

THE BOOK OF ACTS

Lesson 29, Chapter 13

As we concluded Acts chapter 12 last week, the focus that had been mainly on Peter and the goings-on in the Holy Land now shift to Paul and to the foreign lands that were home to the majority of Jews. We have passed a new milestone in that the Lord has specifically instructed the members of The Way, consisting almost 100% of Jews up to now, to take the Gospel to the gentiles. In no way, of course, did this mean that evangelizing Jews was to diminish or come to an end. It is only that a second front has been opened to bring the promise of blessings contained in Abraham's Covenant to the whole world, regardless of race, ethnicity, or nationality.

When we closed Acts 12 we found Paul and Barnabas back in Jerusalem, bringing with them money to help the Believers in Jerusalem get through a famine that had broken out throughout the Roman Empire. This money was the result of charitable generosity from the Believing Jews and gentiles in Antioch, Syria.

Let's read Acts chapter 13.

READ ACTS CHAPTER 13 all

Now back in Antioch, we are told that the Believing community there was served by prophets and teachers and among these were Barnabas, Paul, a fellow called ***Shi'mon Niger***, Lucius of Cyrene and Manaen who had some undefined kind of relationship with Herod Agrippa (Herod Agrippa had just recently died).

A name not mentioned is John Mark among these teachers and prophets even though the ending verse of chapter 12 says he accompanied Paul and Barnabas. This is because John Mark is really just a bit player; he is considered as a servant or attendant and so wouldn't be mentioned as among the teachers or prophets. We know what teachers do, but in this context what would be the purpose of a prophet? It seems that in this era prophets and teachers were nearly the same thing. It is probable that a prophet was merely a more qualified teacher. In the New Testament, most references to prophesying are really about speaking God's written Word (quoting the Hebrew Bible). About the only discernable difference between the two terms seems to be that teachers were usually part of the local community and taught regularly; while prophets tended to be itinerant and would wander from Synagogue to Synagogue offering their insights. Both were held in high regard.

Among these teachers and prophets in Antioch we recognize Paul and Barnabas' names, but the others we've not been introduced to before. Since niger is Latin for black, apparently ***Shi'mon*** was a black skinned man, but we don't know where he is from. Lucius is from Cyrene, today known as Libya. We don't know whether Manaen is originally from Antioch or he too has come from elsewhere. Just know that Manaean is the Greek form of the Hebrew

name **Menachem**. All of these men were Jewish Believers.

Verse 2 explains that as they were worshipping and fasting together, the Holy Spirit told them that it was time to anoint Paul and Barnabas for the specific ministry that the Lord had previously decided for them: taking the Gospel to the gentiles. In other words, there was nothing new that happened here. While I can't be sure, I believe that what is being described as the "Holy Spirit telling them" is not a vision or a visitation or something audible but rather it is the same thing that modern Believers receive especially during prayer as something just comes into our minds that we instinctively know is from God. Today it is common to say "The Lord told me" thus and so. But in Acts, where the Holy Spirit is emphasized, the more common way of saying the same thing was to attribute the thought or unction to the Holy Spirit.

It is also interesting that we often see worship or prayer accompanied with fasting as we do in this passage. Just what form the fasting took is not clear. Some scholars believe that the word "fast" meant it just as we think of it today: we refrain from eating food for some predetermined amount of time. Other scholars think that while it can mean that, it also can mean denying oneself other things for a brief time. That is, fasting didn't always have to do with food. In any case fasting as part of worship or prayer was usual and customary in that era, and it seems to have made the worshippers more able to hear and respond to the Holy Spirit. I have talked with many Believers who tell me that indeed fasting with prayer does seem to heighten their sensitivity towards God; I have generally found this to be personally true as well. Hilary Le Cornu points out that in the anonymous Jewish work titled the Apocalypse of Elijah we get a good insight as to how folks of that era viewed the expected effects of fasting, for there it states:

"A pure fast.....releases sin. It heals diseases. It casts out demons. It is effective up to the throne of God for an ointment and for a release of sin by means of pure prayer".

Extreme fasting (again meaning denial of food and perhaps other things as well for extended periods of time) was seen by especially pious people as a means to obtain a divine vision that they sought. I don't recommend such an approach for both health and spiritual reasons. But fasting was always to be accompanied with intense prayer or it served no spiritual purpose; and with that I agree wholeheartedly.

It is also instructive that up to now we've mostly seen prophets and teachers and Yeshua's disciples receiving their divine marching orders by means of an oracle from an angel, or sometimes from God Himself, and at other times from Yeshua. But now it is the **Ruach HaKodesh** that is credited.

