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## Launching Out Acts 13:4-13

**Intro:** Acts 13 marks the beginning of the last section of this book and it opens with a character study of a vibrant, growing, 1<sup>st</sup> century church. The church at Antioch experienced an effective ministry for the Lord in their vicinity but they weren't satisfied with doing only that. They believed they could do more; they believed the Lord wanted them to do more. The church was made up of mostly Gentile believers who had been saved out of various pagan religions. As they began to see the transformation that the Holy Spirit was bringing into their lives through the truth of God's Word, they realized that there was a whole world of other people out there who needed to be given the opportunity to both hear and accept the truth and experience the life changing power the Gospel brings to all who receive it.

The church at Antioch did not hit upon this idea accidentally. As we have seen, this church had an effective ministry because it was well established in the truth, being taught by a good mix of prophets and teachers. The congregation itself was a microcosm of Roman society and they were experiencing the unity of the Spirit long before it was written about in the Epistles. Antioch wasn't just a great teaching church, they were also a great doing church: ministering to the Lord as individual believers and as a body. Plus, as they ministered, they sought direction from the Lord for how they might better serve Him. In the middle of all this ministry, the Holy Spirit called out servants for the work.

The call for workers was given and the church responded appropriately, with fasting and prayer. They knew that this whole endeavor, from the sending to the going, would require a substantial dependence on God; fasting and praying demonstrated that very dependence. Barnabas and Saul were "ordained" for this work by the Holy Spirit first and then by the church. This was an acknowledgment on the church's part that, as they agreed to send them, so they also agree to support them as they went. This was a significant financial responsibility for this congregation but since they knew that they all couldn't go – they would do their part by giving to others more suited for that particular work.

Note: the church at Antioch seems to have accomplished all of this without an official committee report; without completing a detailed demographic analysis; without the help of any kind of marketing survey or what some might refer to as “spiritual mapping.” They didn’t even have an official missionary board to assess the candidates or serve as a form of spiritual and financial accountability. No, all that Barnabas and Saul had to go on was the call and power of the Holy Spirit. Now, I’m not saying that any of those other things are wrong in and of themselves. The only time they would be wrong is if they are used as a substitute for the call and power of the Holy Spirit apart from the local church. Human effort accomplishes many things but few of those things, if any, ever survive in the kingdom of God.

The Apostle Paul would make 3 missionary journeys out of the church at Antioch. The 1<sup>st</sup> journey makes up [ch13-14](#). Barnabas and Saul sail to the island of Cyprus. They minister across the island and then sailed to Perga, a city in modern day Turkey. They then travel inland to the region of Galatia, ministering in various cities and then return the way they came back to Antioch. Right at the start of the 2<sup>nd</sup> journey, Paul and Barnabas part ways in a dispute over John Mark, who will leave them on the first trip. Barnabas will take Mark and returned to Cyprus, while Paul will take Silas and travel overland back into Turkey. From there he would go into Europe and establish churches in Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, and Corinth. The final missionary journey was a return visit to the churches in Turkey, but most of the time was spent at Ephesus. After this, Paul sails back to Jerusalem and is arrested. These 3 missionary journeys changed the history of Europe forever and as a result: the history of the world.

**4-5** –Cyprus is a large island in the Mediterranean west of Syrian Antioch. It was logical for the team to go there because that was where Barnabas was originally from. He would have a burden for his home country; knew the lay of the land and likely had a wealth of contacts in the area. So, the team sailed from Seleucia and landed in Salamis. This city was a large commercial center on the east side of the island. Right away, we see the standard operating procedure that these missionaries will use in almost every town or city they visit. On the next Sabbath, they go to the local synagogue where, after the traditional service, they are usually invited – as educated, visiting Jews – to share a word with the congregation. Of course, the word they would share was not their own – it was the Word of God.

Luke tells us here that the 2 missionaries took John along as an assistant. This is the John Mark we learned of in **12:12** – he was a cousin to Barnabas and his mother's home in Jerusalem was a gathering place for believers. Luke never says that John was specifically called by the Holy Spirit or ordained by the church for this work but he was a valuable resource for this team. He grew up in Jerusalem and was an eye-witness of many of the events in the life of Jesus which he could relate with special power to Barnabas and Saul and everyone they preached to. He also would have relieved them of tasks and details that could have interfered with their important work of ministering the Word.

**6-12** – Paphos was the capitol of Cyprus. Located on the western side of the island, it was known for its immorality. It was infamous for its worship of Venus, the Roman goddess of love. The religious practices of this worship were referred to at the time as the deification of lust. Here, the missionaries faced a combination of entrenched immorality and spiritual darkness and it's difficult to know which one is the cause and which was the effect. These 2 evils go hand-in-hand and we are seeing a great resurgence of these same evils becoming commonplace in society today. We can blame this on different factors and causes but the main cause, in my opinion, has been the failure of what calls itself the Christian church to publicly teach and personally live out the truths and principles of God's Word.

