

Paul's First Missionary Journey

This is the first of Paul's three missionary journeys recorded. Paul was commissioned by Christ to preach the gospel to the gentiles. The persecution at Jerusalem had resulted in many brethren taking the gospel elsewhere, and so we find a number of them at Antioch.

There were two places in the journey called Antioch, one in Syria and the other up here in modern-day Turkey. The trip, as indicated on the map, was the shortest of the three major trips. Let us read about the commencement of the trip from Antioch in Syria.

ACTS 13 VS. 1-3:

"In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon, called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. 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. So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off." (NIV)

You will note that at this stage Barnabas is named first and Paul last, doubtless as Paul's position had not yet been established; later we will see that Paul is always named first and then Barnabas. There is no mention of John Mark, although he was probably there, but just five, probably the senior brethren, are named.

V. 2 says they were worshipping the Lord and fasting. The word 'worship' is often translated minister; they were serving God in some way. They were also fasting. Fasting was part of the law, but Christ never commanded it, but abstinence from food is said to give one a clearer mind. They were dedicating themselves to the Lord, perhaps something like a praise meeting.

In some way the Holy Spirit indicated that Barnabas and Saul should be separated for the work as yet unspecified. It seems to have been a verbal spirit manifestation as it says, "for the work to which I HAVE CALLED THEM". This was no chance selection, but a specific calling and separation which was obvious to all. The Holy Spirit had already made the choice and, v. 3, they all put their hands on them and prayed and sent them off – to an unknown destination. This was not a giving of the spirit, but a giving of one's blessing upon them, as they placed their hands upon them and prayed. The lesson seems to be that we should engage as much as possible in collective activities and prayers and God will then openly direct our ways. We should also collectively pray for God's blessing upon each other. But what about putting our hands on one to go on a particular mission? Perhaps we can later have some ideas on this.

Antioch was quite a large walled city, about 2 sq. miles in size, on an excellent trade route and so quite prosperous.

They went to Seleucia, Antioch's port about 20 miles away. It may not sound far to us, but it must have been a day's journey. There they boarded a ship to Cyprus, about 80 miles away and landed at the port Salamis which means 'salt', probably from the Greek salos, the tossing or swelling of the sea.

The truth was already known in Cyprus, as we read in ACTS 11 vs 19 & 20: "Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen, travelled as far as Phoenicia, CYPRUS and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. Some of them, however, men from CYPRUS and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus."

Barnabas also came from Cyprus and it must have been really nice for him to be going to his own country. They went into the Salamis synagogue and preached, but we are not given any account of what happened. Paul tended to visit the synagogues as the Jews obviously believed in the O.T., which provided a basis upon which to preach. The words, “Jewish synagogues” sounds odd; were not all synagogues Jewish? Perhaps Christianity had become so widespread that some Jewish synagogues had become ‘Christian’ synagogues so they concentrated on the “Jewish” synagogues.

Verse 4 of ch. 13 tells us that John Mark was with them. As we mentioned earlier no mention was made of John when they were at Antioch, yet it seems highly likely that he was there and would have travelled with them. It seems to me that Barnabas and Saul were the leaders of this mission and John was there as “their helper” – the same word is translated, minister, officer, attendant or servant. So John was with them as a general helper. Paul later referred to the fact that he, himself, seldom baptised anyone
And that must have been the work of such a helper as John

Verse 6. “They travelled through the whole island”, indicating that they visited many places and got to Paphos, at the other end of the island. They met a Jewish sorcerer, a false prophet, named Bar-Jesus. The word “Bar” is ‘Son’; it could be he was even claiming to be a son of Christ, falsely claiming to be a prophet, but in fact he was a trickster, as the word ‘sorcerer’ or ‘magician’ indicates. He did this to obtain influence and money and was an adviser to Sergius Paulus the proconsul. Paul is historically correct in calling him “proconsul” and an inscription with Sergius’s name and title has been found. The Roman writer Pliny describes him as a man interested in science in its many forms and in natural history. He is described in v. 7 as “an intelligent man” – RV: ‘prudent’, a man of quick understanding’ and, v 7, he sent for Barnabus and because he wanted to hear the word of God, and so they preached to him.

Whilst we are not told what they said, Elymas the sorcerer, v. 8, “opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith”, which seems to indicate that Sergius Paulus was being influenced by the Truth. The RV renders “opposed them” as ‘withstood them’; it would seem it was quite a tense scene, a conflict between truth and error, falsehood and true worship. It is the same battle we encounter between the false ideas today against the truth.

Let us read v 10 and see Paul’s castigation of him: “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?”

