

GOD WITH US

Part 9: ACTS

Message 4 – Paul’s First Journey

Acts 12:1-15:35

Introduction

We have seen how the story of Acts unfolds in 3 stages, according to the outline provided by Acts 1:8. Stage 1 is the ministry in Jerusalem (1-8). Stage 2 is the ministry in Judea and Samaria (9-12). Stage 3 is the ministry to the wider Roman empire (13-28). From chapter 13 to the end of the book of Acts, Paul becomes the main character, as he embarks on 3 major missionary trips to take the gospel to the wider Roman Empire. But before Paul takes center stage, we are taken back to Jerusalem in a sort of transitional chapter that shows us what was happening to the apostles in the city where everything began.

Death of James & Escape of Peter: 12:1-25

“It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. When he saw that this met with approval among the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Festival of Unleavened Bread” (12:1-3).

James was killed for political reasons: Herod wanted to do a favor for the Jews during Passover week, (‘Festival of Unleavened Bread’). When this pleased his Jewish subjects, he decided to put Peter to death also. But Peter was miraculously released from prison by an angel. He thought he was seeing a vision; but when he realized it was real, he went straight to the house where the Christians were gathered in prayer:

“When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying” (12:12).

The early church was a *praying church*. From beginning to end, the entire movement was saturated in constant prayer. It also appears that the key “house of prayer” belonged to Mary, the mother of John Mark (later the writer of the Gospel of Mark).

Mary of Jerusalem: Comments from Shirley

Mary, whose home was in Jerusalem, is mentioned only once in the Bible. But, her example and impact are ongoing. Acts 12:12 describes Mary as the mother of John Mark, a younger disciple of Jesus and the writer of the Gospel of Mark. Mark was also a young cousin of Barnabas, who was related to Mary. Mary's husband had probably died, leaving her with a home that she chose to use for ministry. She was wealthy enough to have a servant girl named Rhoda. It was large enough for believers to gather secretly and hold prayer meetings. Many believe that Jesus used her home to have His "Last Supper."

Mary had an open heart and an open home. Her hospitality provided a safe place to meet at a time when there was intense persecution. She was a generous and courageous woman, who could have been killed for allowing her home to be used in secret, against the law.

The story told in Acts 12:1-17, is intense! King Herod put James to death to scare the believers and stop the movement. Peter was to be killed next! Herod could lock up Peter, but he could not lock up the prayers of the believers who were gathered at Mary's home. They fervently worshipped and sought God's face and His power to save Peter. They had no assurance that God would answer their prayers, but the Bible gives examples of how fervent prayer had been used in God's plan to defeat evil and do the impossible!

Miraculously God answered their prayers, and after Peter was led out of the prison by an angel, he knew where to find the believers: at Mary's home. The believers were so astonished when he showed up. How their faith must have been strengthened as Peter told the amazing details of how God sent the angel who brought him out of the prison. Peter then had to leave Jerusalem before dawn.

Mary is an example of the command in Romans 12:13 to practice hospitality. She wasn't 'entertaining', rather just opening her home. The fervent prayers of the believers happened because they had a safe place to meet. Mary's home was used to birth many miracles and stories of changed lives. Her own son Mark was impacted by the example of the believers and their passion for prayer.

Like Mary, I am thankful for the opportunity that our own children have had to meet many believers from around the world. They in turn have continued being hospitable to their own generation. If you have never used your home or apartment for a gathering place to meet and have a small group, why not consider doing it! Over the past 40 years we have hosted many groups, and our home has never been 'perfect' or a 'show-house'! (Just ask anyone who has been over). It has been 'as-is' but a place to gather in Jesus' name.

King Herod's Death: 12:19-25

To close this chapter looking at the events back in Jerusalem, Luke recounts the death of King Herod, the persecutor of the church. Secular history confirms Luke's account, noting that Herod died from an excruciatingly painful internal disease. In sharp contrast to Herod's quick demise, Luke finishes this section with this note:

“But the word of God continued to spread and flourish” (12:24).

Regardless of what the world does to try to stop the spread of the gospel, the Spirit of God will make sure that the name of Jesus goes to the ends of the earth. It is an unstoppable movement. We can take courage from this story the Spirit included, that these faithful praying believers trusted Jesus to be at work in the “unseen”. It seemed that the worldly ruler was winning with the death of James, but ultimately God dealt with Herod. In our circumstances, we need to believe that God IS doing HIS part, while WE keep our faith in Him, which is OUR part.

Paul and Barnabas chosen by the Spirit: 13:1-3

While Paul was already serving as a co-pastor with Barnabas in the primarily Gentile church of Antioch, his emergence as “the apostle to the Gentiles” began at a leader's prayer meeting in Antioch:

“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” (13:2,3).

