



SETTING OUR SAILS TO THE WIND - PART 2

SERIES: ACTS LIFE UNLEASHED

Acts 2:24–13:4

25th Message

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I. Introduction: What is God Doing in This Age?

Last week we celebrated Easter when we joyously proclaimed Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! But now it's the week after and some of you may wonder, what difference does it make? When we get up to go to work on Monday it seems as if life goes on as usual. On a global scale it could hardly be more threatening and violent—North Korea, Syria, Venezuela, Paris, Afghanistan, Russia—it seems rather depressing. Are we missing something? What is God doing in this age?

This week we begin an eight-week series following Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey (Acts 13–15). But before we pick up the story I thought it would be good to remind ourselves of the radical transformation the disciples had to go through in their understanding of the kingdom after the resurrection. They had already been through one transition, leaving everything to follow Jesus. As they witnessed Jesus' powerful deeds and authoritative words in the many months that followed, a feeling of elation began to stir within them. In their final pilgrimage to Jerusalem they had high hopes that Israel's new David would conquer the city and set up his kingdom. But on Good Friday all the powers of hell are unleashed upon Jesus. By the end of the day he is dead and buried in a tomb. Evil has triumphed. Once again it seems that "might makes right" as bribery, deceit, political expedience, and corruption snuff out all that is good. The disciples flee in despair.

Three days later Jesus is raised from the dead and "declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness" (Rom 1:4). Jesus has disarmed the powers and authorities of darkness, having triumphed over them by the cross (Col 2:15). In forty days time Jesus will be enthroned in heaven and ten days later he will make a royal transfer of power to his disciples on earth. The magnitude of upheaval and shift in cosmic power that occurs during this transition is difficult to comprehend. If it had been an earthquake, it would have registered over a 9 on the Richter scale.

Before they begin their ministry, the disciples are instructed for forty days on the ways of the kingdom and the necessity to wait for the gift of the Holy Spirit—a promise the heavenly Father had put his seal upon which would mark the dawn of the new age. Knowing they would soon be baptized with the Holy Spirit reignites their hope, and so they ask, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" On the verge of elation they wonder, "Will our hopes and dreams finally be fulfilled?"

He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." (Acts 1:7–8 ESV)

John Stott writes, "as Calvin commented, 'there are as many errors in this question as there are words.' The verb, the noun and

the adverb of their sentence all betray doctrinal confusion about the kingdom."¹ The phrase "at this time" suggests that they expect the kingdom to be established immediately. The verb "restore" is used in the gospels of healing, of putting something back into its original state or condition and suggests the disciples envision a political and territorial kingdom, one in which they would have positions of authority (Luke 22:24–27; Mark 9:33–34; 10:35–41). The final phrase "to Israel" further confirms their nationalistic aspirations where "Israel would be the top nation, ruling over the rest of the world."²

Instead of a "restoration" to what the kingdom once was, Jesus redefines the nature of the kingdom and the crucial role they will play within it. There will indeed be a consummation of the kingdom, but the "times and seasons" are divine matters which only the Father knows. Jesus shifts their attention from speculation to responsibility, from curiosity about the future to embracing their mission in the present. The kingdom will not be a restoration of what it once was, but an advance, going beyond the borders of Israel in new dimensions that will culminate in nothing less than a new creation. It will not be a territorial or political kingdom established by force, though it will have radical political and social implications. Rather it will be a spiritual kingdom that rules the hearts of men, transcending national and cultural boundaries. It's good news for the whole world. The disciples were hoping for *authority* to rule, instead they are given power to witness, a power that overcomes all the forces of darkness.

We are reminded that Luke's original purpose was to give "full confidence" to Theophilus and his readers concerning "the things that have been *fulfilled* among us." As Luke has shown in Acts 1–12, God was faithful to his promises, first by restoring a faithful Israel in Jerusalem, then expanding his kingdom into Samaria through the ministry of Philip and Peter. Now through the ministry of the apostle Paul, he demonstrates how God is fulfilling his promise to call out a people for himself from among the nations—the goal of salvation history. I have three goals for us as we take this journey with Saul and Barnabas:

1. that we have a greater appreciation for our apostolic foundation and the price they paid that we might be full heirs of the gospel of Christ;
2. that we will come to understand the vital role of the Spirit for mission and personal evangelism;
3. and that our hearts be transformed to have a passion for God's mission for the world and that you will adopt one of our missionaries as your friend.

