

ACTS
The Blessings, Burdens and Blunders of Missionaries
Acts 13:4-13

In Acts 13, we have the first missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas. These two men were separated by God the Holy Spirit for the special work of reaching the Gentiles with the gospel of grace.

“And 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” (Acts 13:2, 3).

Actually, our heritage as Gentile Christians dates back to the faithfulness of Paul and Barnabas to go with the gospel of Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth.

Paul and Barnabas were the first official missionaries, called by God and sent out by the local church at Antioch. What is a missionary? Did you know that the terms “mission” and “missionary” are not found anywhere in the Bible? “Mission” comes from the Latin word missio which means “to send.” Therefore, a missionary is “one who is sent” and is equivalent to the Greek word “apostle” which means “a sent one.” Missions has to do with sending (sending the gospel, people, money and prayers), but has special emphasis upon sending people to spread the gospel. Every Christian is to be a witness for Christ and fulfill the Great Commission however he can wherever he is, but God gives some a special call to full-time Christian work which includes becoming a home or foreign missionary. A missionary, then, is one sent out to proclaim the message of Christ.

Dick Hillis of Overseas Crusades Mission said, “Missionaries are those who never get accustomed to the thought of Christless feet on the way to a godless eternity.”

Acts 13 is filled with missionary principles that we should apply to our twentieth century Christian scene, for God has inspired methods as well as doctrine. If this message seems somewhat fragmented, it is because I will at times leave the main argument of the passage to point out crucial missionary principles.

MISSION OF MISSIONARIES (Acts 13:4!5)

Leading of the Spirit (13:4)

“So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, . . . “ -- The local church at Antioch did not give Barnabas and Paul their commission. The local church simply acknowledged God’s calling of these two missionaries, identified themselves with them by the laying on of hands, and sent them on their way with the prayer and financial support of the whole body of believers at Antioch. The commission to Barnabas and Paul was from God, and the Holy Spirit sent them out, but all this was done with the blessing of the local church. They were sent out by the Spirit which indicates that no man can be successful in full-time Christian work unless the Holy Spirit calls, commissions and sends him out. When the Holy Spirit does this, He always gets His missionaries to the field of service to which He has called them, and blesses their efforts.

Men cannot call and send missionaries, evangelists or ministers. Theological seminaries and Bible schools cannot call and commission a missionary, evangelist or minister. They can train those who are called, but they cannot force the call of God. To be successful in the full-time work of the Lord, one must be called of God, separated by the Holy Spirit, commissioned and ordained by God unto the work He has called that person to do.

Each of us should pray diligently that God would call us into full-time Christian work and be ready to go if He calls us. We should pray that He would call our children into His service. We must never push, force or harangue our

children to be missionaries, evangelists and ministers, for that will turn them off to full-time Christian work and maybe to all of Christianity. We should, however, pray that God would call our children so they will have the inner conviction that God has called them and they have not been coerced or duped in some emotional meeting.

“. . . they went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus.” -- Seleucia was the seaport for Antioch, which was about five miles from the city. They departed from Seleucia to Cyprus. Why Cyprus? God had given the general, broad plan that the Gentiles were to be reached in mass, but God did not give the particulars of this plan. As far as we know, the Spirit did not tell them to go to Cyprus. The Spirit told them to move out, but the missionaries, while praying and using common sense, decided where to go. When they prayed and thought about the missionary plan, it seemed logical to start in Cyprus since Barnabas and others at Antioch had so many natural contacts on the island of Cyprus. These missionaries went forth in great confidence, believing that God was in the choice of going to Cyprus, and that He would bless their efforts. This is a beautiful picture of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility at work. God called and sent the missionaries out, promising them blessing, and the missionaries prayed and went where they felt they had natural contacts, trusting God for blessing.

Proclaiming of the Word (13:5)

“And when they had reached Salamis, they began to proclaim the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. . . .” -- When they came to the city of Salamis on Cyprus, they went immediately to the synagogue to preach to the Jews. Why? They were the most natural contacts of all because they did have the Old Testament. Furthermore, there were many Gentile proselytes and God-fearers in the synagogue who would be sympathetic to the gospel of Christ. The main reason, however, they went to the synagogue was that God said the gospel should be preached to the Jew first. “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Romans 1:16).

What does a missionary do? He may be called upon to do many things in the line of duty, but his primary task is “to proclaim the Word of God.” His first obligation is to speak to men about Jesus Christ. A missionary goes and spreads the gospel of Christ to foreign lands or places which are barren to the gospel or relatively untouched for Christ. Did you know there are about 2.7 billion people in this world at this hour who have really never had an opportunity to hear the gospel of Christ in a meaningful way? Over half the world knows nothing of Christ. We must pray that God will raise up laborers for the harvest. Also our local church must send out missionaries who are spreading the gospel and who are committed to establishing indigenous local churches in foreign lands. God has given us the command.

