

Paul's first Missionary journey: Trials lead to...

Acts 13:4-52

Last week I spoke about the amazing Church in Antioch and how 2 of the key leaders in the Church – Barnabas and Saul were set apart for God's Purposes – to take the Gospel to the Gentiles, and were sent out on the first deliberate missionary journey to the Nations.

So they left Antioch, taking Barnabas' young cousin John Mark with them as a helper, and travelled to a port called Seleucia and caught a ship heading for Cyprus, which seemed like a good place to start, because that was Barnabas' home country.


The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus. When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues. John was with them as their helper. (Acts 13:4-5)

It was a habit throughout Paul's ministry to go to the Jews first – this was a sensible starting place as, Paul as a Pharisee and Barnabas as a Levite would be given respect there and would normally be invited to speak.

The Jews, in theory, had the least distance to travel to come to faith, as Jesus was the 'last piece of the jigsaw' – the fulfillment of the Old Testament, the Law and Prophets.

And out of respect for the Jews as God's Chosen People, Paul went to them first:

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: **first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.** (Romans 1:16)

They travelled through the whole island until they came to Paphos. There they met a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus, who was an attendant of the proconsul, Sergius Paulus. (There are some inscriptions mentioning him in Pisidian Antioch where he became governor after leaving Cyprus) 

The proconsul, an intelligent man, sent for Barnabas and Saul because he wanted to hear the word of God. But Elymas the sorcerer (for that is what his name means) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith.

So, on this first trip, just as things were starting well, Paul and Barnabas met opposition in the form of Bar-Jesus (Son of salvation) or Elymas (meaning “wise”) who was a Jewish magician and advisor to the proconsul (governor)

And as much as Paul and Barnabas were trying to explain the Gospel to this key man – Sergius Paulus, who is not just influential, but is also open-hearted and intelligent; there is a false prophet trying to turn him away from the Truth in his other ear.

Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, "You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord? Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind, and for a time you will be unable to see the light of the sun."

Paul knew the effects of being blind & knew personally how that had brought him to repentance, so I think this is a rebuke “blind – **for a time**” which is intended to change his heart, rather than a final curse.

Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he groped about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand. When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord. (13:6-12)

So although it doesn't say much about what happened on the rest of the island, the Gospel has been proclaimed – with signs and wonders and, **despite, or even because of, opposition**, the person in the highest position on the island has become a follower of Jesus.

Interestingly, from this point on it always talks about “Paul and Barnabas instead of Barnabas and Saul.

From Paphos, Paul and his companions sailed to Perga in Pamphylia, (Southern Turkey) where John left them to return to Jerusalem (v.13-14) It doesn't go into detail here about why John Mark left; but later on in Acts gives more of a clue. In Acts 15 it says:

Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing." Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, but Paul

did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and left (Acts 15:36-40)

John Mark deserted Paul and Barnabas – maybe because he was young and missing home; maybe because there were dangerous Taurus Mountains to get across, on one of the roughest roads in the area, which was notorious for bandits and robbers; & whatever was lying ahead; maybe because Cyprus had been hard.

Another theory is that they had all been ill – possibly with Malaria, which was prevalent in the area. In Galatians, which was written to the churches in the area, Paul writes;

As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you. (Galatians 4:13)

Whatever the reason though, whenever you are going to a new place, it's hard & intimidating; when you are deserted on the way by a close friend, it is even harder.

From Perga they went on to Pisidian Antioch (about 100 miles north)

On the Sabbath they entered the synagogue and sat down. After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the synagogue rulers sent word to them, saying, "Brothers, if you have a message of encouragement for the people, please speak." (v.14-15)

So Paul and Barnabas were in Pisidian Antioch, having met **problems** and **opposition** on the way; having been **deserted**; having just done a really **difficult** journey; are asked to give a **“message of encouragement”**.

At times like this, you better believe in what you are saying! If it was just based on how you were feeling, then words might fail you, but thankfully, Paul's eyes were fixed on God and on the Big Picture, and so this is what he says, summarizing the whole Old Testament:

Standing up, Paul motioned with his hand and said: "Men of Israel and you Gentiles who worship God, listen to me! The **God of the people of Israel chose** our fathers; **he made** the people prosper during their stay in Egypt, with mighty power **he led them** out of that country, **he endured** their conduct for about forty years in the desert, **he overthrew** seven nations in Canaan and gave their land to his people as their inheritance. All this took about 450 years.

"After this, **God gave them** judges until the time of Samuel the prophet. Then the people asked for a king, and **he gave** them Saul son of Kish, of the tribe of Benjamin, who ruled forty years. **After removing Saul, he made** David their king. **He testified** concerning him: 'I have found David son of Jesse a man after my own heart; he will do everything **I want** him to do.' (v.16-22)

William Barclay says that it is striking what view of history Paul is encouraging them with – it is all about what God did: He is central; it's not about what the Israelites did.

They could have told the story by talking about how they conquered Canaan, but Paul's story says how God handed Canaan over.

So, for instance, there was a battle in WW2 called Dunkirk where the British army retreated and managed to get rescued by little boats and brought back to England.