When Jesus commissioned his disciples to "make disciples of all nations," he concluded with the promise, "And behold, *I am with you always*, to the *end* ("completion, fulfillment") of the age" (Matt 28:20). The phrase "I am with you" is more than significant a generic promise of God's presence. In the majority of instances in the Old Testament it was addressed to Israel's leadership when they

were called to a task of insurmountable odds. It was God's promise to be with them to protect, support, and encourage them until the task for which they had been called was completed. Though the task of discipling all nations appeared daunting if not impossible, God promised his presence to guarantee its success. And now through centuries of waiting "the fullness of time has come" (Gal 4:4). The world stage had been divinely orchestrated and intricately set to facilitate the spread of the gospel into the Gentile world.

First, there was the *Pax Romana* ("Roman Peace") that brought relative peace for 200 years throughout the empire and made travel much safer, especially at sea. Michael Green believes that this factor was so significant that he said, "The spread of Christianity would have been inconceivable had Jesus been half a century earlier."³ The second factor was Rome's expansive road system that was designed to move massive amounts of troops throughout the empire. The major roads were paved and had way stations with inns and stables every 16-19 miles, which also facilitated pedestrian traffic. By the third century the empire was linked with over 50,000 miles of paved roads. Paul could travel hundreds of miles through Palestine, Greece, Macedonia, and Italy without ever crossing a border. Third, with Alexander the Great's conquests and the process of Hellenization that followed, Greek became a universal common language. As any preacher knows, not having to have your message translated greatly intensifies its impact. Finally, there was the spiritual foundation of the Hebrew Scriptures that were consistently read and studied every Sabbath in the synagogues throughout the diaspora. Because the Roman mystery religions were morally bankrupt, many God-fearing Gentiles were attracted to the Jewish religion for its ethics and participated in the community life of the synagogue. As F. F. Bruce observes, "Politically and religiously the world was ready for the gospel at that time as it had not been before."⁴

II. Antioch Becomes the Base for World Mission

You may be wondering why Antioch took the lead sail away from Jerusalem as the home base for God's mission to the world. Michael Green comments, "There is much that might be said about the outreach that brought it into being and the outreach it gave rise to." But I will highlight five key elements that made it a thriving center of the Christian movement in the first century.⁵

A. Its strategic location

Antioch was situated on the Orontes River about three hundred miles north of Jerusalem and twenty miles east of the Mediterranean, at the joining of the Lebanon and Taurus mountain ranges where the Orontes breaks through and flows down to the sea. Its strategic location on the great commercial road from Asia to the Mediterranean and its many natural resources, including wine and olive oil produced nearby, contributed to its enormous wealth and prosperity. It was a cosmopolitan city, reflecting "a marriage of oriental and Hellenistic life with Greeks, Syrians, Phoenicians, Jews, Arabs, Persians, Egyptians and Indians making up the population."⁶ After Antioch was annexed by Rome, it became the capital of the province of Syria and was the military headquarters of Rome in the east. It was third largest city in the world surpassed only by Alexandria and Rome. The city was not only known for its sophistication and culture but also for its vices. Peter Walker writes, "The city's location meant it was the conduit for everything that came from the Fertile Crescent; down the Orontes the exotic East flowed into a ravenous, enchanted Mediterranean world."⁷ It was in this cosmopolitan city

full of gods that the church of Antioch emerged and reached out to a larger world.

When PBC Cupertino first opened its doors in 1985 I was a bit reluctant to come. I was not ready to leave campus ministry. I had a long history at Stanford; first, as a student for four years, then a campus intern for two, and finally as a college pastor for seven. I knew the campus inside and out and had established lasting friendships with many students, staff and a number of the faculty. The campus environment was energizing, the students challenging, and the academic environment stimulating. The thought of leaving a vibrant student ministry on the largest campus in the world to do ministry in a neighborhood church, whose facilities were rundown and sorely inadequate, was anything but appealing. I had no idea how strategic our location in Cupertino would become as the thriving cosmopolitan center of Silicon Valley.