I've often stated that there is much evidence to heavily imply that Yeshua, John, and perhaps some others of the earliest disciples of Yeshua had much interaction with the Essenes of Qumran. Many of the terms and thoughts expressed in some of the Essenes' documents (the Dead Sea Scrolls) are mirrored in the words of Christ and other New Testament writers. And if not said precisely in their terms, often the Essenes' unique theological concepts are something that we'll find similarly explained in the New Testament. Here is one such example concerning Essene theology about the Holy Spirit as found in the Dead Sea Scrolls document

that is labeled 1QH20.

“And I, the Instructor, have known you, my God, through the Spirit which you gave in me, and I have listened loyally to your wonderful secrets through your Holy Spirit. You have opened within me knowledge of the mystery of your wisdom, and the source of your power.....”

This was written several years prior to the birth of Messiah Yeshua; so what we have here is strong evidence that these devout men living in the desert outpost of Qumran, away from institutional Judaism, separated from the corrupt Temple and Priesthood, had already begun to realize the critical importance of the work of God’s Holy Spirit. What is also fascinating is the concept of the working of the Spirit **within** a man, as opposed to only being **upon** a man, which up to now had been the way the Holy Spirit operated. Yet I’m also sure they had no idea just how critical the presence and role of the Holy Spirit would soon be in God’s plan of redemption once the Messiah appeared and then left.

Starting in verse 4 (and going through Acts 14:26) we are told about Paul’s first four missionary journeys. But he and Barnabas did not go until the Believing leadership in Antioch anointed them in prayer and laid hands on them. This served to essentially officially commission them and to signify agreement with, and recognition of, the Antioch congregation’s leadership to Paul’s and Barnabas’ mission to the gentiles. Thus we see something we need to keep in mind: Paul’s missionary journeys were sanctioned and supported by the congregation of Believers in Antioch; not by the leadership and congregation of Believers in Jerusalem of which Peter and James were the leaders.

So Sha’ul and Bar-Nabba went to the local sea port of Antioch, called Seleucia Peiria, and from there sailed to the Mediterranean island of Cyprus. Cyprus was only about 60 miles by sea from Seleucia, so it wouldn’t have taken long. However, since the progress of these ships was dictated by wind and weather, each time a journey was undertaken the time of travel varied. This would be a good time to mention that whether by sea or by land, there was a season for travel and a season to avoid travel if possible. Generally speaking it was desirable to travel and to ship goods between the end of May and the middle of September (in modern calendar terms). But from mid-September to mid November, and then from mid-March to the end of May the weather could be severe and quickly changeable; so while travel and shipping didn’t entirely cease, it was best to avoid these periods if at all possible because the risks greatly increased. We should keep this in mind as we hear of Paul’s journeys and it may give us a clue as to the times of year he was traveling.

Further, there were no such things as ships that were purely commercial passenger vessels. Rather all ships were cargo carriers, and so when a person booked passage on a ship, they didn’t have a nice cabin or have hot meals served to them. So depending on the circumstances, one could find themselves sleeping on the deck, or laying on top of the cargo in the hold. If there were any kind of creature comforts, those belonged to the ship’s crew. Usually a passenger had to bring their own food and provisions if they expected to eat. Flexibility in travel plans was important because the route could change in a moment’s notice if there was a business opportunity to take advantage of, or wind or weather forced a change.

However as uncomfortable and risky as sea travel was for passengers, it was also an inexpensive mode of transportation. Thus Paul and Barnabas didn't need too much in the way of funds from the Antioch congregation to pay for their sea travel on their mission trips.

Verse 5 explains a basic format for where it is that Paul and Barnabas proclaimed the Good News; they went to the local Synagogues. Naturally. There were no such things as "churches" (in the standard way we think of them), just as there were no such people as "Christians" in the sense of a movement of gentile Jesus worshippers that were separate and apart from Jews and The Way. The first place they went upon reaching Cyprus was Salamis. No doubt Barnabas was leading the way because Cyprus was his home. Here we have mention of John Mark and his role as a "helper". John Mark was a cousin of Barnabas.