“And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, ‘All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age’” (Matt. 28:18-20).

We must pay the price to see the Great Commission accomplished in our generation.

Many years ago there was a great missionary rally in the Royal Albert Hall in London, England, and a clergyman turned to the Duke of Wellington (the “Iron Duke,” whose armies had defeated Napoleon) and asked, “My lord Duke, do you believe in missions?” “What are your marching orders?” asked the Duke. “Of course, the Bible says to go into all the world,” answered the clergyman. “Then you have nothing to say about it. As a soldier, you are to obey orders.”

“. . . and they also had John as their helper.” -- John Mark, the son of a wealthy Christian woman, Mary, and the nephew of Barnabas, was taken on as an intern on the first missionary journey. John Mark was not commanded by the Lord to go with them, but Barnabas and Paul decided to take him to see whether he had the stuff to be a missionary. John Mark was given on-the-job training to see whether he had the spiritual gifts for a missionary. Nowhere do we read that the Holy Spirit commanded them to take John Mark along, but it was reasonable and logical to give this young man some experience in missionary work.

OPPOSITION TO MISSIONARIES (Acts 13:6-8)

Satanic Attack (13:6)

“And when they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, . . . “ -- Barnabas and Paul were chosen vessels. They were the very best Christian missionaries of that day. They were well battle-tested veterans and were God's best for the work of the ministry. Barnabas and Paul went across the whole island of Cyprus to Paphos, the capital city. We are not told anything about what happened between the cities of Salamis and Paphos, but we can assume that these men encountered some success in their preaching, since local churches were established all through Cyprus. It probably took three or four months before they came to Paphos.

Notice how it says “they had gone .” It appears that the New Testament pattern is the sending out of a team of two or three or more missionaries to the same place. Barnabas and Paul, with Mark, formed the first team and others were added to the team later. When missionaries are sent out in teams, they can encourage, exhort and uphold one another. This is a very practical way to deal with the discouragement, depression and disillusionment that comes with missionary work.

Another New Testament principle of missions is that the missionaries went to the cities, the cultural and population centers, to preach and establish a local church. The indigenous church in the city then began to reach the country area around the city.

“. . . they found a certain magician, . . . “ -- When the missionaries came to Paphos, the capital city, they encountered a Jewish magician. He claimed to be part of the Magi, who not only claimed great skills in alchemy and astrology, but who also claimed great supernatural powers through witchcraft. Magicians were men who dealt with evil spirits and demons. These missionaries, right off, came into direct contact with Satanic opposition, for Satan was the power behind Bar-Jesus, or Elymas. The enemy of the gospel is always an unseen enemy, for Christians struggle against the very powers of darkness. “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world-forces of the darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:12). Elymas was Satan’s man. Bar-Jesus was the best specimen hell could produce.

“. . . a Jewish false prophet whose name was Bar-Jesus,” -- This man was a Jew and a false prophet. He took the Greek name for himself, Elymas, which means “magician.” He also took the Hebrew name which was Bar-Jesus. This gives us a hint of what this man was doing. Bar-Jesus means “the son of Jesus.” In the Hebrew culture, to call yourself the son of someone was to designate yourself his follower. This man was claiming to be a follower of Jesus, but what he taught was absolutely contrary to what Jesus taught. Elymas had probably heard about Christ through the grapevine and knew bits and pieces of His teachings. So he thought he would throw in some teachings of Jesus with his Hebrew background, mixing it with the alchemy, astrology and witchcraft of the Magi. Elymas had some bits of truth about Jesus mixed with a whole lot of error; yet he claimed to be a follower of Christ. He was the first real cultist, who took the name Christian but held to unchristian teaching.

Today we have cults such as the Mormons, Jehovah Witnesses, Unitarians, Unity, Christian Science, Armstrongism, Spiritism, Rosicrucianism, Bahaimism and many others who seize upon the name of Jesus, claim the name of Christianity and yet teach unchristian and unbiblical doctrine. They have mixed much error with a little truth and are cults because they deny the fundamentals of the Christian faith.

The age we are living in is the age of the cults and all of them are false and Satanically inspired. It is common today to hear of Astrology, I Ching, Edgar Cayce and A.R.E., Spiritualism, Witchcraft, Satanism, Scientology, Hare Krishna, Transcendental Meditation, Sun Myung Moonism, and many others. We live in an age when the forces of hell will openly challenge the forces of God. It is frightening, but exciting, since it will give us an opportunity to see God work for Christians in supernatural ways to put down the forces of evil.

Sovereign Preparation (13:7)

“ . . . who was with the proconsul, . . . “ -- Elymas was the proconsul’s personal sorcerer, for it was common for men in government to keep a sorcerer to tell them whether the gods favored their actions. Apparently Elymas had tremendous influence over the proconsul.

“ . . . Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence.” -- Sergius Paulus was the Roman deputy, the governor of the island of Cyprus. He was prudent, wise, cautious and circumspect. The governor of Cyprus was a carefully chosen man -- the highest and best type the natural world had to offer. Sergius Paulus probably was an honorable ruler and a brilliant scholar. His loyalty to Rome was unquestioned and he was known for honest and fair dealings with his subjects. He was the zenith of human achievement. He was the very best specimen the natural world could offer. His citizenship, character and conduct were beyond reproach according to accepted worldly standards of that day. He had position, possessions and the praise of men. Humanly he had everything, but he lacked one thing -- soul contentment. He was a searcher of truth, but had not found the truth that would lead to peace of mind and give assurance about life after death. Sergius Paulus had all the qualities which are supposed to make people happy, but he was still searching for the truth that brings rest and peace to a troubled soul.

“This man summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God.” -- The Holy Spirit was operating in a marvelous way. Paul and Barnabas had no idea that they would be able to have a hearing before the governor. However, Sergius Paulus was prepared by the Holy Spirit to hear the gospel and he sent for the missionaries. We can never anticipate how the Holy Spirit is going to work things out.

Sergius Paulus must have known all the Greek and Roman philosophies and been acquainted with the mystery religions of that day, but none of them solved his problem of the heart. Had he reached a state of satisfaction through these philosophies and religions, he would not have hungered for something else. These missionaries appeared before the governor and declared to him “the word of God.” They did not tell the governor stories or jokes or do magic tricks as did Elymas, but they preached the Word of God.

Silencing the Truth (13:8)

“But Elymas the magician (for thus his name is translated) was opposing them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith.” -- This is Satanic opposition. Elymas had the governor under his influence, but he knew these missionaries were a threat to him and that his days were numbered if Sergius Paulus followed this Jesus of Nazareth. Elymas did everything he could to keep the governor from believing in Christ.

The church today is still in a battle for the minds and souls of men. The church has always faced, and will always face, Satanic opposition when the gospel is preached, for it is penetrating into Satan's kingdom of darkness. The enemies of the gospel try to keep the gospel away from people, and if they cannot keep it away, they try through ridicule and social pressure, to keep people from committing their lives to Christ. Satanic opposition is real, but God is greater than Satan and He will push back the forces of darkness.

CONFRONTATION BY MISSIONARIES (Acts ,13:9-12)

Scathing Denunciation (13:9, 10)

“But Saul, who was also known as Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, fixed his gaze upon him, . . .” -- Here we have a confrontation between the forces of hell and the forces of heaven. Let me set the stage. Paul and Barnabas were the best specimens God could set forth to be the bearers of the good news of Christ. Elymas was the best specimen Satan could offer to oppose the gospel of Christ. Sergi us Paulus was the best specimen the world could offer and his soul hung in the balance between heaven and hell. Paul, being filled with the Holy Spirit, felt constrained to sharply rebuke Elymas, who was filled with Satan. This confrontation was like a shoot out at high noon. It was a head to head, face to face, eyeball to eyeball confrontation. They were about to storm the trenches and do hand to hand combat. To say the least, this was a tense moment.

Only one filled with the Holy Spirit is able to give this kind of strong denunciation of Satan's man who propagates

false teaching.

“... 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?’” -- Paul knew Satanic opposition and false teaching when he saw them and his spirit was stirred with righteous indignation for the truth of Christ. Elymas was perverting the ways of the Lord Jesus Christ with false teaching and so Paul blisters this man. Notice again his tact and courteous words when he encountered Satan, false teaching and cults: “You who are full of all deceit and fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness!” Paul was not trying to win friends and influence people. He was zealous for the truth. Paul also traced Elymas's teaching to its ultimate source -- the devil!

Today the true church must denounce the cults as heretical and inspired by Satan. There is a need today for an open, straightforward confrontation of all cults. We must not speak softly, but declare them what they actually are -- organizations of the devil! We must warn people of the awesome and awful dangers of involvement in these things. We must warn Christians to avoid cultists as the Bible commands them to do. “If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house, and do not give him a greeting; for the one who gives him a greeting participated in his evil deeds” (II John 10, 11).

According to tradition, the Apostle John, on one occasion, rushed out of a public bath at Ephesus, at the sight of Cerinthus, the heretic, crying, “Let us fly, lest even the bath fall on us, because Cerinthus, the enemy of the truth, is within.”

Sovereign Blinding (13:11)

“‘And 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 of darkness fell upon him and he went about seeking those who would lead him by the hand.” -- Elymas was temporarily blinded by God through Paul as the instrument. This was to prove to Elymas that the power of Christ is greater than the power of Satan and, hopefully, this would bring Elymas to repentance. Elymas, who was in spiritual darkness already, was put into physical darkness in order that he might turn to Christ.

