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Acts 13:1-12

Nineteenth Message

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GO WEST, YOUNG MEN!

SERIES: THE SPREADING FLAME

In the pivotal section of the book of Acts which starts with chapter 13, the church begins its westward expansion. Up to this point, Luke has described the growth of the church in and around Jerusalem and the provinces of Judea and Samaria. But evangelism has been restricted to the Palestinian and Syrian mainland. No one has had the vision of taking the good news to the nations overseas. That important move is about to be taken. From this point forward, the focus changes, from a Jewish church with the emphasis primarily on Peter, to a gentile outreach, with the emphasis on the apostle Paul as the predominant figure in Acts.

Luke takes us back to the church at Antioch, the fellowship which we studied at the end of chapter 11. We could say that chapter 13 takes up where chapter 11 left off. We have already seen that this church was one of the most exciting, dynamic, mission-minded, multicultural churches in the New Testament. It is a great model for what a church in a major metropolis ought to look like. Luke begins by introducing the leadership of the church.

Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. (Acts 13:1 NASB)

The leadership reflects the cosmopolitan nature of Antioch. Luke mentions five men, whom he describes as prophets and teachers. He does not detail the distinction between those two ministries, nor does he say that all five men exercised both gifts, or that some were prophets and others teachers.

We are familiar with a couple of these names. Barnabas has been mentioned a few times. He introduced Paul to the apostles, and it was he who went off to Tarsus to find the apostle and bring him back to Antioch to teach the church. Humanly speaking, without Barnabas there would not have been an apostle Paul. Barnabas was one of those people who loved to work behind the scenes, encouraging others and enjoying the role of second fiddle.

Then there was Simeon, surnamed Niger. He was apparently Roman, because his nickname is Latin (Niger means "black"). Simon was a black man. He may have been the one who carried Jesus' cross. His sons Alexander and Rufus were known to the Christian community (Mark 15:21 and perhaps Rom 16:13).

We know nothing about Lucius the Cyrenian, except that he came from North Africa, where Cyrene is located.

Manaen is called in the Greek the *syntrophos* of Herod the tetrarch, that is, of Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great. This Herod was the governor of Perea. The word may mean that Manaen was brought up with him in a general way, or more particularly that he was his foster-brother or intimate friend.

Lastly is Saul, who of course came from Tarsus in Cilicia. He is not designated as an apostle at this point.

We can make a couple of observations about this group. First, notice how diverse it is. It is an amazingly heterogeneous, multi-national and multi-lingual group, comprising a Jew, a Roman, a Greek, a black man, and an Arab. These men symbolized the ethnic and cultural diversity of Antioch. The leadership reflected the church's diverse population. I wonder if Luke mentions their names to highlight that fact. I pray that this would be more and more evident in our congregation as well. It is a beautiful thing to see unity in the midst of diversity. In some churches, power is attained through education or wealth.

In the Body of Christ, our differences should not make any difference at all. Our national origin, cultural background or educational advantage should never separate us. None of those things matter. Racism is a sin. Bigotry is wrong. We should appreciate and value our diversity.

The second thing I observe about this group is the order in which they are listed. Barnabas is first and Saul is last. That was the order up to this juncture. At the end of chapter 12, Luke gives a summary statement to this point, an indication that a new history is beginning, "*But the word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied. And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem*" (12:24-25).

Here, Barnabas is the leader. When they return, it is Barnabas and Saul, and when they leave for Cyprus it is Barnabas and Saul. But when we get 13:13, we read that Paul and his companions set sail. From that point on in Luke's history it is always Paul and Barnabas. So there is a reversal of roles.

Barnabas was willing to step aside because he saw the bigger picture. He was older, more respected, and in many ways more experienced. But now we will observe his character in full bloom, because from this point on he is going to yield his preeminence to Paul. His humility reminds me of John the Baptist's words concerning Jesus, "He must increase, and I

must decrease.” It doesn’t matter who gets the praise for what is accomplished. The important thing is that the job gets done.