The word “pervert” seems to imply that Elymus had been deceitfully using Scripture to support his views, hence he was perverting the right ways of the Lord. For the proconsul there was a choice between Paul and Elymus. Elymus claimed to be wise and clever; Paul showed him to be full of subtility and mischief. Elymus had a name meaning ‘Son of Jesus’ the Saviour; Paul showed him to be the son of the devil. Elymus claimed to be a prophet, Paul showed him to be an enemy of righteousness and Elymus was struck blind by the Holy Spirit and the proconsul believed. We are not told if he was baptised or what happened to Elymus, but, v 13, Paul and his companions left Paphos and sailed to Perga.

In verse 9 we have the reference to the name-change of Saul to Paul. As Saul, he was a well-to-do, educated, well connected man, possibly even a member of the Sanhedrin; humanly speaking a man of some importance, but he gave that all up for Christ and became Paul, which

means little. In the Truth there is no room for worldly respect, but we are all ‘little Pauls’, slaves of the Sovereign Lord.

It was at Perga, v. 13 that John Mark “left them to return to Jerusalem”. The word “left” in the RV is “departed” and is a strong word meaning ‘desertion’. We are not told the reason; it could have been he objected to Paul becoming team leader instead of Barnabus. Maybe he could not stand the rigours of the active preaching campaign or perhaps just felt unsuited at that time for the work.

There is no record of any activity in Perga and they went on to the Pisidian Antioch. There were actually 17 cities named Antioch, named after Antiochus.

It all sounds so easy when we read they went on to Antioch, but it was 100 miles from Perga, and travelling at 15 miles a day would have taken a week to get there. The route was noted for its robbers and so this was no easy journey. They would have followed the Roman Road, passing a big lake and through the rough mountainous passage, climbing endless miles until they reached Antioch on the 3,280-foot-high plain. It was high, cool and dry. It is thought that it was on this journey Paul suffered from his “thorn in the flesh” – possibly malaria. It may even have been Paul’s relentless pressing on, in spite of the journey and his illness that contributed to John Mark going back.

Why did they want to go to Antioch any way? Well, we don’t know, but it could have been on the recommendation of Sergius Paulus, the newly converted governor of Cyprus, because the archaeology of Antioch indicates that his family had roots in the city. An inscription there refers to “Lucius Sergius Paulus the younger”, which is thought to be a reference to the son of the Cyprus proconsul. What more natural for a father to wish for his son to have the gospel preached to him.

We read in ch. 13 v 14 that they went into the synagogue, and then v. 15, read: “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.”

There were two readings, one from the law and the other from the prophets. The ruler of the synagogue presided over the meetings and it would have been he, who decided who to call upon to read, pray or speak. The Pharisees and prominent members sat at the front and the fact that the ruler sent a messenger asking Paul if he wished to speak gives the impression that although he was a Pharisee he did not exercise that rite, showing his humility; they were probably at the back of the hall; this would have taken a few minutes and people would have started chatting, hence Paul stood up and, v. 16, motioned (or beckoned, RV) with his hand, in effect telling them to be quiet, and then proceeded to give them an exhortation.

They would have all been familiar with their history. This perhaps is a lesson for us in our preaching: speaking about things people can agree with and then gradually build up to showing how things can have a different meaning to what one has understood. Paul addressed both Jews and Gentiles who worshipped God, v. 17. Then he spoke of how the Jews were a chosen people and God delivered them from Egypt. It was God who had delivered them which showed His care for them, His people.

Ex/ 6:6-8: “I will bring you out”
“I will rid you out of their bondage”
“I will redeem you”

“I will be to you a God”

“I will bring you in unto the land”.

Yet in spite of God’s care, v. 18, “they rebelled”; “He endured their conduct”.

And showed His love to them in spite of their wickedness.

They rebelled against God’s appointed judges and wanted a king like other nations, which proved disastrous. Yet God provided them a deliverer in David, and what is more, God promised to David a ‘seed’ who would deliver them, v. 23 (Acts 13) “From this man’s (David’s) descendants God has brought to Israel the Saviour, Jesus, as He promised”. God promised that in the Davidic covenant in 2 Sam. 7:12-16, God would establish the throne of David for ever; no longer would they be an oppressed people. This was what John the Baptist had foretold, yet they had, in ignorance, crucified Christ, but God had raised him from the dead, as David had foretold (vs. 34-39) . It was so clear that this was the teaching of the Old Testament and the Prophets they so revered.

This was a glorious message to many, and it was agreed that Paul should speak more on the next Sabbath when (v. 44) almost the whole city came to hear him preach the glad tidings of the Kingdom of God.

Let us read vs 45-46 “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”.

When the Jews saw the multitude of Romans, Greeks and others, their pride of race and ingrained conviction that salvation was exclusively to the Jews, made them resent Paul’s preaching, and were filled with envy, which indicates jealousy and indignation. They were “abusive” against what Paul was saying. The RV says, “contradicting and blaspheming”. Perhaps they argued that Christ had been crucified and so cursed by the law.

