

The Book of Acts

Lesson 19: The First Missionary Journey -- Acts 13:1-52

In the church at Antioch, a gathering of prophets and teachers is worshiping the Lord and fasting when the Holy Spirit speaks: set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them. So the church fasts and prays, lays hands on the two men, and sends them off. A new era begins. The gospel that has been spreading by scattered believers now goes out on a deliberate, Spirit-directed mission, the first of the great journeys that will carry the name of Jesus across the Roman world.

They sail to Cyprus and work their way across the island until they reach the proconsul Sergius Paulus, an intelligent man who wants to hear the word of God. But a sorcerer named Elymas tries to turn him from the faith. Saul, now called Paul, fixes his eyes on the man and pronounces a temporary blindness on him, and the proconsul, astonished at the teaching of the Lord, believes. From here on, Luke calls him Paul, and Paul takes the lead. The mission presses on.

In Pisidian Antioch, Paul stands up in the synagogue and preaches a sermon that traces the whole story of Israel down to its climax: of this man's offspring God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, as he promised. He preaches the cross, the resurrection foretold by the prophets and the Psalms, and then he reaches the heart of it: through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses. The law could never justify; Christ can.

The response splits the city. Many beg to hear more, and the next Sabbath almost the whole town gathers. But the jealous leaders contradict and revile Paul, and he turns boldly to the Gentiles, who rejoice and glorify the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believe. The word spreads through the whole region. The opposition grows until Paul and Barnabas are driven out, but as they go they shake the dust from their feet, and Luke leaves us with a beautiful picture: the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit. The mission has begun, and nothing can dim its joy.

Group Discussion: The church at Antioch sent out its very best, Barnabas and Saul, for the work of the gospel (vv. 1-3). What does it cost a congregation to send out workers and support the spread of the gospel beyond itself, and why is this mission so central to the church's purpose?

Personal Reflection: Paul preached that in Christ we are freed from everything the law of Moses could never free us from (vv. 38-39). Do you ever try to earn your standing with God by your own performance and rule-keeping? What would it mean to rest more fully in the forgiveness Christ offers?

Read Acts 13:1-52

Study Questions

1. The Holy Spirit said, set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them, and the church sent them out (vv. 1-3). What does this teach about the mission of the church and about how God calls and sends workers for the gospel?
2. The Antioch church gave up two of its finest leaders to send them into mission (vv. 1-3). What is your part in the spread of the gospel, whether going, giving, praying, or supporting? Where might God be calling you to invest more in His mission?
3. Paul preached that God had brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, from David's offspring, just as He had promised, and raised Him from the dead as the Scriptures foretold (vv. 23-37). How does Paul present Jesus as the fulfillment of God's promises, and why does this matter for our confidence in God?
4. Paul rooted the gospel in God's long faithfulness to His promises across centuries (vv. 16-23). How does remembering God's track record of keeping His promises help you trust Him with the promises you are still waiting to see fulfilled? Where do you need that assurance now?
5. Paul declared that through Jesus forgiveness of sins is proclaimed, and by Him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which they could not be freed by the law of Moses (vv. 38-39). What does this teach about the limits of the law and about the forgiveness and freedom found only in Christ?
6. The law could never free people from the burden of their sin, but Christ does (vv. 38-39). Do you ever fall into trying to earn God's acceptance by your performance, your rule-keeping, your religious effort? How would resting in Christ's forgiveness change the way you relate to God?
7. When Paul preached, the Gentiles rejoiced and glorified the word, while the jealous leaders contradicted and reviled him (vv. 44-48). What does this dividing response teach about the gospel, and how did jealousy harden the hearts of those who rejected it?
8. The leaders rejected the gospel because they were filled with jealousy at others' success and inclusion (v. 45). Where does jealousy or envy stir in your own heart, and how can it quietly harden you against God's work in others? How do you guard against it?
9. Luke writes that when the Gentiles heard the gospel, they rejoiced and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed (v. 48). How should we understand this statement about being appointed to eternal life, in light of the genuine, universal gospel call and the real human response God requires?
10. Despite fierce opposition that drove them from the city, the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit (vv. 50-52). Looking back over this whole chapter, name one specific way the Lord is calling you to grow, in mission, in resting in His forgiveness, or in joyful faithfulness, and what is one step you will take this week.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Romans 3:20-26, justification through faith in Christ apart from works of the law; 2 Corinthians 1:20, all the promises of God finding their Yes in Christ; 1 Timothy 2:3-6, God desiring all people to be saved, Christ a ransom for all; 2 Peter 3:9, the Lord not willing that any should perish but that all reach repentance; Matthew 28:18-20, the Great Commission to make disciples of all nations