Apparently, at this point in time, Paul began to act in the official capacity of an Apostle. He did an act of an Apostle; he blinded Elymas. This is the first time Paul used the sign-gifts of the first century Apostles. The sign-gifts gave the Apostles the authority they needed to be obeyed. Remember, only the Apostles had power to act in judgment like this. This is not something any Christian can do today or that any group of Christians can do.

After this blinding of Elymas by Paul, Paul became an officially recognized Apostle, although he had been appointed to this office before this time. From this point on, the leadership of the missionary journey turns to Paul. From here on in Acts, we no longer read “Barnabas and Saul,” but “Paul and Barnabas.”

Saving Faith (13:12)

“Then the proconsul believed when he saw what had happened, being amazed at the teaching of the Lord.” -- The governor came to know Christ. What a catch for Christ. The people who say Christianity is for the poor and common folk only have never read the Bible. The governor, apparently, was more struck with the Christian teaching (doctrine) than with the blinding of Elymas. What impressed him was the remarkable teaching of Christianity. Sergius Paulus had finally found the truth that set him free. He was overwhelmed with the fact that Christ died for sinners and rose from the dead to live His life again in every human being who has received Him as personal Lord and Savior. He also realized that the power of God's Spirit can conquer all Satanic opposition.

An interesting side note is that Sir William Ramsey, an archeologist, uncovered some inscriptions bearing the name of Sergius Paulus. These documents indicated that Sergius Paulus and his family became Christians and were very prominent in Christian circles.

DEFECTION OF MISSIONARIES (Acts 13:13)

Leadership of Paul (13:13a)

“Now Paul and his companions put out to sea from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia; . . . “ -- Notice carefully that the leadership of the missionary group passed from Barnabas to Paul. Barnabas must have been some kind of a humble man, but men filled with the Spirit are in submission to one another.

Losing of John Mark (13:13b)

“. . . and John left them and returned to Jerusalem.” -- Dr. Luke mildly states that John Mark departed from the group. What actually happened is that John Mark deserted. “But Paul kept insisting that they should not take him along who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work” (Acts 15:38). We do not know exactly why John Mark turned back, but we can surmise the reasons. Mark was from a wealthy home and was probably spoiled, pampered and a “momma's boy.” Apparently, when the going got rough, the young man turned back. He probably went on this trip for the excitement and adventure of travel, but had no deep commitment to spreading the gospel. Perhaps he deserted because of opposition or ridicule or persecution or because the world looked so attractive. Maybe self denial was too demanding on him. Whatever the human reason John Mark jumped ship, the divine reason was that John Mark was never called to full-time Christian work by God. He was taken along on this journey by Paul and Barnabas as their helper, but he had no divine call to this work. He failed because he was not separated unto this work by the Holy Spirit. Now it is my conviction that John Mark later received this call and became faithful to his calling and was successful for Christ. Later, John Mark wanted to go on the second missionary journey, but Paul refused to take him because he deserted the first time. There was a big dispute between Barnabas and Paul, and they split over this matter. Barnabas, willing to give Mark a second chance, took him to Cyprus. When Barnabas took him, John Mark hung in there and proved himself to be a good soldier of Jesus Christ. It was this same John Mark who later wrote the Gospel of Mark. Towards the end of his ministry, the Apostle Paul finally recognized the value of Mark to the Lord's work. “Make every effort to come to me soon; for Demas, having loved this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica; Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me. Pick up Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for service” (II Timothy 4:9-11).

CONCLUSION

Let me ask you a question. With whom do you identify in this story? Do you identify with Paul and Barnabas, who were veterans in the Christian fight. If so, move out, spread the gospel, train the young Christians and confront the Elymases of our day.

Do you identify with Elymas? Do you pervert the gospel of Christ and oppose Christ and His kingdom? Are you a cultist who mixes a little truth with a lot of error? Have you delved into the cults and other evil practices which God condemns? If so, repent and turn to Christ who alone can save your soul and deliver you from the powers of darkness.

Do you identify with John Mark? Have you defected? Have you deserted the cause of Christ? Have you miserably failed the Lord? If so, you can come back to Christ, just as Mark did, and have a useful life for the Lord. Bow before your Lord in humility. Admit your failure. Take up your cross. Be a good soldier. Be willing to face honestly the hardships of being a Christian. God will give you another chance to be useful for Christ.

Do you identify with Sergius Paulus? Are you seeking truth? Do you have position possessions and prestige, but no inward soul contentment, no peace of mind? If so, be like Sergius Paulus and give heed to Jesus Christ and His teachings. If God has revealed to you truth about Jesus Christ, act on that truth by accepting Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior. Act today on the truth of Jesus Christ. Tomorrow may be too late!