Prayer plays such a major role in the progress of the gospel in the book of Acts. “Worship and fasting” are two examples we can learn from them. Worship is focusing on WHO God IS and declaring that He is more than able to accomplish all that He wants to do. “Fasting” (a posture of denial and dependence) was a common practice of the Jews, and the Christians continued it. The Christians in Acts worshiped and prayed when: appointing leaders; facing persecution; seeking the Spirit' guidance; needing a miracle from God; sending out the first missionaries; sitting on a rooftop; sitting in a prison; sailing on a ship... they worshiped and prayed in every situation. They got their example from Jesus who, during His earthly ministry, rose early each day to pray and seek guidance from His heavenly Father.

Oak Pointe Church chose PRAYER as one of our key 8 traits of a disciple, because of the Christians' example in the book of Acts. When we pray, it is good to first take time to 'worship' God- whether through singing songs or just reading Scripture, and speaking it back to Him saying, "Yes Lord, I agree with this verse about You! You ARE all powerful, and all knowing, and in control of my life." Second, after worship we turn to "supplication" – asking God to supply our needs. In some situations, you might also consider fasting - denying yourself something you enjoy, or from food. Finally, always give thanks in prayer to God, for the ways He has already shown up in your life. How can you get more involved in the PRAYER LIFE of OPC? How can you make prayer more a part of your own life, or your life group?

Ministry on Cyprus: 13:4-12

Paul and Barnabas may have gone to Cyprus first since Barnabas was from that island (Acts 4:36). John Mark was their assistant. They adopted a strategy that Paul would follow for the rest of his ministry. In every new city, he would go "to the Jews first" by locating the synagogue and presenting the gospel on one or more Sabbath days (Saturday). Those from the synagogue who believed in Jesus formed the nucleus of the new "church" in that community and would begin to meet regularly. (The Christians moved their day of worship to Sunday, in honor of the day of Christ's resurrection.)

Power-encounters were a common part of the missionary expansion of the early church. Philip overcame the power of Simon the magician in Samaria (8:9-13). Paul will later challenge the power of magic in Ephesus (19:11-16). On Cyprus, Paul and Barnabas had a power-encounter with a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named 'Elymus' or Bar-Jesus, who was an advisor to Sergius Paulus, the governor of the island.

"Elymas the sorcerer (for that is what his name means) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith. 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 for a time, not even able to see the light of the

sun.’ 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” (13:8-12).

Evil spiritual powers are real, and their impact should never be minimized. Paul wrote: “Our struggle is NOT against flesh and blood (other people), but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12). Yet, we have this assurance: “Greater is He Who is in you than he who is in the world” (1John 4:4). Jesus prayed for His disciples: “I do not ask You to take them out of the world; but to keep them from the Evil One” (John 17:15). When you face unexplainable opposition and/or hostility from others in your walk with Jesus, turn to Him and ask Him to defeat the evil powers that may be at work in the unseen world of spiritual conflict.

Ministry in Pisidian Antioch: 13:13-51

The team sailed from Cyprus to the mainland (*100 miles northward*). For some unknown reason, John Mark (their assistant) left the team and returned home. Paul and Barnabas *continued the journey* to Pisidian Antioch (not to be confused with Syrian Antioch, where they originally launched out from) in the region known as Galatia (the churches planted in the Galatian region would later receive Paul’s letter “to the Galatians”). As per their custom, they entered the synagogue on the Sabbath and, when invited to speak, Paul gave a message concerning God’s fulfillment of His promises to Israel, particularly in sending the “Christ”. (Note: This opening sermon is recorded at greater length than most of Paul’s sermons in Acts, probably because Luke wanted to give the reader a feel for the kinds of messages that Paul would give in every synagogue.) Paul reviewed the history of the Jewish nation, focusing on God’s promise to David to send one of his sons to sit on the throne forever. Then, he explained how Israel had rejected Jesus; but God had raised Him from the dead:

“We tell you the good news: What God promised our ancestors, He has fulfilled for us their children, by raising up Jesus” (13:32,33).

Then, he offered them the forgiveness that comes through faith in Jesus Christ:

“Therefore, my friends, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through Him everyone who believes is set free from every sin, a justification you were not able to obtain under the law of Moses” (13:38,39).

God’s Law is holy and right and good. No-one can keep the standards of God. In fact, when we look at God’s Law, it should cause us to realize that we can’t possibly attain God’s standards for His acceptance. No amount of ‘good’ is ‘good enough’, as Paul finally realized. But GOD’S GRACE and FORGIVENESS is offered to each one of us when we acknowledge that we fall so far short and need Christ, who is fully God yet fully human, to be our Savior. If you have not accepted God’s salvation which has been paid for by Jesus Christ, as Paul was encouraging these people to in each city, simply BELIEVE IN JESUS. He is the only One who has lived a sinless life, and fully paid the price for your sins. You can never achieve God’s forgiveness on your own. Salvation is God’s gracious gift to you!

Paul and Barnabas had a good reception on this first visit to the synagogue and were invited back to speak more the next Sabbath day. On that second visit to the synagogue, Luke reports that nearly the entire city gathered *“to hear the word of the Lord.”* Yet, they met stiff resistance from the local Jewish leaders.