It is often said by Bible Commentators that the reason that Paul always first went to Synagogues was to fulfill Yeshua's instruction to His disciples of "First to the Jews....then to the Greeks". While I can't entirely discount this, I doubt this was really on Paul's mind. After all, Yeshua had told him that he was to be the emissary of the Good News to the gentiles, and then he (and Barnabas) were commissioned in Antioch and sent off to fulfill that particular mission. He went to the Synagogues because the first gentiles he approached were already God-fearers (they were halfway there, so to speak), and out in the Diaspora there was overall less resistance to the idea of gentiles coming into Synagogues to worship with Jews. A traditional day of communal gathering and worship on Shabbat had been established and it was well known; and it was common that visitors and itinerant prophets would come to the Synagogues to teach or speak. In other words, there was a ready-made organization and system that Paul could tap in to. And remember: The Way was merely another sect of Judaism, and there was no stated goal (not even by Paul) of someday setting up non-Jewish houses of worship for gentiles, nor especially was there a goal of severing worship of Yeshua away from Judaism as a distinct new religion. But more, the Diaspora Jews were generally Hellenists. That is, they were Greek speakers who lived a Greek lifestyle. Greek society loved to hear and debate new ideas, so they weren't shy about allowing various speakers into their Synagogues. This is why Paul and Barnabas were usually welcomed, even if at times after being heard they were chased out of town.

And by the way; it is interesting to note that Synagogues were more at home in foreign lands than they were in the Holy Land. The oldest Synagogues unearthed have been found in places like Macedonia and Italy. And the reason for this is obvious: the Synagogue was invented and created by Diaspora Jews for use by Diaspora Jews in their foreign nations. They had existed in a very similar form to what Paul was visiting for more than 3 centuries. So Synagogues were merely a familiar and accepted part of the landscape to gentiles even if most had never set foot in one of them.

After spending some unstated amount of time in Salamis, they then journeyed a little over 50 miles to the southwest coast (still on Cyprus) and the city of Paphos. Here they had a run-in with a sorcerer named Elymas. This is the Greek name for Bar-Yeshua (which means son of Yeshua). This is in no way referring to the Messiah nor is it mocking Him. Yeshua was among the most common names for Jewish males at this time. Paphos was no doubt selected because it was the administrative governing center for Cyprus. Thus we hear that this Jewish

sorcerer Bar-Yeshua was associated with the Roman proconsul Sergio Paulus who is said to be an intelligent man. It was common for government leaders to have seers and diviners in their employ as Romans were a very superstitious people. What is also notable is this Elymas is a Jewish magician; something that is staunchly prohibited in the Torah of Moses, with the punishment for practicing magic being death.

The gentile Roman proconsul was interested in hearing Paul's message about the God of Israel; but the Jewish magician opposed it. So the zealous and outspoken Paul lit into the magician telling him that he was the son of the devil and that since he was opposing the Lord a curse of God would be laid upon him. Paul's tirade was specifically because this magician was a Jew and should have known better than to practice this forbidden trade. Immediately the sorcerer lost his eyesight and had to be led around by his hand. Notice how similar this is to what happened to Paul on the road to Damascus. The early Church Father Venerable Bede says of this that ***"Paul, remembering his own case, knew that by the darkening of the eyes, the mind's darkness might be restored to light"***.

It seems as though Paul calling Bar-Yeshua "son of the devil" is very likely one of those hidden Hebraisms in the New Testament that we have talked about. That is, this is a Hebrew expression that is masked because of its translation into Greek (and from there into English). Remember who Paul is addressing: a JEWISH magician. So Paul probably is calling him a known and familiar Hebrew epithet: ***Ben Belial***. Even in Hebrew ***Belial*** carries an ambiguous meaning; however it revolves around the concept of being worthless and wicked. So sometimes ***Ben Belial*** is translated in English as son of worthlessness. It is easy to see then how in Greek it would be translated as ***huios diabolos***. Most literally this Greek phrase translates to "son of slandering" or "son of siding with evil". It is common in translation that one language has no direct equivalent in another language, so you have to choose something that is pretty close but likely does not express the precise meaning.

The Roman governor was impressed by what Paul seemed to have done to Elymas and he was now all ears. He listened intently to Paul's message and we're told that he believed because the message was perhaps the most profound thing he had ever heard. Yet what he believed in and exactly the level at which he accepted it is ambiguous. That is, was it the Gospel that he heard, or was it more about the God of Israel in general? And while he believed what he heard, did this amount to believing that Paul was saying the truth, or was it a saving belief? We don't know. We don't hear anything about the Holy Spirit coming upon the governor nor an instruction to be baptized. So I doubt that this meant that the Roman governor accepted Christ as his Lord and Savior.

