
Day 329 - November 25

Christ's Church and the Apostles (30-100 CE)

First Missionary Journey

The Jerusalem Conference

Readings: *Acts 13:1-15:35*

Reflections:

- First missionary journey: In these missionary journeys of Paul we see his basic strategy. He would teach in a city, establish a core group, organize Home Churches and then move to a new city. He would not abandon these cities but would return to them to provide more training as well as write letters to provide teaching resources.
- Barnabas and Saul called: Antioch was home base for Barnabas and Saul's work. Luke records the event when God, through a prophetic work during a time of worship and fasting, calls Barnabas and Saul to a new expanded ministry. Barnabas is listed first in the names of prophets and teachers signifying his primary leadership in the group. Saul is listed last signifying his junior status. It's interesting that in time the order will reverse as the younger takes the lead. This reminds us that God often chooses the younger to lead the older, the weak to lead the strong. We should also note the importance of listening prayer, fasting and complete devotion to God in worship as a wonderful context for hearing God speak. The community of leaders places their hands on Barnabas and Saul as a sign of unity, solidarity, and the empowerment of the Spirit for the task.
- Journey begins in Cyprus: We notice that John (John Mark) is with them as a helper. He may have been a teenager at this time.
- Elymas blinded: We see the collision between the kingdom and religion in this section, particularly magical religion. This was a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet. Did this mean that he was Jewish by decent and rejected the Torah to adopt pagan practices of magic or was this Luke's way of saying that he was a false version of a prophet and miracle worker that believed he was representing God? We are not sure but from Luke's perspective, Bar-Jesus (or literally Son of Joshua) is representing the religion that must be abandoned to embrace a true relationship with God. We also see how influential religious leaders can be as Bar-Jesus or Elymas is the attendant of the proconsul, Sergius Paulus. Religious leaders gravitate to power and often like to be in close allegiance with other power structures or people of power. Jesus on the other hand teaches us to gravitate towards the powerless and humble. Paul is filled with the Spirit. We see again the importance of the Spirit to complete the will of God in our lives. His rebuke of Elymas is as direct as someone can be. He clearly

states that this magician is an operative of the enemy, the devil. Paul's rebuke also mirrors other rebukes from the Old Testament (see Genesis 32:11; Jeremiah 5:27; Proverbs 10:7 and Hosea 14:9) regarding making God's straight paths crooked or "perverting the right ways of the Lord." Paul pronounces blindness and immediately God makes him blind. God gives this false prophet as well those around him a physical manifestation of his spiritual state. He was spiritually deceived and blind and so God made him this way to make it clear to everyone that God was not with him and he should not be trusted. We should also note that the proconsul was curious and motivated to hear Paul teach and so we are reminded of how many people are spiritually hungry. Also, this is the passage where Saul officially is now known (at least in Luke's record) as Paul. From now on we will just know Saul of Tarsus as Paul the Apostle. As we move into our calling, often times our core identity is so reshaped it is almost like we are new people.

- John Mark returns: John abandons the mission and returns to Jerusalem. We don't know why but Luke states it as a simple fact.
- Paul's first recorded sermon: Similar to Peter's preaching in Pentecost, Luke records Paul's sermon to give us a clear example of Paul's message to his Jewish audience. How Paul preaches here is radically different than how he will preach to Gentiles and we must remember that great communication is always determined by the communicator's ability to connect with his or her audience. Paul's preaching is based on narrative and retelling the story. John the Baptist is referenced as apparently his reputation has spread far and wide across the extended Jewish community. Jesus' identity as God's son is clearly affirmed along with the resurrection. Old Testament prophecies are referenced. Paul also clearly contrasts the free forgiveness and grace of God and the fact that the Law is now obsolete. You can't teach the Good News of Jesus without mentioning that you don't need religion to be in right relationship with God. Here in this sermon we see the fundamental message of the early Jesus movement and we also see how natural it was for them to expand this type of preaching into biographies of Jesus' life.
- Sermon well-received: Those who are interested gather and those are the ones Paul and Barnabas work with to establish community.
- Jealousy and opposition: The buzz has worked and now the whole city shows up to hear Paul. This is one of God's strategies to get the word out about Jesus. Get an entire city talking by creating a stir and then pretty soon everyone has heard the message. The religious people, in this case Jewish, start to become abusive as we should expect and so they turn their full attention to the Gentiles. In declaring this Paul makes it clear that this was Israel's mandate. He quotes the mandate God gave Israel in Isaiah 49:6 to be a light to the Gentiles. Here we see how the Jesus movement fulfills the mandate that was originally given to Israel and in doing so has become the new Israel or the new Jerusalem as John will depict in Revelation.