I expect that Barnabas and Saul shared the good news of Jesus Christ wherever they went, in any way they could to whoever would listen. And we can also assume that many people would believe and accept the Gospel they preached. But, Luke doesn't record every instance of witnessing or every decision that was made as a result of their preaching. Instead of telling what happened in each and every village, Luke shares only one incident in that occurs in Paphos. There are several things in this incident that are examples of what happens in the rest of the Book of Acts.

1) There was a Great Opportunity – Here, the opportunity was an invitation from the proconsul Sergius Paulus to speak the Word of God. This was a great opportunity because of the importance of this individual. A proconsul was a Roman official responsible for an entire province. All Roman provinces were divided into 2 categories: those that required troops to keep the peace and those that didn't. The first category was under the direct administration of the Emperor. The second was ruled by proconsuls that

answered directly to the Roman senate.

This was the status of the man who called for Barnabas and Saul because he desired to hear the Word of God. Luke tells us that he was an intelligent man and that's to be expected. One wouldn't think a person could rise to the level of proconsul while being an idiot but there are plenty of examples of people making it to positions of power without a clue as to how to actually do their job. We don't know if Sergius Paulus earned his position or was a political appointee but it doesn't matter. His intelligence is seen in the fact that he *desired to hear* the Word of God. There are a multitude of interesting and mind-bending subjects a person can pursue that would take a life time to understand, let alone master but the smartest thing you can do is discover what God has said about Himself and us in His Word. This pursuit is the height of intelligence because, in the end, it will be the only thing that matters.

2) There was some Serious Opposition – it appears in the form of a man named Elymas (Bar-Jesus). He's called a Jewish sorcerer and a false prophet. It was a rare find since Jews traditionally shunned demonic activities like these. There were plenty of men like him in the ancient world. They would get into powerful positions by pretending to have special insight into the future and could offer "wise" advice to those who made decisions. Elymas had gained the proconsul's confidence. When Barnabas and Saul showed up, he quickly realized that if Sergius Paulus listened to them, his own days as an influencer would be numbered. So, he opposed the gospel and did everything to turn the proconsul from it.

After the fear of failure, I think the fear of opposition is what stops many Christians from pursuing God's will for their life. Somehow we've got it in our minds that witnessing and winning souls should be easy. We can live how we want to and, when we share our faith, people should just line up to accept it and everything will be just fine. That's not how it works; that's not even how it's supposed to work. Jesus didn't promise His disciples a walk in the park, did He? No, just the opposite – He promised them a long row to hoe. In fact, He warned them to expect resistance, difficulty and offenses; in a word – opposition. And yet, we don't feel that this should apply to us – why, because we're special? Sadly, this reflects a wrong understanding of one's self and the purpose of opposition in our Christian walk

We should never be surprised or shaken when opposition appears because great opposition usually accompanies great success. This is not a hard and fast rule but a general principle. Opposition sometimes arises because we are ill prepared to serve. But, if we're properly prepared and we're focused on being obedient to God's call, if we find no adversaries to our service, we may fear that there will be no success. Opposition forces us to continue to trust in God but it can also indicate that a great opportunity to advance the Gospel lies at our feet. Let's endeavor to not miss the opportunity for fear of the opposition. It's impossible to fly a kite without wind resistance. The stronger and more steady the resistance, the higher the kite will fly.

3) Along with the opposition came a Divine Empowerment - here we see the presence of the Holy Spirit in a special way. When Elymas's fierce opposition began to emerge, the Holy Spirit filled Paul in a powerful way to pronounce judgment on him. Luke mentions his Hebrew name is Bar-Jesus (son of Jesus) but Paul rightly calls him a son of the devil and an enemy of all righteousness or everything that is right. Paul was granted the gift of spiritual discernment and faith by the Holy Spirit and he used this spiritual empowerment to rebuke Elymas and pronounce the judgment of God on him. Elymas was struck blind. Those who resist God are spiritually blind so God gave him a physical condition to match his spiritual condition. Surely, Paul remembered his own experience with divinely appointed blindness but, while Paul repented, we never hear of Elymas repenting.

Paul may seem particularly harsh in his dealings with Elymas but that's only because the eternal destiny of Sergius Paulus was at stake. If an person wants to commit spiritual suicide, that's one thing; but it's never right to bring others down with you. If you want to give up on the things of God and allow bitterness into your heart against him, that's your choice. But, it's a terrible sin to draw someone else away from God with you, either in word or example. The strongest words in the Bible are for those who stand in the way between man and God. It was Paul's heart of love for the proconsul that spoke in anger against the sorcerer.

