

# Acts of the Holy Spirit

---

Littlebourne - 16th April 2023 - Acts 13:1-12

---

We pick up in Acts where we left off at the end of chapter 12 (v25):

*And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark.*

Back at the end of chapter 11, we read about the prophecy of a great famine that would take place, so Barnabas and Saul had been sent from Antioch to Jerusalem to take with them relief for this famine. Now they've finished up in Jerusalem, and they take John Mark back home with them. This is the Mark that we have reason to believe wrote the gospel of Mark.

We start chapter 13 back in Antioch, after the events of chapter 12.

**v1**

*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.*

The first thing we learn about the church in Antioch is that there are several prophets and teachers there. We're familiar with Saul and Barnabas already, but the three others are unknown to us and only mentioned here.

Simeon called Niger, meaning black in Latin. Maybe he came from Africa, we don't know for sure. Some suggest he's the same person as Simon the Cyrene who we saw carry the cross in Mark 15.

Cyrene was the capital of the Roman province of Cyrenaica, which is in modern Libya. This is where Lucius was from. So we have at least one person, possibly two, from a long way away from Antioch that are in a leading role at the church in Antioch. Chapter 11 verse 20 tells us that men of Cyprus and Cyrene came to Antioch, it became an important hub for Christianity in the area.

The third person is Manaen, lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch. Last chapter, I talked about the various Herods that we read about in scripture, and this person is a friend of probably Herod Antipas, that ruled over the region of Galilee and imprisoned and executed John the Baptist. This Herod's reign ended in 39AD (he was exiled to somewhere in western Europe, because he was accused of conspiracy against the emperor, and his territory given to Herod Agrippa I). We're at this point in Acts around the early 40s AD (the famine took place in the reign of Claudius as chapter 11 said).

The word in Greek word translated here as 'lifelong friendship' is σύντροφος / syntrophos, which could be translated as foster brother, companion, intimate friend - from syn meaning with or together and trepho meaning to grow, nourish, feed. So they probably grew up together. Manaen probably grew up in Galilee then and was probably very well off.

Luke, writer of the gospel of Luke and of Acts, was likely from Antioch too, so maybe the account he has of the various things that happened to the various Herods is via Manaen. That might account for why Luke's gospel has more details about Herod Antipas than the other synoptic gospels do.

Back to the story - not only is the church growing, but the number given the gifts of prophecy and teaching are growing too - the leadership of the church at Antioch has expanded - there are those in Antioch that can lead the church, feed the flock, and it's not all down to Saul and Barnabas to do this. They're freed up to go elsewhere. God raises up others to continue the work in Antioch, so that they can spread the gospel to other areas.

## v2-3

*While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." 3 Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.*

Sounds like fasting was a pretty big part of church life. We don't know if this fasting was for a specific reason, or just a routine part of early church practice. But whatever the case, they hear direct from God what they should do.

Hearing from God isn't something we can provoke or cause I don't think. God speaks when He wishes to speak. But there's something to the idea that we shouldn't expect to hear from God if we aren't listening. Listening for God's guidance seems exactly what the church in Antioch were doing - they are worshipping and fasting, that is they are setting their eyes and ears on God, rather than on whatever else is distracting them. The idea behind a fast is not just to starve, but to give up something in order to focus on or take up something else.

Notice also, that once they hear from God, and hear clearly, they don't stop fasting, but they continue to fast and pray, seeking continual guidance.

The Holy Spirit specifically says here that these two are to be set apart for specific work to which they are called. God wants them for things that are more than the ordinary. One of the ways we can go wrong is thinking that we can't do things unless God specifically tells us to - we don't want to do something new at church, unless someone hears from God clearly.

Now if God does tell you something clearly, as in this instance, you'd better take it seriously. But ordinarily, God trusts us to use our own initiative - you don't need to hear directly and explicitly from God to use the talents and gifts He's given you. Ordinary service to the church doesn't require God's direct

In this case, Saul and Barnabas are listed as just two of five people gifted with prophecy and teaching in the church at Antioch - they're set apart from those that presumably will just stay doing what they're doing, which is important too.

Then they lay hands on Saul and Barnabas. This is something we see again in the New Testament - in 1 Timothy 4:14 Paul writes to Timothy:

*Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you.*

We've seen laying on of hands in Acts as well - think Acts 8:17, when people from Samaria come to faith:

*Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit.*

The church at Antioch are commissioning Saul and Barnabas to go and follow what the Holy Spirit has sent them to do.

## v4-5

*4 So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus. 5 When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. And they had John to assist them.*

Thus begins the first missionary journey of Paul. If you've got a Bible with maps in the back, you probably have one of this journey.

Let's not forget that Barnabas was a native of Cyprus, as Acts 4 tells us (verse 36-37):

*Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, 37 sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.*

So they're not starting off going to anywhere too unfamiliar, however this is only the start of the long journey.

