

Acts 13-14

Lesson 9

In Acts Chapter 13 the narrative returns once more to Antioch in Syria once more stating that there were prophets and teachers there. While it has been argued that on the basis of syntax the first three names in this list are prophets and the last two are teachers, the terms “prophet” and “teacher” are likely interchangeable here. If that is the case, as it likely is, Luke considers all five that are listed to be “prophets” as well as “teachers”. All five are considered to be prophets in the eyes of Luke. Something like prophet-teacher.¹ This chapter will introduce us to the first of three missionary journeys that will be an important part of the narrative structure from 13:1-20:38. Verses 1-12 of Acts 13 speak of the commissioning of Barnabas and Saul and their first missionary journey that begins on the island of Cyprus.²

¹ David E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1983), p. 265.

² J. Bradley Chance, *Acts*, in the Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary Series (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing Incorporated, 2007), p. 208.

The list of prophets and teachers given here demonstrate the diversity of Antiochene church as it includes African Gentiles, and even a member of the Jewish Herodian royal court. These men are engaged in fasting and praying, while they were worshipping. Worship here includes prayer and fasting as a regular element within the context of what worship is. It is not clear from the text if it is only those who are listed here who are participating in these actions or if they are a part of a wider group, but it is likely the wider group. It is also unclear as to who does the laying on of hands in verse 3. What is clear is that the leadership of the Holy Spirit comes in the context of worship that included “fasting” and “prayer.”³

In the Old Testament law the only annual national fast day prescribed is the “Day of Atonement” (Yom Kippur). The requirement on this day is universal, and it is intended to be of a penitential character as is indicated by the usage of the terminology of “self affliction” or to “deny yourselves” (עֲנֶה Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia) (ταπεινώω Septuagint)

³ J. Bradley Chance, *Acts*, p. 208.

(Leviticus 16:29, 31; 23:27, 32; Numbers 29:7). The fasting practice of the early church appears to closely resemble Jewish practice. When Christian leaders are commissioned, fasting is a natural companion to the acts of fervent prayer (Acts 13:2-3; 14:23). In Luke's account of Anna, (Luke 2:36-37) the prophetess, she is held up to be a paragon of traditional virtue and piety. This virtue and piety is expressed in fasting and continual prayer.⁴

The laying of hands on Barnabas and Saul may represent the transmission of "power and authority" or a commissioning of these two missionaries. The important issue appears to be, not about the impartation of authority within the church, but the recognition of the expanding scope of the church's efforts to fulfill its mission of taking the gospel message to the world. The expansion of the mission of the church is not based upon the efforts of individualistic mavericks, but the response of the church to their mission and the clear and present prompting of the

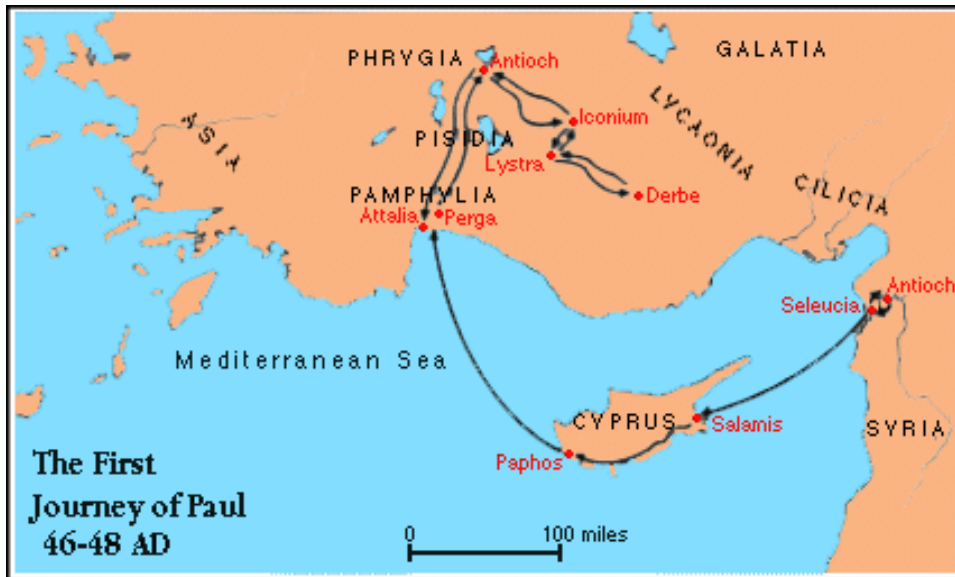
⁴ John Muddiman, "Fast, Fasting," in David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), pp. 773-776.