I have the privilege of coaching a basketball team at Homestead High School. One of my greatest challenges is taking 12 insecure young men who want to look good on the court and get them to sacrifice personal desires for the good of the team. We have to be willing to step back and let another take the place of leadership if that is God’s plan. Barnabas was always willing to do that. Together, he and Paul were a dynamic duo. They complemented each other beautifully: Barnabas, with his sensitive, gracious spirit; Paul, with his brilliant intellect.

While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away. (13:2-3)

Apparently, through some prophetic utterance the message was delivered that God wanted to set aside these two men for a particular task, not designated at this point. The church at Antioch had no idea what God had in mind for them. This reminds us of Abraham’s call, when God said to him, “Go to the land I will show you” (Gen 12:1). God says to the church at Antioch, “*Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.*” In both instances the call to go was clear, while the place and ministry were not. The response needed for such a call requires an adventurous step of faith, a trust that obeys without knowing all the details.

A couple of things are worth noting here.

First, these verses are a reminder that power and direction in ministry come from God. The Spirit’s revelation was imparted to the believers in Antioch while they were serving the Lord and fasting, and their first response was to fast and pray.

I’m inclined to think that the word “they” in verse 2 is referring to the entire church, not just the five leaders. Notice in verse 1 that both the church and the leaders are mentioned; and when the two return home from their journey in chapter 14, they gather the whole church together to give a report, because it was the whole church that had commissioned them. Here is a church united, worshipping together, serving the Lord, praying, seeking God’s direction. Sometimes churches forget that power in ministry comes from God, and they lose contact with him. That wasn’t the case in Antioch.

Notice that the fasting is linked in verse 2 with serving the Lord and with prayer in verse 3. Fasting is never an end in itself. These believers were not fasting because they were overweight. This is a mark of deep spiritual concern. It is the setting aside of the normal demands of life in order to seek God’s direction, foregoing food for a time, withdrawing from the influences of the world, that they might hear the commands of heaven. Unfortunately, this helpful and needed expression of our spiritual awareness has largely disappeared from the Western Christian church.

Next month we will celebrate the twentieth anniversary of PBCC. At our staff meeting last week, we shared our observations of what God has done over these years, celebrating his faithfulness. We prayed and sought his guidance and direction for the future. I believe these are important days in the life of our church. We need God’s guidance and direction. We don’t want to just “turn the crank.” We want to hear his voice and be sensitive to the Spirit’s call. It indeed may be a time for our body to fast and pray.

Secondly, notice that God sent away their very best. They didn’t send people who couldn’t cut it in Antioch. They didn’t send a couple of interns. I was convicted as I pondered this truth. Initially, I think most of us would respond to the feeling that we need to start a new work by deciding who we can’t afford to lose. Who are the franchise players? How different are God’s methods! This ought to give us a clear perspective on our own missionary endeavors. When we think of starting a new work or sending someone overseas, we should be sending our most gifted pastors, our most experienced people.

So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus. When they reached Salamis, they began to proclaim the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews; and they also had John as their helper. (13:4-5)

The course for the beginning of the mission was simple. Seleucia, about 15 miles from Antioch, was the nearest seaport. From there they set sail for Salamis, the port city of the island of Cyprus. We are not told why Cyprus was chosen as their first destination, although we know that Salamis was Barnabas’ hometown (4:36). Cyprus was probably already on Barnabas’ heart. He wanted to make contact with various friends and associates there. He was a wealthy landowner, and probably knew people all over the island. He might have said to the group, “God didn’t tell us where to go. Let’s start at Cyprus. There are many cities there which have never heard the gospel.” Many of the men who started the church at Antioch were also from Cyprus, so undoubtedly they had contacts there. Paul and Barnabas took an intern with them, a young man named John. This is the John who is known as John Mark in the New Testament, the author of the gospel of Mark.

Arriving in Salamis, a large city on the eastern side of the island, Paul began to enter the synagogues and preach. The apostle, a rabbi, wore the distinctive garb of a rabbi. Anyone could spot that he was a teacher. Upon being asked to speak, he would step to the front and take the scroll. Some early writers indicate that he would often insert the name of Jesus at appropriate places when reading the Hebrew Scriptures. That would wake up if you were dozing. Hearing some unknown visiting rabbi say that Jesus is the Messiah would get your attention.