After some indeterminate amount of time that the three remained on Cyprus, at some point they found a ship to take them to the Asia Minor coast of Pamphylia and the city of Perga. Perga was the major metropolitan city of the region. It was there that John Mark left Paul and Barnabas and returned to Jerusalem. No reason is given for his leaving. But later in Acts we hear that Paul was pretty unhappy with John Mark for leaving them and regarded it as abandonment. So there were some underlying problems that had developed between John and Paul (remember, John and Barnabas were family, so no doubt this dust-up also caused friction between Barnabas and Paul).

Verse 14 explains that from Perga Paul and Barnabas went to Pisidian Antioch. And, as usual, they waited for Shabbat and then went to the local Synagogue. This is a different Antioch than the one in Syria. In fact, there are 15 or 16 known places called Antioch, because they were all named in honor of Antiochus Epiphanies. We are told that they had to cross over a mountain range to get there, so no doubt they timed their trip to avoid the winter snows and spring downpours. The distance between Perga and Antioch of Pisidia was over 125 miles, so the travel time would be about a week in decent weather.

As with everywhere they've gone thus far, there is a Jewish community in Antioch of Pisidia. It isn't that nearly every town in the Roman Empire had a Jewish community; it is that Paul and Barnabas intentionally targeted those cities and towns with a sufficient number of Jews in them that could support a Synagogue. It was typical procedure on Shabbat that the Torah Scroll would be removed from its Ark, and then rolled out and read. Notice how verse 15 says that "after the reading of the Law and the Prophets..." The Law is synonymous with the term The Torah. So after reading the weekly Torah Portion (that is, a section of Genesis through Deuteronomy), then next is the reading of the **Haftarah**, which is a series of Scripture readings from the Prophets. The word **Haftarah** may sound like it is connected to the word Torah, but it isn't. The word means something like "parting" or "taking leave". No one knows exactly when this Tradition of meeting on Sabbath in Synagogues began, nor when the customary service of reading a portion of the Torah followed by a reading from the Prophets originated. But what we do know is that it happened before New Testament times because we're reading about it right here in Acts 13 verses 14 & 15.

It was also customary that following the two readings of Scripture, a short comment would be made by either the Synagogue President or later in Synagogue development, the Rabbi. Often the floor was opened to the congregation to see if someone had something they wanted to say. The readings would have been in Greek, taken from the Greek Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible). During Paul's era, most Synagogues didn't have assigned teachers per se. There might be a few different men who were regularly called on to teach. But even then the teachings following the readings weren't exegetical Scripture study; rather they more resembled a moral teaching on some aspect of Jewish life. Remember: Judaism revolved then, as it does now, around **Halakhah**; Jewish Law. And Jewish Law is a fusion of the Torah of Moses, Traditions, and customs. So Scripture study as we know it in Seed of Abraham Torah Class wasn't the usual mode at Synagogue. When it did occur it took place at a **Beit Midrash**, which was a house of study.

So those who presided over this Synagogue in Antioch then offered for Paul and/or Barnabas to offer a word of encouragement to the congregation. Paul responded by going to the raised platform, the **Bema**, and he began to speak. His opening words are revealing: he addresses his audience as 1) men of Israel (**Israelim**) and 2) God-fearers. Men of Israel mean Hebrews; Jews. God-fearers mean gentiles who worship the God of Israel, but they have not converted to becoming a Jew. So here is proof that at this particular Synagogue, gentiles were allowed to join the Jews and apparently there were no serious issues of ritual purity that concerned the Jewish congregation. This was not so in all the Synagogues of the Roman Empire, and it was the opposite case in the Holy Land and especially in Jerusalem. This reality will play a major role in what happens at the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15. Paul now goes into a speech that

brings back memories of the speech that the martyr Stephen gave in his defense before the Sanhedrin. It is essentially a historical survey of Israel's past to make a point.

Paul begins with the first of Israel's Patriarchs, Abraham, because upon God's election of Abraham we have the birth of the Hebrew people. A series of important theological points is made that truly ought to be labeled Christianity 101. These are the basics for understanding the history of our faith; and so when one realizes that Abraham was the root and that he was also the first Hebrew, then we have every justification we need to defend the definition of our faith as truly and accurately a "Hebrew Roots" faith.

When Paul says that God made the people "great" when living in Egypt, he means "great" in the sense of "many", not of merit. I want to pause for a moment and have you hear what the editor of the Complete Jewish Bible, David Stern, says about the concept of God choosing the Hebrew people out of all the other people on this planet, to be set apart for Himself. Because God "choosing" one over the other is often taken as a matter of pride, when it should be the opposite.

