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Missiology

Lesson 7 – Paul’s First Mission Journey

When Barnabas and Saul returned to Antioch from their mission of mercy to Jerusalem, they brought John Mark with them, the very man who later wrote the Gospel of Mark. The Gospel work in Antioch was going well. At that time this Christian congregation was blessed with five **“prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul”** (Acts 13:1). The Gospel was making many converts among the Gentiles in that city.

But it was time for the Gospel to be spread into other cities and countries among the Gentiles: **“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.’ Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away”** (Acts 13:2-3). How did the Holy Spirit speak to them? Most likely the Holy Spirit spoke through one of those prophets, just as He had spoken through Agabus to announce a coming famine. In any case they were sure it was God’s will to send Barnabas and Saul on a mission. The laying on of hands was a ceremony that indicated that this was the Lord’s will, and soon they were on their way.

Barnabas was a native of the island of Cyprus, and so it was natural that they would go there first. **“So being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus”** (Acts 13:4). Since Barnabas and Saul were Jews, they began their work in the city of Salamis, where there were several Jewish synagogues. John Mark was their assistant. In the preceding centuries of turmoil, the Jews had been scattered throughout the Roman Empire. Almost any city of any size had one or more Jewish synagogues where Jews gathered on the Sabbath to listen to the reading of the Law and the prophets and to sing praises to their God. Their worship probably included a prayer for the fulfillment of God’s ancient promises and the arrival of the Jewish Messiah. Many Gentiles through the years had become attracted to Jewish worship and attended synagogue services. Some of them became Jews in almost every sense of the word, becoming circumcised and living according to the Old Testament Law. But most of the Gentiles who attended synagogue worship did not go that far, and these Gentiles were called God-fearers.

We read that Barnabas, Saul, and Mark **“preached the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews”** (Acts 13:5). We are not told about the results of this preaching in Salamis. But when they got to Paphos, another city on the island, they had an opportunity to bring God’s Word to the proconsul Sergius Paulus, **“an intelligent man”** (Acts 13:7). But they were fiercely opposed by **“a certain sorcerer, a false prophet, a Jew whose name was Bar-Jesus”**

(also called Elymas), who **“withstood them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith”** (Acts 13:6-8).

At this point the Lord determined to confirm the word of His apostle Saul through a special sign, a miracle. Saul (now called Paul for the first time) called Bar-Jesus a **“son of the devil”** and said to him, **“The hand of the Lord is upon you, and you shall be blind, not seeing the sun for a time”** (Acts 13:10-11). This prophecy was fulfilled at once, and Bar-Jesus **“went around seeking someone to lead him by the hand”** (Acts 13:11). When Sergius Paulus witnessed what had happened, he was **“astonished at the teaching of the Lord”** and he **“believed”** (Acts 13:12).

When Paul and Barnabas sailed from Paphos to Perga in Pamphylia on the mainland, Mark left the group and returned to Jerusalem. But Paul and Barnabas continued the trip and went up from the coastland into the interior to another city called Antioch in Pisidia. Antioch was most likely one of the congregations that Paul addressed when he later wrote to the Galatians (although there are a few scholars that disagree). In this letter Paul wrote: **“You know that because of physical infirmity I preached the gospel to you at the first”** (Galatians 4:13). It is therefore possible that their travel route inland was made necessary by Paul’s health problem. The Lord still sometimes directs His mission work today by inflicting sickness on His workers so that their plans have to change. It is the Lord’s work; He has a hand in everything that takes place, whether it is sickness or natural disaster or shake-ups in the government.

There was a synagogue in Antioch in Pisidia, and that is where Paul and Barnabas began their work. Towards the end of the service Paul was given an opportunity to speak to the worshipers. In his account of what happened, Luke (the author of Acts) gives us an example of the kind of message the apostle Paul preached in a Jewish synagogue. The message is recorded for us in Acts 13:16-41. Paul began by talking about Moses and the exodus from Egypt, the conquest of Canaan under Joshua, the period of the judges, and the choice of David as king. All of this was no doubt very familiar to his listeners.

But at the mention of David, he began to speak of the promise God give to David and how this promise was very recently fulfilled in Jerusalem. He said: **“From this man’s seed (David’s seed), according to the promise, God raised up for Israel a Savior – Jesus”** (Acts 13:23). Paul then spoke of Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection, and concluded: **“We declare to you glad tidings – that promise which was made to the fathers, God has fulfilled this for us their children”** (Acts 13:32-33). After referring to several Old Testament prophecies (from Psalm 2, Isaiah 55, Psalm 16) that were fulfilled by Jesus, Paul came to the climax of his Gospel sermon: **“Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins; and by Him everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses”** (Acts 13:38-39).

The main point of Gospel preaching is to preach the forgiveness of sins to all sinners, based on the life, death, and resurrection of this Man Jesus, whom God sent to be the Savior of the world. This is the message that must always be the center of all Christian mission work.