They set off from Seleucia, which is the nearest port to Antioch, sixteen miles west of Antioch by the coast. The journey to Cyprus, provided the wind is behind you, can take as little as a few hours. It's a 130 miles between Seleucia and Salamis.

Salamis was the biggest city on the Island at the time, on the eastern coast. Cyprus had a sizable Jewish population at the time, and this Jewish population was probably at least a little familiar with the message Saul and Barnabas brought with them. Chapter 11 tells us as much (verse 19):

*19 Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. 20 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.*

So maybe it was Jewish people who were originally living in Cyprus that took the gospel back to their brothers there. Saul and Barnabas, and John Mark too, will take the message beyond the Jewish population and to the gentiles too.

## v6-7

*6 When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they came upon a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet named Bar-Jesus. 7 He was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. 8 But Elymas the magician (for that is the meaning of his name) opposed them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith.*

They travel across Cyprus - from Salamis on the east coast of the island, to the then capital Paphos on the west coast.

Here they meet Bar-Jesus, or son of Jesus / son of Joshua. What an irony to be named such. This is the second time we've met a magician - Simon the magician in Acts 8, was also a man of trickery and falsehood.

The word used in Greek is magos, meaning wise man (think of the Magi who visited the infant Jesus), or meaning sorcerer or magician. Sorcery is of course forbidden by God's law, so when a Jewish man is doing it, it's indication that he's up to no good.

The proconsul was the chief officer of the island province. In contrast to the regions we've seen so far - Judea for example, Cyprus at this time was a senatorial province, rather than one of the imperial provinces. The difference was that the senate of Rome would appoint the leadership over their provinces, and the imperial provinces would be ruled by those appointed by the emperor. We saw that Herod Agrippa was a friend of the emperor, and got his position over all of Judea probably through his connection to the emperor. Whereas Sergius Paulus would have been appointed by the senate.

For many years, most of the 19th century, the record that Luke gives us of there being a proconsul in Cyprus was considered a mistake or a falsehood, as under the reign of Caesar Augustus, some thirty years prior, we know that Cyprus was an imperial province, rather than a senatorial province. Did Luke get it wrong here?

Well in 1887, an inscription was found that confirmed Luke's account. In the reign of Claudius, the emperor at this point of time in Acts (early 40's AD), we know that the region had transferred from imperial to senatorial rule, and that the local ruler was appointed the title proconsul, and his name was Paulus. Archaeology confirms the details of the Bible. Luke as a historian is vindicated.

So the ruler of the whole of Cyprus is interested in what Saul and Barnabas have to say. But he is opposed by this Elymas the magician, who seeks to turn away the Proconsul from the faith.

Elymas is just a name, it might have similar derivation as the Arabic word for 'wise' or an Aramaic word for 'powerful'. He, in contrast to the prophets that we saw in Antioch, is a false prophet. He claims to speak for God, or to predict the future, but he is deluded or lying when he does so.

It may be that his influence over the Proconsul, his position of power, his status, is threatened by the words of Barnabas and Saul. Maybe he senses what they are saying is a direct threat to himself. Whilst it's not totally clear why he opposes them, but this is hardly an unusual situation. We all face opposition of some kind to the gospel - there are many out there that try to dissuade people from their faith. Today, in our society, the tendency is for the alternatives presented to be things like atheism, agnosticism, or forms of Christianity devoid of substance, watered down to the point of complete inoffensiveness. Back then, Christians were accused of atheism - because they rejected the pantheon of Gods that Rome had. Paphos had a big temple to Venus for example, and it would have been a major scandal for the ruler of the area to openly reject such a place.

Today, as well as then, one of the major arguments levelled against Christianity was its exclusivity. Christianity says there's no way other than through Christ. The polytheistic world of the first century Roman empire didn't abide this - Rome dealt with the religions of the places they conquered by absorbing them into their pantheon, and here come Christians saying that there's no God but the true God who doesn't dwell in man-made temples and stands above and beyond all the other gods of Rome. This is an affront to the whole Roman way of thinking.

## v9-10

*9 But Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him  
10 and said, "You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and  
villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord?"*

And now we get to the part of Acts where Saul becomes Paul. Saul was his Jewish name, and Paul was his Roman name - this isn't quite like Simon who gets given a new name Peter, with the meaning that comes with it, rather it's just he has a Jewish name and a Roman name, for he is a Jew and a Roman citizen. A bit like Chinese people sometimes have a western name. Luke takes the opportunity of the conversion of a senior Roman official, a prominent gentile, to introduce us to the Roman name we're more familiar with.

Possibly this is a time when he introduced himself with his Roman name deliberately because of his audience. Luke will stick to this name throughout the rest of Acts, except where he quotes Paul talking about his conversion.

Now Paul doesn't hold back does he. He has harsh words for Elymas. We think of Paul often as a man of grace and gentleness. In his letters we see a man with very much a pastors heart, bearing kindly with the major errors he sees in the churches he has founded or visited. But here, he is really different than that.