"While it is possible that some Jews like some Christians, become proud to be chosen, I think many find it embarrassing and wish like Tevye in "Fiddler on the Roof" that God "would choose somebody else for a change". But only if I take chosenness to imply superiority do I become either embarrassed or proud. The right attitude, the one taken by Sha'ul and by the writers of the Tanakh, is that Israel's election by God is not predicated on any special quality in Israel but entirely on God's grace, rightly defined as God's undeserved favor. Being aware of this favor as undeserved should make us humble without embarrassing us".

In verse 17 when we see Paul speak of God leading Israel out of the land (of Egypt) "with an out-stretched arm", it means that God rescued Israel with judgment against those who were hindering His people. And then after delivering His people from bondage God cared for them out in the desert for 40 years, after which He destroyed 7 nations in Canaan to pave the way for Israel to inherit the land the 7 nations had inhabited (the list of these nations can be found in Deuteronomy 7). The land of Canaan was not a gift of conquest from God to the Israelites; it was a gift of inheritance. Why an inheritance? Why not as a spoil of war? Because God already owned the land; He had hundreds of years earlier promised to give it to Abraham; it became Abraham's land the instant God promised it. All that remained was for Abraham's descendants to possess it. So the Lord merely evicted the unlawful squatters, and then turned over to the rightful inheritors (Israel) that which He had long ago bequeathed to them. For God is a Father to His children, Israel and that's what fathers do.

Verse 20 says that the process of Israel living in Egypt and then God rescuing them and taking them through the desert and dispossessing the Canaanite squatters took 450 years. This number is given in round terms; it is not to be taken as precise. After that the Lord gave Israel Judges (***shofetim***) to rule over them. The age of the Judges lasted through Samuel who was part Judge, part prophet. But the people of Israel wanted a king like their gentile neighbors, so God gave them Saul, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. Let's take another brief pause to make an interesting connection. In Genesis 45, which is part of the story about Joseph and his

brothers coming to Egypt to buy grain from him, we read about how Joseph gave his little brother Benjamin 5 times as much food, clothing and silver as he gave to his other brothers. In Egypt 5 times the regular portion was the royal portion. But why would Joseph give the royal portion to Benjamin? Is it because they had the same mother? Is it because Benjamin is the only brother not guilty of selling Joseph in to slavery? It is certainly not because Benjamin would become the inheritor of the nation of Israel; that would turn out to be an older brother, Judah. Whatever was Joseph's true motive at the time, in the end it is because this was prophetic of Saul of the tribe of Benjamin becoming the first king (the first royalty) of Israel.

But then comes an important turning point: after 40 years God removes Saul and turns the throne over to David of the tribe of Judah. This now sets the stage for David's messianic descendant who would deliver Israel all over again. King David was chosen because he will do what God wants him to do, and this is because David was a man after God's own heart. Remember: in the Bible any reference to the heart is not about emotions or warm feelings. In that day and age, the heart organ (the **lev**) is where the ancients believed that our thought processes (our mind) existed; they didn't know then that it occurred in the brain. So God is saying that David is a man after God's own mind. That is, David wants what God wants.

Then in verse 23 the messianic promise is fulfilled. God promised David that his bloodline would never end and we read of that promise in a number of places in the Bible but the first place it is recorded is in 2nd Samuel 7.

2Samuel 7:9-16 CJB

⁹ I have been with you wherever you went; I have destroyed all your enemies ahead of you; and I am making your reputation great, like the reputations of the greatest people on earth.

¹⁰ I will assign a place to my people Isra'el; I will plant them there, so that they can live in their own place without being disturbed any more. The wicked will no longer oppress them, as they did at the beginning,

¹¹ and as they did from the time I ordered judges to be over my people Isra'el; instead, I will give you rest from all your enemies. "Moreover, ADONAI tells you that ADONAI will make you a house.

¹² When your days come to an end and you sleep with your ancestors, I will establish one of your descendants to succeed you, one of your own flesh and blood; and I will set up his rulership.

¹³ He will build a house for my name, and I will establish his royal throne forever.

¹⁴ I will be a father for him, and he will be a son for me. If he does something wrong, I will punish him with a rod and blows, just as everyone gets punished;

¹⁵ nevertheless, my grace will not leave him, as I took it away from Sha'ul, whom I

removed from before you.

¹⁶ Thus your house and your kingdom will be made secure forever before you; your throne will be set up forever."

Then Paul says, and in keeping with the promise to make David's throne secure forever God has brought to Israel the descendant from David who will sit on that throne forever and His name is Yeshua.

My daily prayer is that Yeshua will come back very soon to occupy that throne of David, forever. We'll continue with Acts 13 next week.