“Through this Man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins.” In this sermon Paul made it clear that no amount of obedience to the law can possibly accomplish what the Gospel offers: **“You could not be justified by the law of Moses.”**

Paul concluded his message with a warning against despising his words. It seems that a number of the Jews were not convinced by His words, but the God-fearing Gentiles in the audience were delighted to hear about the coming of the Jewish Messiah: **“The Gentiles begged that these words might be preached to them the next Sabbath”** (Acts 13:42). This same thing happened in almost all of the Jewish synagogues Paul visited on his mission journeys. Most of the Jews simply did not want to hear or believe that the crucified Jesus of Nazareth was actually their promised Messiah. It was the Gentile God-fearers who were attracted to the Good News that Paul preached and they were quick to spread the Word to their relatives and friends. These Gentiles became the core members of the Christian congregations throughout the Roman Empire. There were also some Jews who became Christians, but these quickly became the target of persecution by the unbelieving Jews.

After this first Sabbath message in Antioch of Pisidia **“many of the Jews and devout proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas, who, speaking to them, persuaded them to continue in the grace of God”** (Acts 13:43). This was certainly a very promising beginning. **“On the next Sabbath almost the whole city came together to hear the word of God”** (Acts 13:44). What a golden opportunity for the Gospel! Just think: Jews and Gentiles gathering together to hear about Jesus, the Savior of the world! **“But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy, and contradicting and blaspheming, they opposed the things spoken by Paul”** (Acts 13:45). Instead of rejoicing at the influx of Gentile neighbors, they resented the interest of these non-Jews. These strangers, Paul and Barnabas, come to town, and now their synagogue is being overrun by Gentiles. They could not handle it, and so they found fault with the message that Paul and Barnabas proclaimed. They did all they could to squash the impact of the Gospel.

What were Paul and Barnabas to do? Should they, as Jews, cater to their own people and retract what they had said before? Should they take back their offer of forgiveness of sins through Christ to everyone in attendance? Should they take back their statement that the law of Moses could not justify anyone? No, they could not do that. **“Paul and Barnabas grew bold and said, ‘It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you (Jews) first; but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles’”** (Acts 13:46). They were able to justify their actions from the Jewish Scriptures. Using one of the prophecies of the Messiah (Isaiah 49:6) they demonstrated that the Jewish Messiah was intended to be **“a light to the Gentiles”** and that the salvation won by this Messiah was to be proclaimed **“to the ends of the earth”** (Acts 13:47). **“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” (Acts 13:48).

Notice the wording that is used in verse 34 above. Those who rejected the Gospel did not reject the Gospel because God failed to include them and invite them. The Gospel message was intended for them, and the Holy Spirit wanted them to accept it. They, however, judged themselves unworthy of everlasting life. God did not judge them unworthy.

On the other hand, in verse 48 those who believed are not credited or praised for making the decision to believe the Gospel of Jesus. God had appointed them to eternal life, and because God chose them, they were brought to faith in Jesus. This is the Scripture’s teaching concerning conversion. Those who reject the Gospel are lost by their own fault. Those who believe the Gospel believe it because God appointed them to believe it. Salvation is by grace, and by grace alone. It is God’s doing, not our own.

It is vital that preachers of the Gospel and missionaries understand this. They can expect that the Gospel they preach will be rejected by some, perhaps by many. But God has appointed some to believe, and these will be brought to faith in Jesus through the means God has appointed: the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. No one can believe in Jesus or come to Him by his own reason or strength. No preacher by his preaching can cause anyone to believe in Christ if God does not bring about that person’s conversion. We are saved by grace, and by grace alone.

The next thing that happened in Antioch in Pisidia was typical of what happened wherever Paul and Barnabas preached the Gospel. Those who rejected the Gospel persecuted those who preached the Gospel and those who had been brought to faith in Christ: **“The word of the Lord was being spread throughout all the region. 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. But they shook off the dust from their feet against them, and came to Iconium. And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 13:49-52).**

The preachers of the Gospel are the prime targets of persecution. But their joyful listeners do not escape persecution either, as we see in the events that followed in the city of Iconium. As in Antioch, Paul and Barnabas began their mission work by going **“together to the synagogue of the Jews, and so spoke that a great multitude both of the Jews and of the Greeks believed” (Acts 14:1).** What power there is in the Gospel to change people’s thinking from the inside out! Many were brought out of the darkness of unbelief into the light of the Gospel. They **“believed.”**

“But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brethren” (Acts 14:2). Not only did these Jews personally reject the Gospel, but they did all they could to persuade others to reject the Gospel. It is just as Jesus said to the Pharisees: **“You travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as**

much a son of hell as yourselves” (Matthew 23:15). It is bad enough to reject the Gospel, but it is even worse to do everything you can to turn others away from the Gospel! Jesus said: **“Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea”** (Matthew 18:6).

The preaching of the Gospel of Jesus divides those who hear it into two groups. Paul and Barnabas stayed in Iconium **“a long time, speaking boldly in the Lord, who was bearing witness to the word of His grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands. But the multitude of the city was divided: part sided with the Jews, and part with the apostles”** (Acts 14:3-4). It was just as Jesus said: **“Do you suppose that I came to give peace on earth? I tell you, not at all, but rather division: three against two, and two against three. Father will be divided against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law”** (Luke 12:51-53).