Sometimes there is a place for harsh language, and directness of this sort. If this happened today, Paul would be accused of not being Christ-like, of not loving his enemy. But of course Jesus did very much the same thing. The hard words that Jesus had for the Pharisees make this from Paul look tame.

And Paul is here filled with the Holy Spirit - he is saying this because God is telling him to, because God is speaking through him. I think there is wisdom here - we should be careful about this kind of language without good reason. Paul can talk to Elymas this way with confidence, because he has the warrant of the Holy Spirit.

Sometimes a harsh word, or an uncomfortable truth, is required and effective. The most famous sermon ever preached in America is probably Jonathan Edwards' *Sinners in the hands of an angry God*. Through 6000 words, he uses vivid imagery about hell and judgement to persuade his listeners that they dangle over the pit, on little more than a spiders web of a thread, with only the grace of God keeping them from that instant being condemned to an eternity of destruction. His whole thrust is telling people they deserve death and hell, and will get it justly, if it were not for God's present restraint and his allowing them opportunity to turn to Christ for salvation, the only way out.

In the early years of the First Great Awakening, Jonathan Edwards preached this sermon to his own congregation in Massachusetts, with little effect. Later, on 8th July 1741, he visited a town called Enfield in Connecticut. This town was one of only a few in New England that were thus far left unaffected by the revival that had been spreading. They were a hold out and Edwards was just passing through. He apparently wasn't even meant to be the preacher that day, but having to stand-in, he dusted off the sermon he'd delivered to his own church before, and started to preach.

There was no preparation for revival in this town, no passion, no interest at all. They were said to be even completely inattentive at church. But there was a great effect. The congregation is said to have broken out into wailing and crying, and desperation to find out how they might be saved. Edwards couldn't finish his sermon, the crying and weeping



from the congregation was so loud.

Edwards had particularly hard words to hear, but when the Holy Spirit is behind such words, there is great power in uncomfortable truth and harsh language. Of course Edwards may be popularly famous for this particular sermon on hell, but the vast bulk of his works are on much happier topics. He was predominantly more like we think of Paul - positive for the most part, focused on Christ and His love for us. But like Paul does here, he could issue a harsh word to those that needed to hear it. In both cases, what was required to press those words home was the Holy Spirit. We can read these words of Paul or the words of Edwards and be totally unmoved. *Sinners in the hands of an angry God* is actually a commonly used text for college courses on literature in America, yet it doesn't lead to revival every time it's read out - though sometimes people read such things and the Holy Spirit does press it home for them.

But this instance was also more than just harsh words.

## v11-12

*11 And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and unable to see the sun for a time." Immediately mist and darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking people to lead him by the hand. 12 Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord.*

Now, to show clearly that the Holy Spirit is speaking through Paul, Elymas is blinded for a time. Paul makes clear that it's the hand of the Lord that is doing this, not himself. He is only the messenger.

Just as this sorcerer Elymas sought to darken the view of the Proconsul, to blind the Proconsul from the truth, so does the Holy Spirit darken his eyes. He was already blind to the truth of the teaching that Paul and Barnabas brought to the court of the Proconsul, now he is blind literally as well as figuratively. He cannot see the light - spiritually, and now physically as well.

The Proconsul didn't believe just because of what he saw in the blinding of Elymas, but because he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord. God blinded the blind Elymas, and gave eyes and ears to the Proconsul to see the miracle and hear the truth of the gospel.



## Conclusion

We've talked about the leaders of the church in Antioch, Saul/Paul, Barnabas, John Mark, Elymas, Sergius Paulus. Lots of characters in these 12 verses. But the key character that drives the story at all points is the Holy Spirit - He gives the gift of teaching and preaching to the leaders of the church, He sets apart Saul and Barnabas, He sends them off, He leads them to the court of the Proconsul and gives Paul the words to say. He shuts the eyes of Elymas, and opens the eyes of Sergius Paulus. Everything here that happens, happens because God is in control.

We might not have the same situations here and now, with such gifted people, or such clear callings to go to specific places, or such obvious miracles in conversion, but the same Holy Spirit that guided the infant church in those days is with us now. He is operating in the same way - He builds up and gifts those that He charges with leading, He sends us out, whether that's far away or just down the road. He speaks through us, gives us the words to say to people, and He builds up His church through our actions.

We read primarily in Acts about the few people in the early church that were especially used of God - that were really gifted in huge ways - but we know the church didn't grow to what it became just through just the work of a few people. Paul and Barnabas left the church in Antioch with competent leaders that the Holy Spirit had gifted - and who we never hear about again. Maybe they just did the ordinary work of preaching and teaching and leading that continues to happen today. We never hear about the vast majority of Christians in the first decades of the church, yet no doubt they were all essential in keeping things going and spreading the gospel.

We don't all need to be like Paul or Barnabas. We don't even need to be like Simeon, Lucius and Manaen. We can be ordinary. But what we can't do without is the Holy Spirit. Our story doesn't have to be as interesting as the stories in Acts, but we should strive to have stories where the main character is the Holy Spirit.