



Beginning the First Missionary Journey

Acts 13

Sent from the Antioch church

The beginning of Chapter 13 shows a definite break with the former activity. Jerusalem had still been the center from which the work of the early church proceeded. Now, however, Antioch of Syria becomes the center. Its church will send out the missionaries to the gentile world. In Antioch were prophets and teachers. These New Testament prophets have also been mentioned in chapter 11. In Antioch we again meet with Barnabas and Saul but also with a Symeon, Lucius and Manaen. Nothing is known concerning these men. There has been much speculation, but, that is all it is – speculation. To the church together with its leaders the Holy Spirit makes it clear that Barnabas and Saul are to be separated to the work to which He has called them. The fasting in which the church engages is still part of the Old Testament worship but, of course, they do not offer sacrifices any more, because that would now be an abomination since Christ has come and has given His life as a sacrifice. With prayer and the laying on of hands, the church sends them out into the gentile world with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We would also be able to say that the Holy Spirit sent them, as well as the church. He only uses the church as His tool to send out these missionaries. Does the Spirit also tell them where to go? Although we do not read of this specifically, it is evident that the Spirit is in charge of all the works of these heralds of the cross. Later He twice forbids Paul to go to the place to which he had intended to go. First they go to Seleucia, which is the seaport for Antioch. Then they set sail for the island, Cyprus. This is the home country of Barnabas – not totally unfamiliar territory.

Mission to Cyprus

The first place they come to is Salamis, where they preach the gospel in the synagogue of the Jews. The Jews had scattered over the whole then-known world and had erected synagogues wherever they went. This is the place where the missionaries of Jesus Christ begin their work. There is in these synagogues a certain bond between the things these men will have to say and the things which are taught here. They come with the message that the Old Testament, which the Jews believed, has now been fulfilled. Almost as an aside, it is mentioned that John Mark was with them as their attendant.

We do not hear of any results of their work in Salamis. They go on to the other side of the Island, to the capital city, Paphos. This is the place where the pro-consul has his residence. This dignitary, Sergius Paulus, is a Roman officer, but he is a man of understanding. He does not seem to be satisfied with the religion of the day and the mode of life dictated by the worship in this place of Venus or Aphrodite. He calls for Barnabas and Saul because he wants to hear what they have to say. But, missions will not be easy. Will the ruler of the first place they come to turn to the Lord and be instrumental in turning many others too? Opposition arises immediately. A certain sorcerer, Bar-Jesus or Elymas, opposes them and seeks to influence the pro-consul against the word of God. Saul, now called Paul, attacks him at once and does so in no gentle manner. He calls him a man full of guile and villainy, a son of the devil and enemy of all righteousness. Then the Apostle smites him with blindness so that he has to be led about by another. Upon this word of the Apostle and the attendant miracle, the Pro-consul believes. The gospel has come to Cyprus and it will never be the same!

To the Jew first

The mission on Cyprus has been accomplished for the time being and the Apostles go to the mainland, to Perga in Pamphylia which is in Asia Minor. This will be the area in which much of the mission work of the early church will be done. When they come here, John Mark leaves them. Why? We can only guess. The work apparently proved too strenuous for him. They do not stay in Perga but go to the larger city of Antioch of Pisidia (to be distinguished from Antioch of Syria). Again they go to the synagogue on the Sabbath day. Paul later gives the reasons for going to the Jews first in Romans 9 and 11. This ancient people of God was to hear the glad tidings first. Then the gentiles must hear them. Jesus had given similar orders. The missionaries sit with the worshippers. Both the law and the prophets are read. Then the ruler of the synagogue, seeing strangers, and perhaps knowing something about them, asks them to speak if they choose.

Paul does choose to speak! He has been sent to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ to both Jew and gentile. He will now use somewhat the same approach which Stephen had also used in his defense. He speaks to these people in the synagogue about the history of their own people. Unlike Stephen, he begins with the history of Israel in Egypt. God showed His power to all men in the way in which He led Israel out. He carried them through the wilderness for the space of forty years. This was necessary because this wilderness was not able to support them. He then destroyed the people who lived in Canaan so that there would be a home for His people. All this took about 450 years. These figures have been questioned time and again. This is fruitless. No one knows from which time the Apostle begins nor to what point he extends this time. Besides, he is simply speaking in round numbers. Then the Lord sent Judges to lead the people. This went on until the prophet Samuel. Then they obtained a king just like all the other people around them. King Saul was of the tribe of Benjamin, doomed to failure from the start, because Judah was to rule. After Saul reigned forty years the Lord put him aside and set David on the throne. This was the man *"after His own"* heart. These Jews to whom he is speaking know this history very well. He is not teaching them anything new. But, out of the line of King David God has raised up Jesus the Savior. David's words are fulfilled and his purpose has been attained. Out of their own history he shows them the key to that history, Jesus Christ. The Savior, the Messiah, is of the posterity of their hero, David.