If Paul had been telling this story, he would have told it like this:

And the Lord sent low cloud over the beaches of Dunkirk so the German planes could not fly safely.

And the Lord raised up an armada of ships.

And the Lord put a willingness in the hearts of many to sail the ships over to rescue the troops.

And the Lord caused the German tanks to stop some way off from Dunkirk and sent confusion over the German leaders

And in this way the Lord delivered the British and French armies.

(This is not saying that God was on one side or the other)

(Quoted by Rico Tice, All Soul's Langham Place, 2010)

Paul's encouragement to the Jewish and Gentile God-fearers listening to him was that God is Lord over history and is working out His Purposes.

Then Paul went on and, continuing the same Story of the unfolding of God's Plans, introduced Jesus:

"From this man's descendants God has brought to Israel the Saviour Jesus, as he promised. Before the coming of Jesus, **John** preached repentance and baptism to all the people of Israel. As John was completing his work, he said: 'Who do you think I am? I am not that one. No, but he is coming after me, whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.'

"Brothers, children of Abraham, and you God-fearing Gentiles, **it is to us that this message of salvation has been sent.** The people of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognize Jesus, **yet in condemning him they fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath.** Though they found no proper ground for a death sentence, they asked Pilate to have him executed. **When they had carried out all that was written about him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb. But God raised him from the dead,** and for many days he was seen by those who had travelled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. They are now his witnesses to our people. (v.23-31)

The Jews were given the Message of salvation and the Saviour, but they didn't recognise Him and so had Him killed.

In opposing and killing Jesus though, they were fulfilling God's Plan of Salvation.

In other words, looking at this all as God's Plans unfolding, even God's enemies, acting against The Messiah, were working out God's Plan!

And that is exactly what Paul and Barnabas had witnessed with Bar-Jesus the magician on Cyprus; he opposed them and the Gospel, but then, as God dealt with him, Sergius Paulus – the leader of the island, had witnessed God's Power and had come to faith.

Then Paul finished his preach by adding him and Barnabas and the invitation of the Gospel to the Nations into God's big Plan:

"Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses. Take care that what the prophets (Habakkuk) have said does not happen to you:

"Look, you scoffers,
Wonder and perish,
For I am going to do something in your days
That you would never believe,
Even if someone told you.'" (v.38-41)

They finish by saying that God's Plan has always been for the salvation of the nations – and that is what they are proclaiming there.

As Paul and Barnabas were leaving the synagogue, the people invited them to speak further about these things on the next Sabbath. When the congregation was dismissed, many of the Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who talked with them and urged them to continue in the grace of God. (v.42-43)

What they were saying was amazing for the non-Jews who had been listening – instead of being treated as second class citizens, the Good News was that God’s Blessing and Salvation were for them as well, and this was God’s Big Plan being unfolded!

On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and talked abusively against what Paul was saying.

Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: "We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. For this is what the Lord has commanded us:

" 'I have made you a light for the Gentiles,
that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.' "(quoting Isaiah 49:6)

When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed. (v.44-48)

Some of the Jews didn’t listen to the warning they had been given and were furious, hardening their hearts and missing out on God’s Blessing. But some of them saw God’s Plans and responded – as did many of the non-Jews. And through them: The word of the Lord spread through the whole region. (v.49)

But the Jews incited the God-fearing women of high standing and the leading men of the city. They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region. So they shook the dust from their feet in protest against them (the Jews and city officials who were opposing them) and went to Iconium. But the Gospel continued to flourish and the disciples left behind were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit. (v.50-52)

The question I want to finish with is this:

Is your view of God bigger than your view of your circumstances?

In this life, you are going to face trials and problems and disappointments and losses and opposition.

And if we think that a trouble-free life with health and wealth and happiness is a sign of God's Blessing, then we're missing the point and we are heading for a big crash!

This wasn't Barnabas and Paul's experience and it wasn't their message.

I read part of one of Paul's letters (1 Thessalonians) this week – this is what he says:

We sent Timothy, who is our brother and God's fellow worker in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. You know quite well that we were destined for them. In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know. (1 Thessalonians 3:2-4)

If you have found that you have been 'unsettled by trials' then you need to hear this!

We need a Big Picture of God and His Plans in order to be encouraged, so that when trials happen, we will still have something solid to cling onto.

Jesus said this:

"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." (John 16:33)

Jesus' promise to you is that you will have trouble (not often preached on!)

But even in the face of troubles (Paul meeting a false prophet who tries to destroy his attempts to spread the Gospel; a close friend deserts him; he has to walk across dangerous, bandit-ridden mountains; people who should be allies harden their hearts and stir up trouble)

Even in the face of all that, he can know God's Peace and be encouraged and encourage others and take heart:

Our battles may be going the wrong way at times, but the war is won!

And Jesus, the Victor is so amazing that he can even cause his enemies – Pontius Pilate, Herod, Elymas, to bring about His Purposes and His Great Victory,

He is the One unfolding History – and in His Grace, He lets us be part of the story.

Because Jesus has overcome the World!

Pray