Interestingly, Luke doesn’t write about these contacts at all and what happened in these various cities. They traveled across the entire island from east to west, from Salamis to Paphos,

about 90 miles, probably ministering in all the cities along the way. Luke does share one incident which occurred at the end of their ministry in Cyprus, possibly two or three months later, in Paphos, the capital city on the western shore:

When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they found a magician, a Jewish false prophet whose name was Bar-Jesus, who was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence. This man summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. But Elymas the magician (for so his name is translated) was opposing them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith. (13:6-8)

They come across this man who actually has two names. One is Bar-Jesus, which means the “son of Joshua.” Jesus is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew Joshua. This man was not a Christian but a Jewish rebel, a false prophet. His other name was Elymas, a nickname which is just another word for magician. But he was not the kind of magician we are familiar with, one who does tricks with sleight of hand. He was an occultist, a wizard.

He was associated with a man named Sergius Paulus, who is described as the proconsul, or governor of Cyprus. Luke describes this man using a very positive adjective: “a man of intelligence.” He had great understanding and was evidently weary of materialism and idolatry and was hungry for spiritual reality, which may explain the presence and influence of this wizard on his court. He has his own private counselor on matters of the occult.

This man sent for Barnabas and Paul to hear their message. I wonder if what happened is that Elymas opposed them in some way as they were preaching in the city. He realized that their message would jeopardize his living and influence with the governor, and he attempted to stop their ministry. The governor of the island heard about this encounter and wanted to know more, so he invited the two into the palace to hear their message.

How would you reach this key man for Christ? These public men, like our political leaders, are not very accessible. You can't just walk into their office and introduce yourself. How would you set this up on your own? You wouldn't think of doing it through a wizard. But God's way of doing things is different from ours. That is why the Christian life is so exciting. You never know what God is going to do next. We see this over and over throughout the history of Acts as God takes men and women into situations they could not contrive. Our tendency is to plan and scheme and set up committees. God thrusts us right into the middle of the action. We go, knowing that God is going ahead of us, opening doors and preparing hearts.

But Saul, who was also known as Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, fixed his gaze on him, and said, “You who are full of all deceit and fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease to make crooked the straight ways of the Lord? Now, behold, the hand of

the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and not see the sun for a time.” And immediately a mist and a darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking those who would lead him by the hand. Then the proconsul believed when he saw what had happened, being amazed at the teaching of the Lord. (13:9-12)

Here the apostle begins to demonstrate his apostolic gift, that unique, miracle-working authority given to the apostles to authenticate their ministry. Paul had two names. His Hebrew name was Saul, and his Greek name was Paul. When he operated in the Jewish world he used the name Saul; when he operated in the Greco-Roman world he was known as Paul. So, using the name Paul, he begins to assume the leadership in the great adventure of taking the gospel into the Gentile world.

We are told that the proconsul believed when he saw the impact of the word. It wasn't merely the blinding of Elymas; it was the authority by which Paul spoke and the impact of the word of God when he spoke.

Thinking through this text, I am impressed by these men's boldness. The Christian life is designed to be an adventure. We need not be afraid to take bold steps of faith and believe God for great things.

None of us here this morning wants to waste our life in trivial matters. We all want to do something significant, to be in on what God is doing and where he is working. We want God to use us. That begins by simply making ourselves available to him, being willing to do whatever he asks, whether it is sharing what he is doing in our life with a friend at work, in the neighborhood, or at school. Maybe it means volunteering to help in a Sunday School class. This life of adventure is simply responding in faith to what God asks you to do. These people were simply serving the Lord, worshipping when they were thrust out into this great adventure.

God took the apostle into the heart of the Roman Empire and he was able to preach to the governor of that province, who became a Christian. We don't know what influence that family had on the Roman world, but it began with a sensitivity to what God wanted and a willingness to follow his leading. Allowing God to work out the itinerary and making divine appointments, which even included those who opposed him, were all a part of God's plan.