4) There was some Significant Success - Paul told Elymas he would be blind for a time. Eventually, God must have given his sight back. In the meantime, his blinding made a great impression on the proconsul. The story says that after he saw what happened to Elymas, the proconsul believed. What did he see? We can say that he saw something in Paul and something

in Elymas. He saw the courage of Paul – here was a man of conviction, bold in his belief and willing to take a stand for what he believed. He saw the just result of Elymas’ sin – physical blindness to match his spiritual blindness. When we see all the trouble and destruction that sin brings into people’s lives, it should compel us to pursue God that much more earnestly. It certainly did for Serge!

But, it wasn’t just the miracle of blindness that caused him to believe; it was that along with his astonishment at the teaching of the Lord. Sergius Paulus had heard the gospel and he responded to it. Historians report that inscriptions have been found on Cyprus bearing the proconsul’s name that confirms he was a Christian and that his entire family became Christians. So, along with all the others in that area who believed, this man also believed and became the nucleus of a church that endured through the ages. All because 2 missionaries were willing to trust God, face the opposition, and deliver the message of the cross to a lost and dying world.

**13-** In the middle of this story Paul is called Paul for the first time (**v9**). Before this he’s called Saul - his Hebrew name. Now he’s called Paul his Roman name. This may be because **ch13** marks the beginning of the missionary outreach to the Gentiles. Before this, the church grew under the oversight of the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem; so, Saul was called by his Hebrew name. Now he’s going to the Gentiles; so he’s referred to by his Gentile name.

An even bigger change occurs in this chapter. Back in **vs2**, the team is referred to as Barnabas and Saul. We see this again in **vs7**. Then, in **vs9**, Saul becomes Paul and **vs13** says, Paul and his party. Finally, in **vs42** we find the words “Paul and Barnabas.” These changes signify that at the start Barnabas was the leader. He had been in the faith longer. He had been effective, recruiting Paul, for example. But the time came, as God worked sovereignly in these two lives; that Paul became the natural leader of this missionary team. Paul had been in the background for a long time. But now the call came, and from this point on Paul leads the work for which God had earlier set him apart.

We are just getting into these missionary journeys and already we find that they weren’t at all smooth sailing. As far as we know, there were no serious difficulties on Cyprus other than Elymas. Now we’re starting to notice some.



We've seen a shift in leadership. Somewhere along the line Paul began to take first place as leader of the missionary party. We can assume that Barnabas took this graciously. He seems to have been an extremely gracious man. Still it must have been a bit difficult for him.

Next, there's John's desertion. Luke mentions his departure briefly in vs13, passing over the fact that Paul and Barnabas must've reacted quite differently to it. Mark hadn't been called by the Holy Spirit or commissioned by the church as the others had been. He was related to Barnabas so Barnabas probably just said, "Let's take him along with us," which is what they did. Mark was with them on Cyprus. But when they arrived in Pamphylia, for some reason Mark left the others to return to Jerusalem. We do not know why he left, though there has been a great deal of speculation about it. What we do know is that Paul didn't appreciate it. He saw it as a desertion.

There's a 3<sup>rd</sup> problem. It's not mentioned here, but Luke may be alluding to it by saying that although they went to Pamphylia and might have been expected to carry on a ministry there, they actually left the coast and moved inland to Antioch in Pisidia (not Syria). This Antioch was about 3600 ft up in the mountains. Since Paul mentions in his letter to the Galatians that he had a bodily affliction at this time, some think Paul caught a disease (malaria?) while living in Pamphylia's lower coastal plains and that the team pressed on into the healthier mountain climate because of it.

If Paul was seriously ill, it might explain Paul's strong reaction to Mark's desertion. Scholars suggest Mark wanted to evangelize Pamphylia and when Paul left it for Galatia; he saw this as abandoning the work. Paul would have seen Mark as being unsympathetic and unsupportive of him in his illness, maybe even unresponsive to God's leading.

Whatever the reasons, it's clear that even these extraordinary apostles had disagreements. They were in the middle of a monumental missionary journey, being led by the Holy Spirit, on the verge of what turned out to be a time of great blessing. But they still had problems. If these men had trouble in their work, we shouldn't be too shocked if we have trouble too. We sometimes talk as if everything in the Christian's life should go smoothly, that nothing bad should happen. We expect total and unmitigated blessings. But Jesus did not promise us smooth sailing as his disciples. He promised

suffering.

We might not see the reasons for any of the things that happened here but God does. Just because we don't know why things fail to go smoothly in our lives does not mean there isn't an answer or that God isn't blessing us in spite of discouragements. These men had trouble, but in spite of their trouble they preached the gospel, people believed, and churches were established. 😊