Holy Spirit.⁵ Verse 4 makes it very apparent that the church does not see the actions that it undertakes to be of its own accord, but to be at the direction of the Spirit. It is important to note that the church does not operate using the wisdom and counsel of men. It is the wisdom and counsel of God that guides the church through his own Holy Spirit.

Luke then recites the path of their journey, first to Seleucia, to Cyprus and then at Salamis they begin to proclaim the gospel in the synagogues of the Jews. John (Mark) is with them in order to assist them. This pattern of going to the synagogue will be repeated over and over again as the mission of God continues, at the direction of the Spirit of God. It will become a great source of trouble and pain for Paul personally but he does not cease or withdraw from this pattern to protect himself or the church. The plan is God's plan and as such is not open to discussion or negotiation. It is a plan guided by God, through his Spirit.

⁵ J. Bradley Chance, *Acts*, pp. 208-209.

Map of Paul's First Missionary Journey



They preach through the whole island as far as Paphos where they meet a man named Bar-Jesus who is described as a Magician (μάγος). This is the same word that Matthew (Matthew 2:1) used to describe the “Magi” that came to visit Jesus at his birth. However, the description given here by Luke does not stop here but goes on to describe “Bar-Jesus” (also known as Elymas) as a “Jewish false prophet.” He is associated with Sergius Paulus, who is described as an “intelligent” man who summons Barnabas and Saul because he desires to hear the gospel message.

Bar-Jesus, whose name means “son of God saves” is a name filled with rich irony especially when Saul, also known

as Paul refers to him as “son of the devil.” The irony rests in the fact that one who has a name proclaiming loyalty to God is shown here opposing God’s saving message. With regard to the name “Elymas,” (vs. 8) some have said that it represents the Greek rendering of the Arabic *‘Alim*, which means “wise man” or the equivalent of *magos* or the *magi* of Matthew’s gospel.⁶

“Saul”, who is also known as “Paul”: it is here that Luke will identify Saul with the name that he will bear through the rest of the narrative of Acts. It is likely only a coincidence that the name of the Proconsul is the same as Paul’s. Most probably Saul here simply adopts the “public” name that he had used all along in contexts other than Jewish contexts.⁷ Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit asks him **“will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord?”** This phrase echoes the Septuagint version of Proverbs 10:9 and Hosea 14:10, with the verse from Proverbs referring to “crooked paths” (*διαστρέφω*) and

⁶ J. Bradley Chance, *Acts*, p. 211.

⁷ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Sacra Pagina Series, Vol. 5 (Collegeville MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), p. 223.

Hosea referring to “straight paths” (εὐθύς). The sense of both of these Old Testament passages is that judgment awaits the one who perverts or strays from the paths of God. The sense is that the goal of Bar-Jesus is to inhibit people from coming to faith in Jesus, especially Sergius Paulus.⁸

Paul then pronounces that the judgment of God will come upon Bar-Jesus and that he will be totally blind for “a while” (vs. 11). Immediately he was struck with blindness, so that he needed someone to lead him. There is no real indication of how long Bar-Jesus was blind or if he ever came to repentance. The text does however; indicate a redemptive aspect to this miracle in the leading of Sergius Paulus to a belief in the Lord.

At this point the narrative changes to listing Paul as the primary character and Barnabas as secondary, indicating that they leave for Perga and then Pamphylia. The seriousness of the departure of John Mark here is not seen until 15:37-39 when Paul refuses to take John with him

⁸ J. Bradley Chance, *Acts*, p. 212.

and Barnabas on a return visit to the towns that they had evangelized previously. The reason given is that he had “deserted” them and not continued on with them beyond Pamphylia.⁹ The trip to Pisidian Antioch (v. 14) will have taken some time because more than 100 miles of mountainous terrain lies between Perga and this city:¹⁰ On the Sabbath Day (Saturday not Sunday) Paul and Barnabas go into the synagogue and sit down.

Excursus

By the first century A.D. Jewish communities were to be found the length and breadth of the Roman Empire, with the possible exception of the western and northern provinces. The Jewish population of the Diaspora ranged between three and five million and they outnumbered the Jews of Palestine even before 70 A.D. This situation models the current situation in that there are many more Jewish people living outside Israel than live within the nation of Israel. There were likely many hundreds, if not thousands

⁹ David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary series (Grand Rapids MI: 2009), p. 384.