They rejected Jesus, so Paul turned to the Gentiles who not embraced the hope of eternal life enthusiastically, but went and preached it throughout the region. It was not just Paul’s preaching, but the pre-determined purpose of God that the Gentiles should be related to His purpose. We read, end of v. 48, “...all who were appointed for eternal life believed”. The AV says, “ordained” to eternal life; it was God’s purpose, and it is the same with us. Naturally wretched creatures but because of God’s grace towards us we are destined to eternal life.

Let us now read vs. 49-52:

“The word of the Lord spread through the whole region. 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 and went to Iconium. And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.”

It should be noted that it was the Jews who stirred up hatred of the Christians (generally speaking the heathen regarded Christians as just another ‘religion’ and as they tended to worship many God another on, like the unknown God it did not make a lot of difference to them. The Jews also infiltrated the ecclesias as Judaisers trying to destroy the ecclesias from within.

The city was, we understand, under the direction of ten leading men, and the Jews incited God-fearing women, Jewesses to influence the leaders.. It is often said of leading men that they have

a woman behind them. It can be the same in the ecclesias.) We are told the brethren were persecuted, but no details are given, but it must have been severe.

Paul mentions it in his letter to Timothy. Let us read it – 2 Timothy ch. 3 vs. 10 & 11 :

“You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings – what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them.”

In listing some of his sufferings in 2 Cor. Ch. 11 (vs. 24 & 25) Paul mentions, “Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods...”. Maybe some of these were at Antioch. As dreadful as persecution is, it often turns out to increase the spread of the gospel. Even in our times the underground churches are strong and thriving.

In verse 50 of Acts 13 we learn that they expelled Paul and Barnabas from the city; it suggests a violent casting out. Then, v. 52, they shook off the dust of their feet as they left. The object of the persecution and expulsion was designed to cease the work, but it had the reverse effect, as we saw from vs. 51 & 52.

So, after this, they went to Iconium, sixty miles away from Antioch. They again made themselves known to the Jews and spoke in the synagogue and at ch. 14 v 1 we read that “a great multitude of Jews and Gentiles believed”, v. 2, But, the Jews that did not believe stirred up evil against them, but, (v. 3) God enabled signs and wonders to be done by them, doubtless healing the humanly incurable, but in spite of these evident tokens of the apostles’ authority the unbelievers planned an assault, or a ‘violent impulse’ on them. They were indeed going to stone them - the Jewish method of execution – so they fled to Lystra, about 20 miles further on.

There is no mention of them going into the synagogue here at Lystra - probably they preached in the market place - but listening to them was a man crippled from his birth. Ch. 14 vs. 8-13 “In Lystra there sat a man crippled in his feet, who was lame from birth and had never walked. He listened to Paul as he was speaking. Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed, and called out, Stand up on your feet! At that, the man jumped up and began to walk. When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, The gods have come down to us in human form!” Barnabas they called Zeus and Paul they called Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought bulls and wreaths to the city gates because he and the crowd wanted to offer sacrifices to them”.

Maybe this lame man had hobbled along to listen, or was even taken by others each day for years to beg, but at Paul’s command, through the Holy Spirit, he called out – shouted out for all to hear – “Stand up on your feet”, and he jumped up and walked before them – a fantastic miracle and Paul and Barnabas had problems in stopping the people from worshipping them.

Maybe Paul and Barnabas would not at first have understood what the commotion was all about as v. 11 says the people spoke in the Lycaonian language, which would have been foreign to them. There were two principal gods in Lystra, Zeus the main one whose statue was before the city gate. He was represented as tall and aged and maybe Barnabas fitted that description. Hermes or Mercurius at it was sometimes called, was smaller and acted as the mouthpiece or messenger of Zeus, and as Paul did much of the talking it seemed appropriate that he should be called Hermes.

There was a tradition that these two gods were the gods of their city and in their superstition it was thought that their gods had come down and so they hurriedly arranged for sacrifices to be made and garlands of flowers to be put on Paul and Barnabas.

We suggested initially that Paul and Barnabas may not have understood the Lycaonian language, but v. 14 tells us they rushed into the crowd shouting. Perhaps this was by the gift of tongues which would have even more impressed the people of Lystra. Let's read vs. 15-18 so see what they said:

“Men, why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them. In the past, he let all nations go their own way. Yet he has not left himself without testimony. He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy. Even with these words they had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them.”

Paul does not at first attack their idolatry, but gradually builds up a case. He tactfully opens in a polite way, “Men” – in the NIV “Sirs” and in the AV and it really means ‘gentlemen’. He then humbles himself by stating that there was no difference between them and Barnabas and himself and their companions. They were all of a similar nature. Then he starts preaching, beginning with the Creator and all His wonderful works – the design argument. In all this we see his wonderful humility and a wonderful pattern to ourselves.