In Iconium the opposition to the Gospel became violent. Paul and Barnabas were in danger of being stoned to death. But **“they became aware of it (the attempt to kill them) and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding region. And they were preaching the gospel there”** (Acts 14:6-7). By fleeing they were following Jesus’ directions: **“When they persecute you in this city, flee to another”** (Matthew 10:23).

In Lystra Paul and Barnabas were faced with a problem that faces many missionaries who attempt to bring the Gospel of Christ to people who speak a different language: that of not being properly understood. It seems the residents of Lystra understood the Greek language that Paul and Barnabas used, but their native language was Lycaonian. After the Lord confirmed Paul’s preaching by giving him power to heal **“a cripple from his mother’s womb, who had never walked”** (Acts 14:8), the Lycaonians **“raised their voices, saying in the Lycaonian language, ‘The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!’ And Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker”** (Acts 14:11-12). In fact, the priest of Zeus in the city went so far as to prepare to bring them sacrifices of oxen and garlands as a way to worship these “gods.”

No doubt some false teachers would have been happy to receive such honor and glory and to be treated like gods, but as soon as Barnabas and Paul realized what was going on, they **“ran in among the multitude, crying out and saying, ‘Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men with the same nature as you, and preach to you that you should turn from these useless things to the living God”** (Acts 14:14-15). Misunderstanding is almost inevitable when there are language differences. When they begin their work in a foreign land, missionaries need to depend on translators. But even then, they cannot know for sure what the translator is saying, because they do not yet fully understand the language. It is certainly beneficial when the Christian missionary makes a serious effort to learn well the chief language of the people to whom he is speaking.

Notice that Paul and Barnabas tried to introduce the true God to the people of Lystra by speaking of the true God as their Maker and Provider. The true God, they said, **“did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good, gave us rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness”** (Acts 14:17). In other words, the true God who created heaven and earth had been blessing them all along by providing bountifully for their earthly needs. **“With these sayings they could scarcely restrain the multitudes from sacrificing to them”** (Acts 14:18).

The mood of the people changed quickly, however, when unbelieving Jews from Antioch of Pisidia and Iconium came to Lystra to stir up trouble for Paul and Barnabas. The Lycaonians apparently believed all the false accusations the Jews leveled against the missionaries, for it is written that these troublemakers, **“having persuaded the multitudes, ... stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead”** (Acts 14:19). Thus, within a short time Paul was treated as the god Hermes (or Mercury) and then stoned as a deceiver.

But Paul was not dead. **“When the disciples gathered around him, he rose up and went into the city. And the next day he departed with Barnabas to Derbe”** (Acts 14:20), a nearby city. Things went better for them in Derbe. Their preaching of the Gospel **“made many disciples”** (Acts 14:21) in that city. It was time for them to return to their home base in Antioch of Syria, but before they did that, **“they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch (in Pisidia), strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, ‘We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God’”** (Acts 14:21-22). Follow-up is always necessary, especially when the new converts are being persecuted for their confession of Christ, as was the case with these new Christians.

In the absence of Paul and Barnabas the newly founded Christian congregations needed leadership to continue the work. Therefore, the missionaries **“appointed elders in every church,”** they **“prayed with fasting,”** and **“they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed”** (Acts 14:23). On the return trip to their home base in Antioch they went through Pisidia and Pamphylia and **“preached the word in Perga”** (Acts 14:25), and then they caught a ship in the seaport of Attalia and **“sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work which they had completed”** (Acts 14:26).

The Christians in Antioch were probably eager to hear what had happened on this first mission journey. **“When they had come and gathered the church together, they reported all that God had done with them, and that He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. So they stayed there a long time with the disciples”** (Acts 14:27-28). Notice that Paul and Barnabas did not take any credit for their success. They reported what God had done through their preaching of the Gospel. It was God who was at work to bring non-Jews (Gentiles) to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. It was now clear to them that it was God’s will to bring the Good News of salvation in Christ to all people, and that He would bless their preaching by converting Gentiles from heathen unbelief to Christian faith.

Questions

1. Who sent Barnabas and Saul (Paul) on their mission? (Two answers)
2. Into what country did Paul and Barnabas go first?
3. In what place did Paul usually preach the Word first in a city?
4. Why did Paul do this?
5. How did God use this method to reach the Gentiles?
6. What miracle did God use to impress Sergius Paulus?
7. What important event took place in Antioch of Pisidia?
8. What other towns in Galatia did Paul and Barnabas visit?
9. What did the Lycaonians in Lystra attempt to do to Barnabas and Paul?
10. What persecutions did Paul and Barnabas endure on this first journey?
11. What do we learn from the words of Acts 13:46-48?
12. Who showed themselves to be enemies of the Gospel?
13. What did Paul and Barnabas report to those who had sent them?
14. What does the word “**must**” in Acts 14:22 mean for mission work today?