¹⁰ J. Bradley Chance, *Acts*, p. 213.

of synagogues throughout the empire. Many, if not most synagogues in Asia Minor had banquet halls for sharing sacred meals as well as a place for Sabbath assembly. Synagogues also served as a repository of sacred books and sacred monies. These sacred monies were donated for both local usage as well as for support of the Jerusalem Temple.¹¹

The worship in the synagogue had likely already achieved some structure by the time of Acts and included such things as: The reading of scriptures on the Sabbath to a congregation that was assembled to worship followed by an exposition or teaching based upon scripture. Paul would have been invited to speak to the congregation by the “rulers of the synagogue” (ἀρχισυνάγωγοι) in Pisidian Antioch following the reading of the Torah and the Prophets. The synagogue was the focus of communal activity, fulfilling and serving the needs of its local community in all aspects of communal life. For those having a desire to preserve their Jewish way of life the synagogue served as an institution meeting that desire. It was at the

¹¹ Lee I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 74-107.

center of what separated Jews from the communities that surrounded them. It served as a “house of prayer”, a “Sabbath meeting place”, and a “place of instruction”.¹²

As Paul addresses those present in the synagogue he addresses two groups, those who are “Israelites”, Jews and “those who fear God”, Gentiles who were believers but were uncircumcised (vs. 16). In verse 17 note that Paul says that God “chose” or “selected” (ἐκλέγομαι) the “fathers” of Israel and “exalted” (ὑψόω) them leading them out of “Egypt” with his “powerful arm.” It is God that does this not the people or the nation that “chooses” or “selects” God. Paul continues to recount to them the mighty and redemptive acts of God for and through the nation of Israel.

He then recites the story of Jesus and his death, at the hands of the “residents of Jerusalem and their leaders”. He proclaims to them the story of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ, demonstrating that these things were the fulfillment of Scriptures (vss. 33-35). He then proclaims powerfully and forcefully at verse 38 that

¹² Lee I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, pp. 109-119.

“through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. There message appears to have been well received as some went with Paul and Barnabas and heard more and on the next Sabbath Luke says, “almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord.”

When the Jews saw this they were filled with jealousy and disputed what Paul and Barnabas were saying. At verse 46 there is a major turning point as Paul says, “**Then both Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, “It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken first to you. Since you reject it and judge yourselves to be unworthy of eternal life, we are now turning to the Gentiles.”**¹³ They reject the “calling” or “selection” of God. The Jews here are not aware of the fact that God has cleansed the Gentiles (10:28). Paul makes it clear that God is not rejecting the Jews as the gospel is preached to them first. Secondly, he makes it very clear that in the act of rejecting the gospel they are condemning themselves and bringing about the fulfillment of the prophetic warning of

¹³ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Ac 13:46). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

verse 41. Thirdly, Paul will now turn to the Gentiles in proclaiming the gospel. There is not even a hint here that the Jewish rejection of the gospel is due to some predetermined plan of God that eliminates free will in the Jews who heard the gospel. They reject God's "calling" or "election".¹⁴

Paul makes this very plain by using active verbs in verse 46 stating that they have "thrust the word of God from you" and "**you judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life.**" God in no way dictates that the Jews of Antioch will reject the word of God so that the gospel can now move on to the Gentiles. This is something that the Jews do themselves and it is not done, or forced upon them by God. Paul concludes his harsh statements regarding the Jewish audience by quoting from Isaiah 49:6. This quotation, in its original context comes from one of the servant songs of Isaiah. Paul quotes only the portion about the Gentiles.¹⁵

The Gentile reaction to words of Paul was very much the opposite of the reaction of the Jews. They were "glad"

¹⁴ J. Bradley Chance, *Acts*, pp. 222-223.

¹⁵ J. Bradley Chance, *Acts*, p. 223.

and “praised the word of the Lord” (vs. 48). The word then spreads through the region, which seems to incite the Jews even further and even incite others, “those that were powerful” against Paul and Barnabas. Paul and Barnabas then shake the dust from their feet and move on to Iconium “filled with joy and the Holy Spirit.” By shaking the dust from their feet they accomplish two things: first, this serves as a warning to the Jews that their rejection of the gospel is a rejection of eternal life. Secondly, that they, Paul and Barnabas do not wish to be associated with those who would make such a decision.¹⁶

Chapter 14

This chapter divides into three sections: 1. Paul and Barnabas at Iconium (vss. 1-7); 2. Paul and Barnabas preaching and healing at Lystra (vss. 8-20a); 3. Paul and Barnabas return to Antioch of Syria (vss. 20b-28) (cf. map above).¹⁷

The experience of Paul and Barnabas at Iconium is virtually identical to their experience in Antioch of Pisidia.

¹⁶ David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 400.

¹⁷ J. Bradley Chance, *Acts*, p. 233.