In closing, I want to introduce you to a friend of mine whom most of you know, Walt McCuistion. He is the living example of this principle, a man who at the end of his vocational career asked God to use him, and God answered that prayer by using him to powerfully touch another nation for Jesus Christ.

Walt McCuiston: I stand before you as an example of how God takes our too little and makes it “too much!”

When I retired as a pastor, I feared my life would shrink to the golf course and Safeway. So I began to pray, “Please Lord, don’t let my world become small.” Little did I know how God would fulfill those prayers beyond my wildest dreams.

Soon I felt prompted to call a friend in North Carolina. He was a tomato broker, and he led a weekly Bible study in his home. He told me that he was forced to quit the study during the peak of tomato season and it required additional time and effort to resume the intensity and intimacy of that time. I suggested that since I was retired, time was not my problem. I could take a leisurely drive to his farms in North Carolina from my home in California. That would allow me to teach his home fellowship, help with tomato distribution, and allow the Bible study to continue without interruption.

While I was working in North Carolina, I received an unexpected invitation to attend the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington D.C. This led to an invitation to attend a seminar for political leaders from Balkan countries, and there I met the mayor of the capital city of Moldova. Through a translator, the mayor shared how he recently became a follower of Jesus Christ. As a former educator, he also shared his passion to distribute Bibles in public schools in his country. He then invited all the attendees to come to Moldova with him and help. Isaiah 1:19 instantly came to my mind: “If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat of the best of the land.” Since I was retired, I could not think of any reason for not volunteering.

When I shared my availability, the mayor proposed a different plan for me. He would ask Moldova’s national director of education to select a representation of their best public school principals. I was given two months to teach Christian ethics and morality to replace the ethics void created when Moldova seceded from the USSR and abandoned Communism. The mayor’s vision was for me to teach principals. In turn, the principals would teach their faculties, faculties would teach their students, children would influence their families and become the seed for the next generation. The mayor’s ultimate goal was for Christian ethics and morality to replace the model set by former Communist party chairmen.

Due to my association with the mayor I became acquainted with others in government: members of parliament, the vice-prime minister, the rector of Moldova universities, the architect who crafted the declaration of independence for Moldova, etc. Friendships with parliamentarians encouraged a prayer group to begin within the parliament. In contrast, to assure you that God was the genius behind these friendships, I don’t know a single city councilman where I live in California!

After I left Moldova, one of the principals in my class together with his friends pooled their money and began weekly radio broadcasts entitled “Christian Ethics and Morality and the Benefit to Our Society.” The broadcasts lasted a year before I discovered their existence.

When I heard of this principal’s passion for her country, I sent her a classic book, *Authentic Christianity*, by Ray Stedman. I explained how important and valuable it was for her countrymen to learn the purity of the New Covenant, since Orthodoxy dominates their nation. As a result of her enthusiasm for the book, this converted principal crafted a series of broadcasts, and insisted her country also needed the book in their own language. Subsequently, I was able to publish and send 5,000 translated copies.

While in Moldova, I was given a tour of a Children’s Hospital, where one glass thermometer served four floors of patients. I was shocked at the pathetic conditions, so shocked that I took photographs to validate reports I would share later. As an example of how God takes our too little and makes it too much, my photographs got the attention of an American medical group that subsequently invested six million dollars in renovations and equipment for the hospital.

My first trip to Moldova was over 10 years ago. Since then, my wife June and I have returned several times to teach a wide variety of people, from bus drivers to professors. After one week-long seminar, a scientist from the Academy of Science shared with the group, “Ninety five percent of everything I know about God, I learned this week!”

Looking back, it has been a wild and wonderful ride. What I thought would be a leisurely trip to a tomato farm in North Carolina, God continued over ten time zones to the country of Moldova.

Due to my contacts with educators, I was asked if I had a degree in education, to which I answered, “No.” Speaking to politicians, I was asked if I had a degree in political science. Again my answer was no. Then to the question, “What credentials validate what you are doing in Moldova?” my standard answer was, “I suspect that God in heaven was shuffling through a deck of cards and picked out the Joker and said, ‘I’ll use him. He’s willing...and I’ll compound his willingness into my bigger plans.’” (Isaiah 1:19 NIV).

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