- Gentiles believe: Luke notes that not only do the Gentiles believe but only those appointed to salvation. The early Christ-followers had a confidence that they didn't have to arm twist or manipulate. God had it all in control. From our point of view it looks like free choice. From God's point of view it looks like his sovereign will. This is the mystery of humanity and divinity dwelling together in time and space. Gentiles respond very positively but influential Jews ultimately turn the tide against Paul and Barnabas. Interestingly it is the high-standing women who seem to have the most influence. Throughout Luke and Acts, Luke notes how influential women can be both for good and for evil. Paul's response to these religious persecutors follows Jesus own teachings to "shake the dust from your feet" as a sign of God's judgment. Yet, because of the response of the Gentiles, the disciples are filled with joy and the Holy Spirit. There is a consistent connection between experiencing joy and being filled with the Spirit (Luke 10:21; Romans 15:13; Galatians 5:22; 1 Thessalonians 1:6).
- Mixed response in Iconium: Here we see recurrent themes: proclamation, reaction for and against, miracles, religious people start persecution, God keeps them safe, the mission must continue. We should be prepared for all of these realities if we are to fully embrace the message and mission of Jesus.
- Crippled man healed: This miracle of a crippled man being healed parallels many of Jesus' miracles.
- Barnabas and Paul worshipped: This demonstration of God's power causes people to respond out of their religious paradigm. They want to hail Paul and Barnabas as gods. How easy it is for us to attribute God's working to people rather than give credit to God. We see again the impact of a religious mindset getting in the way of true relationship with God. Paul does all he can to get the people focused on God as the one true God who meets all their needs. Yet, the religious mindset of the people kept many of them from grasping the truth.
- Paul stoned: As soon as the Jews show up, this worship of Paul turns to wanting to stone him. This is an important reminder. Religious people want to put leaders on a pedestal until they find fault with those leaders and then they will want to stone the leaders. Beware of being lifted up as someone special. People as pedestals are sitting ducks. Paul actually is stoned and looks dead but somehow God keeps him alive. Sometimes God rescues us from being hurt and sometimes he just gives us the grace to go through it.
- Strengthening the churches: Paul goes back through the cities he established home churches in and encourages them. His key message, "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God." No kidding. Paul now knows the people well enough to appoint elders and commissions them with prayer and fasting. We see again the connection between empowerment (by the Spirit) and prayer and fasting.
- Report to church in Antioch: Paul reports all God is doing and they decide to camp out for awhile in Antioch. No doubt it felt good to be home!
- The Jerusalem conference: We see here in this conference the first clear discussion around an issue that will remain with the Jesus movement for at least a generation. The issue is

about what role the Jewish religion and traditions now play in the Jesus movement. Some want everyone to become fully Jewish as a part of becoming a Christ-follower. This meant circumcision for men. The Jews had a long history of remaining distinct and these social boundary markers were key to their sense of identity. The conference in Jerusalem models for us how decisions should be made. We see collaboration and mutual submission with the ultimate goal of discerning God's mind. Rather than Peter or Paul having the final word, it is actually James, the half brother of Jesus who has the final word. Here we see how Christ leads his community, not through one dictatorial leader but through a mutually submitted community of leaders seeking his voice.

- **Judaizers prompt meeting:** Here is the issue. Some religious Christians were teaching that unless a man was circumcised and obeyed the Torah he could not be saved. Religion always says you are saved because of trusting in Jesus and....fill in the blank. Religion wants to add to the truth about Jesus. You have to do this ritual. You have to join this particular organization. We see that believing in Jesus was all held within their larger religious mindset rather than abandoning religion to follow Jesus alone. Some were still considering themselves as Pharisees.
- **Gentile evangelism recounted:** Peter gets it started by pointing out that God gave his Spirit to the Gentiles. This was the ultimate validation of God's acceptance. Paul and Barnabas back up what Peter says by sharing their own experiences.
- **James suggests a resolution:** James the half brother of Jesus, now a Christ-follower with strong ties to Judaism and the key leader in Jerusalem. He suggests that rather than forcing the Gentiles to be circumcised and keep the Torah that they should simply ask them to abstain from participation in worship in the Roman Temples and religious system. This means abstaining from food sacrificed to idols, having sex with temple prostitutes (sexual immorality) and drinking blood. Apparently these key issues were the hallmark distinctions and he felt this was a good compromise for those that were Jewish Christians. We will see later that Paul does not even feel that Christians need to consistently avoid meat sacrificed to idols (see Corinthians) but at this point, this was the compromise.
- **Letter sent to the Gentiles:** Luke records the letter (again he is careful about noting his sources) and we see in the letter that the guidelines are not outlined as strict rules to be obeyed but strongly suggested guidelines. It is good to be organized without being religious and obsessed with strict enforcement of rules.
- **Gentiles rejoice:** Judas and Silas are the message carriers and Luke notes that they were prophets. Not only did they bring the Gentiles a letter but also were free to speak God's heart to them as they travelled to the churches. Here we see the first example of the use of shared written teaching as well as Spirit led teaching and encouragement. This community approach to discerning the heart of God pays off as the larger Christ-following community experiences unity, peace and growth.



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