This will become an often-repeated cycle throughout Acts and in every case the gospel message continues to be spread as great numbers accept Jesus Christ. The cycle is that they come, they preach, persecution follows and then they move on. When the persecution comes this prompts them to move on to other areas, in this instance Lystra and Derbe. In verse 2, the expression “poisoned their minds” (ἐκάκωσαν τὰς ψυχὰς) literally means something like “harmed their souls.” This same verb has been used earlier in Acts to describe the oppression of Egypt against Israel (7:6, 19) and of Herod’s actions against the church (12:1). This leaves the impression here that the Jews of Iconium are now acting against God’s people as the Egyptians had against Israel and as Herod had against the church.¹⁸ The Jews have elected to oppose God, and once again the haunting words of Gamaliel echo in the air (Acts 5:38-39).

Paul and Barnabas respond to this by remaining for a long time in Iconium. They do this until they find out that there are plans to mistreat them and then they move on to

¹⁸ J. Bradley Chance, *Acts*, p. 234.

Lystra where they encounter a man crippled from birth. Paul heals this man because he sees that he has the faith to be “healed” or perhaps “saved.” The word σώζω can mean to be “rescued”, “saved” or “healed”. Paul shouts and the man is healed. The response of the crowd is to proclaim that Paul and Barnabas are gods and they want to offer sacrifices to them, but when they heard of this they rip their clothes and rush into the crowd seeking to correct this horrible misunderstanding. They then begin to preach the gospel to the crowd and still they barely restrained them from offering sacrifices to them.

There is then a new wrinkle as Jews come from Antioch and Iconium and win over the crowd who then stone Paul and leave him for dead. The disciples surround Paul who then gets up and goes to Derbe where they proclaim the gospel once again before returning to Lystra then to Iconium and on to Antioch. Along the way they strengthen and encourage the disciples, they appoint elders for them in the churches and after “prayer and fasting” they “entrust” or “commend” them to the Lord in whom they

have believed. It is noteworthy that “prayer and fasting” once again accompanies this appointment of those who would minister in an extraordinary way in the church. They then return going to Perga, down to Attalia and back to Antioch where they report the outcome of their first great mission to the Gentiles.

Synopsis

Barnabas and Saul are selected from the pool of five prophet-teachers in Antioch to carry forward a special work for the Lord. They lay hands upon them and sent them off on the first missionary journey for Paul. They travel to Cyprus where they encounter a Jewish magician named Bar-Jesus who has the ear of the proconsul Sergius Paulus. After Bar-Jesus is struck with blindness Sergius Paulus accepts the gospel. Paul takes a dominant role in this encounter.

Paul and his companions travel on to Perga while John Mark turns back and returned to Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas then travel to Pisidian Antioch where they attend the synagogue on the Sabbath and are asked to speak. Paul preaches the gospel message to this group and the message seems to be very well

received. On the next Sabbath they once again speak to a huge group and this time they incite the Jews to jealousy and so Paul goes preaches to the Gentiles who are pleased to hear his words.

The Jews, however, incited people of power against them and they move on from that region after shaking the dust from their feet. The disciples leave this encounter “filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.”

Chapter 14

This pattern of preaching in the synagogue, many believing, the Jews being incited, persecution developing and then moving on continues in Iconium. Paul then moves onto Lystra where a man is healed and Paul and Barnabas are mistaken for gods and an attempt is made to offer sacrifices to them. They struggle to stop this and Jews from Antioch and Iconium come and win over the

crowd and Paul is stoned, left for dead and then leaves for Derbe. They preach there they return to Lystra, then Iconium and Antioch strengthening the believers in their faith. They appoint Elders in each church and then pass back through Pisidia, Pamphylia and preached at Perga before going to Attalia and sailing back to Antioch of Syria where they reported on their journey.

Main Points

1. God directs the church through the Holy Spirit.
2. Prayer and Fasting are an important part of worship.
3. The gospel message incites strong reactions either to accept or reject in the people who hear it.
4. Paul and Barnabas consider the mission of God more important than their own safety.

Questions

1. Why do you think “prayer and fasting” are mentioned so many times in these 2 chapters?
2. What role do you think “prayer and fasting” should have in the church today?
3. Why do you think Bar-Jesus is struck with blindness?
4. Why do you think Paul and Barnabas continually go to the synagogue when they enter a new place even though they know it will lead to trouble?
5. Does God determine whether we will accept the gospel or not even before we are born? Do we have a choice?
6. What do you make of 13:41?
7. Why do you think the “unbelieving Jews” at 14:2 “poisoned” the minds of the Gentiles?
8. What would be your reaction if someone stoned you for talking about Jesus?

9. Why do you think Elders were appointed in each of the congregations planted by Paul and Barnabas?
10. What do you think Luke means by the phrase “...they entrusted them to the Lord in whom they had come to believe” (14:23b)?
11. Why do you think Luke gives us these accounts of the church?