He now also brings to their attention the relation of this Jesus to John the Baptist. This forerunner came preaching the gospel of repentance. This is necessary to come to Jesus. This becomes important later when we read of people at Ephesus who were baptized by John but had not heard of the Spirit's coming (Acts 19). The coming of the Messiah must be brought in relation to the history of Israel, but also in relation to the one who the Lord had sent to pave the way for Messiah.

Now that it has been firmly established who Jesus is from the history of God's people and from the prophetic mouth of John the Baptist, Paul calls the people to listen closely because the word of salvation *"has been sent to you!"* Let it now also be known what has happened to Jesus in Jerusalem. The rulers of the people had never understood the voices of the prophets to which they listened every Sabbath day and they condemned Him. They were thereby fulfilling the prophecies which had come to them, but they are guilty. Even Pilate would have let Him go, but they wouldn't have it. They slew Him. God raised Him from the dead. Through this resurrection it is evident that this was the Messiah. There are many who saw Him after He rose, so that it was not done secretly or in a corner. This resurrection of Jesus is the good news which can now be proclaimed to all men. This resurrection has caused the whole Old Testament to come alive! The promises are there for the taking. He can quote from Psalm 2 or Psalm 16 or Isaiah 45 or Isaiah 49 – all the Scriptures bear witness to this one fact that the Son of God would come to redeem His people. Through this Jesus there is proclaimed to them forgiveness of sins. Through Him they will also find a justification which the law is not able to give them. Both law and prophets will now receive their rightful place. All of them are fulfilled in Jesus Christ. He also warns them with the same word that they may not harden themselves. Today salvation has come to this place!

As the people leave the synagogue and stand outdoors they talk about the "sermon" which they have just heard. There is too much for them to digest at one time. They ask the Apostles to come back the next Sabbath and speak to them again. Many of both Jews and proselytes follow Paul

and Barnabas to have a personal word with them. They urge the people to continue in the grace of God.

From Jew to gentile world

The next Sabbath almost the whole city gathers to hear the word. This could not well be in one building but may take place out of doors. Multitudes are here to listen to the Apostles. This could become a very large congregation over night! Now we do not even hear what the Apostles say because there is another development which must be dealt with. The Jews are jealous. They have been here for generations and have never had this kind of success. These two men come and the whole city follows them. They begin to contradict the words spoken by Paul. This is dangerous. Paul has spoken the word of God. If they contradict this word, they will blaspheme! Paul and Barnabas do not allow this to go on, but oppose these Jews with the word! It is necessary that the word come to these Jews first, but, if they cast it away and "*judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life,*" they will go to the gentiles. The prophet had spoken of this (Isaiah 49:6).

The loss for the Jew is the gain for the gentile. They rejoice that the word is coming to them and that they will have a place in the Kingdom of God. As many as "*were ordained to eternal life believed,*" says Luke. What clearer statement of the electing love of God can be found anywhere?

The gospel is not confined to this city, but spreads throughout the countryside. The jealousy of the Jews is also not confined to a few words with the Apostles. They stir up "*the devout women of honourable estate and the chief men of the city.*" They are going to turn the most influential people against the Apostles and against the New Testament gospel. As a result the missionaries will have to leave that region because of persecution. As their Lord commanded them, they shake off the dust of their feet as a witness against them and go to Iconium. Those who will not hear will come to the position that they can not hear!

Some disciples are left in this city. Although the Apostles have to leave, the seed has been sown. These disciples rejoice in their faith and have the indwelling of the Spirit to console them.

The march of the gospel has begun. It will be attended by all kinds of difficulties – but the gospel will go on until it has covered the whole earth. No one will be able to stop its onward march!

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Questions for discussion:

1. Must the church send out missionaries or may they also be sent out by others? Give reasons for your answer.
2. Was it right for Paul and Barnabas to take John Mark along seeing he had not been designated by the Spirit?
3. Is it good mission policy to take the gospel to the principal cities and to the rulers? Why?
4. Isn't Paul quite harsh in his rebuke of Elymas? Was this proper?
5. Is it a good idea to have an opening for the preaching of the gospel like Paul had when he reviews the history of Israel? Is it well to use the Biblical material to begin the preaching of the word?
6. How are missions and election related? Or does the one stand in the way of the other?
7. Is it understandable that the Jews would be jealous? To what has their jealousy led?