B. Founded by lay initiative

Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. (Acts 11:19–21)

Luke tells us that the persecution that arose in connection with Stephen's martyrdom forced many disciples to flee beyond the borders of Judaea to the island of Cyprus and to the coastal region of Phoenicia and Antioch to the far north. Though they became refugees uprooted from their homes, they saw their plight as an opportunity to spread the gospel into new territory, and they couldn't stop talking about Jesus. Initially they spoke only to Jews, but when they came to Antioch with its cosmopolitan population and rampant idolatry, the Spirit broke down their prejudices and they boldly preached that Jesus was Lord to non-Jews as well.

If you have ever been around broken people who have lost everything, you may have observed that when they speak, they have authenticity. Their courage was met with great success, as Luke says, "the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord" (Acts 11:21).

C. Enriched by gifted and diverse leadership

Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. (Acts 13:1)

When the Spirit breaks down our prejudice everyone feels welcome. That welcoming spirit of embrace was clearly evident in their leadership, which consisted of five gifted prophets and teachers who were from diverse geographical and cultural backgrounds. At the top of the list was *Barnabas*, a Levite farmer from Cyprus. Like many of the refugees who came to Antioch, Barnabas was born in Cyprus but, while they were forced to flee their homes, he voluntarily sold his property for the sake of the kingdom (Acts 4:36–36). Such generosity earned him the name, "son of encouragement," and being "full of Holy Spirit and faith," he fanned the flame of God's grace in everyone's life. "Secondly, there was *Simeon* (a Hebrew name), called Niger ('black') who was presumably a black African, and just conceivably none other than Simon of Cyrene who carried the cross of Jesus and who must have become a believer, since his sons

Alexander and Rufus were known in the Christian community.”⁸ Third was *Lucius of Cyrene*, one of the men from Cyrene, North Africa who were the first to preach the gospel to non-Jews in Antioch. Fourth, there was *Manaen*, whose name is the Greek form of the Hebrew Menahem (“comforter”). The phrase “a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch” is better translated by the NIV as one “who had been brought up with” Herod. F. F. Bruce explains,

The title “foster-brother” was given to boys of the same age as royal princes, who were brought up with them at court...It is natural to suppose that Luke’s special knowledge of members of the Herod dynasty may have been derived from Manaen. But what a commentary on the mystery and sovereignty of divine grace that, of these two foster-brothers, one should attain honor as a Christian leader, while the other should be best known for his shameful behavior in the killing of John the Baptist and the trial of Jesus!⁹

Concluding the list is *Saul*, a former Pharisee from Tarsus in Turkey, who led the death squads against Christ’s followers in Jerusalem and drove many of them to Antioch, where in God’s sweet irony, he now serves as one of their pastors. This is a community that is bathed in forgiveness. The leaders in Antioch were a microcosm of the ethnic and cultural diversity in the city they served. As Michael Green observes,

Cross-cultural fellowship is not easy. We naturally tend towards our own kind. But to mix with those from other nations and cultural backgrounds, should be the particular characteristic and glory of the Christian church. God has, after all, chosen us from all our different backgrounds and put us together in one family. We need to demonstrate that family life. And it will be very attractive, in a world where real fellowship without judgmental attitudes is rare, and where loneliness is common. Christianity is not international: it is supranational. It is a family that is bigger and broader than any of the other solidarities to which we belong.¹⁰

D. Generosity to the poor

Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius). So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul...And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark. (11:27–30; 12:25)

The church in Antioch is planted by refugees, nurtured by gifted teachers, enriched by cultural diversity and now is called upon by a prophet to give aid in a crisis. A group of prophets arrive from Jerusalem and during one of their worship services one of them stands up and announces by the Holy Spirit that a severe famine is coming over the Roman Empire. The Jerusalem church with their emphasis on circumcision and food laws might have seemed very strange to the Gentile believers in Antioch. Yet they cared enough to make a substantial collection for them. Feeling a debt of love to the mother-church, they determined that each individual would give “according to their means.” Once the money was collected, they commissioned Paul and Barnabas to take the gift as their representatives. By sending their leaders, they were communicating

their respect for their spiritual roots and the privilege they felt as Gentiles to be grafted in to the mother-stalk.

