is that humility fosters within us boldness for the gospel. We need to be bold for the gospel to walk across the street and talk to our neighbors about Christ, let alone set sail on a journey without any actual knowledge of how things will turn out. It's not that we need to be more confident in ourselves. Instead, we need to think of ourselves less and think more of the power of the message that we have to share. There is the only way to endure the difficulty of the mission we are called to—the only way to overcome the powers of darkness and remove obstacles. The only way to lead others to Christ comes from a gospel boldness, and that only comes from a heart of humility, and like the meaning of Paul's name, we must become small so that God might become big.