E. Authentic Worship

While they were worshiping 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 after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off (lit “released them”). (Acts 13:2–3)

Alongside their generosity and concern for the poor went a wonderful spirit of worship and prayer. There was nothing dull or perfunctory about the worship in Antioch. Their leaders took God at his word and believed if they seriously sought him with prayer and fasting, God would lead them as the Lord of his church. On this occasion God accepted their invitation, made himself known in his own voice and took the liberty to make radical changes among their leadership. Following the command is an emphatic Greek particle (*de* – “Now, then, therefore”) that is not translated. It is used with exhortations or commands to give them greater urgency — “*Now* set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” God calls the most gifted in the congregation, whose gifts and character have been proven to be “set apart” for a greater mission. As Craig Keener writes,

Just as the Seven were engaged in social ministry (6:2–5) before their evangelism ministry (6:8–15; 8:5–40), and just as the Gospel focuses on care for the poor and marginalized more than does Acts, which focuses on proclamation, so Barnabas and Saul proved themselves by caring for needy disciples before being sent on their full evangelism ministry.¹¹

This was probably a bit shocking to the congregation. It was no small thing to be open to releasing their two best leaders to go on overseas mission. They could have argued that they were needed in Antioch, or that it was too costly or dangerous to venture into that pagan world. Instead they fasted and prayed to make sure it was God’s will, then being assured they pledged their support by laying hands on them and commissioning them, releasing them from their charge in Antioch and sending them off. The voice of the Spirit coupled with confirmation of the church gives Barnabas and Saul a two-fold validation. Luke Timothy Johnson writes,

First, they are shown to be thoroughly enmeshed in the life of the local Antiochean community. It is there they have lived and taught for a year. It is there they exercise their gifts as prophets and teachers. It is within that community that they fast and worship God. And it is by that community that they are sent on their way as missionaries.¹²

I find it instructive that for years Saul had known from his encounter with God in Damascus he would be sent to the Gentiles, “to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me” (Acts 26:18). But he doesn’t venture forth until the community in which he serves confirms the call. As Stott observes, this protects against “the tendency of *individualism*, by which a Christian claims direct personal guidance by the Spirit without any reference to the church.” Second, their mission is validated by the direct intervention of the Holy Spirit that calls them and sends them out. This protects against “the tendency of *institutionalism*, by which all decision-making is done by the church without any reference to the Spirit.”¹³

The exact details of the call are not made clear. It was not unlike the call given to Abram: “Go from your country... to a land I will show you” (Gen 12:1). There is no itinerary or five-year plan. They are just called to go, and by implication they are to do what they have already been doing, preaching the gospel making disciples and establishing new churches. Up until now evangelism was the spontaneous less-systematic work of individuals. But now the task of missions will be intentional and strategic, following the lead of the Spirit coupled with wise strategies. As Paul later spoke to King Agrippa, “I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision” (Acts 26:19).

So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus. (Acts 13:4)

Antioch will take the lead sail of the kingdom, upstaging Jerusalem, as the gospel goes out from her, expanding over the whole of the Roman world. When our church in Cupertino first opened its doors, I was invited to shepherd a Bible Study in Los Altos begun by Ron Ritchie, a gifted evangelist, who had led over a dozen people to Christ. Looking back over three decades it’s interesting to see how many of our leaders came out of that Bible study—Arthur and Judy Halliday (Judy is one of our deacons); Ed and Linda Donohue (Ed became an elder); Jim Foster (our missionary to Romania); Bill Kiefer (a faithful servant who designed many of the software systems at Stanford University); James Garcia (our worship pastor); Peter and Carol Ross and their son Jim (our missionary with Vision Trust and leaders for our ministry in Liberia). How glad I am that, though I was at first reluctant, I became obedient to God’s call to come to Cupertino.

1. John Stott, *The Message of Acts*, BST (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990), 41.
2. N. T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone: Part One*, Chapters 1–12 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 7.
3. Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 13.
4. F. F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 24.
5. I am dependent on Green’s work for these observations. Michael Green, *Thirty Years that Changed the World: The Book of Acts for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 153–56.
6. Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 413.
7. Peter Walker, *In the Steps of Saint Paul: An Illustrated Guide to Paul’s Journeys* (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2011), 51.
8. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 216.
9. F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 245.
10. Green, *Thirty Years that Changed the World*, 145.
11. Craig S. Keener, *Acts, An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 2:1981.
12. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, SP5 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 225–26.
13. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 218.