“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. They began to contradict what Paul was saying and heaped abuse on him” (13:44,45).

Paul then began focusing his attention on the Gentiles in the region, and there was wide receptivity . . . and more opposition:

“The word of the Lord spread through the whole region. But the Jewish leaders 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 off their feet as a warning to them and went to Iconium. And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit” (13:49-52).

Ministry in Iconium: 14:1-7

The ministry in Iconium followed a pattern similar to that in Pisidian Antioch. Many Jews and Gentiles believed in Jesus after

the initial sermons in the synagogue; but fierce opposition arose from Jewish leaders. Paul and Barnabas “*spent considerable time there,*” *proclaiming Christ and performing miracles.* Finally, they were forced to move on:

“The people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews, others with the apostles. There was a plot among both Gentiles and Jews, together with their leaders, to mistreat them and stone them. But they found out about it and fled to the Lycaonian cities of Lystra and Derbe and to the surrounding country, where they continued to preach the gospel” 14:4-7).

Ministry in Lystra and Derbe: 14:8-20

Because of Paul’s ability to perform miracles, the people in Lystra believed that the Greek gods had come to their city!

“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” (14:11-13).

Paul and Barnabas pleaded with the adoring crowd to believe that they were *not* gods, and that they had been sent to them to give them the knowledge of the *true God*. Then, in a sudden turn of events, the crowd changed their minds and became hostile:

“Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. But after the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city. The next day he and Barnabas left for Derbe” (14:19-20).

Stoned and dragged out of the city, thought to be dead! Such was the cost these apostles. People today are still paying the ultimate cost for their devotion to Jesus. On April 18, 2019, it was reported that Muslim herdsmen had killed 17 Christians who were gathered at a church for a child dedication and meal in a village in Nigeria. If we live in a time and place where there is little or no persecution for our faith in Jesus, then we live in a rare and privileged time and place! What can you do to use your privileged situation to make the name of Jesus more widely known in your sphere of influence?

The Return to Antioch in Syria: 14:21-28

After Paul and Barnabas had reached the end of their tour of cities in the Galatian region, they retraced their steps and went back to every city they had already visited!

They returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,” they said. Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust” (14:21-23).

The return visit to each city was motivated by a genuine concern for the welfare and sustainability of the infant churches. Paul knew that life would be difficult for them, given the level of persecution he had faced. His heart for them was that they would remain “true to the faith”. Note that “prayer and fasting” was the pattern of these spiritual leaders, as they committed these new believers to grow and reach out in their region. How can we “strengthen and encourage the disciples” today, in our church? Perhaps you can mentor someone who needs your shepherding touch. Or maybe you can open your home to a life group. Or you can join a ministry team and encourage the church through your serving. Or, if God has you in a time of trial and suffering, you can encourage others by the way you trust God in your difficult days.

Finally, Paul and Barnabas returned to home base at Antioch, and gave a full report of their missionary trip and the outcomes:

“On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. And they stayed there a long time with the disciples” (14:27,28).

The Jerusalem Council: 15:1-35

The issue of Gentiles becoming Christians was something that the Jewish believers wrestled with. The issue came to a head following Paul and Barnabas’ first missionary, when teachers came to Antioch contradicting Paul. Acts 15 records the first “church council meeting” to resolve the Gentile question.

Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: “Unless you are circumcised, according

to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.” This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them” (15:1,2).

Paul and Barnabas were sent to Jerusalem for a council meeting with the other church leaders to resolve this dispute. (Note: Circumcision of male infants on the 8th day after birth was a command given to Abraham by God (Genesis 17:12). Gentiles who converted to Judaism were circumcised as a sign of their obedience and conversion. However, now the Gentiles were being welcomed into the faith of Christ by simply believing in His death and resurrection for their sins.) After much debate from both sides, Peter stood and recounted how God had opened a door for the Gentiles through his visit to the house of Cornelius (Acts 10). He summarized his position:

“Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are” (15:10,11).

Paul and Barnabas recounted God’s work through them among the Gentiles. Finally, James (the ‘half’ brother of Jesus, one of the sons of Joseph and Mary, and now leader of the Jerusalem church) stood and gave the final decision (based not only on the experiences described, but also on Old Testament prophecies concerning God’s care for the Gentiles):

“It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.” (15:13-21).

This was the final decision – Gentiles did not have to become Jewish through circumcision to become Christians. At the same time, there were a few restrictions that Gentile Christians should observe, for moral reasons (e.g. sexual immorality) or for the sake of not offending their Jewish Christian brothers (eg. food that had been sacrificed to idols, and raw meat containing blood). Paul

would later write about these same “stumbling block” kinds of issues between Jewish and Gentile Christians (1Corinthians 8-10).

A formal letter was issued by the Jerusalem Council and sent out to the Gentile churches. Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch in Syria and did ministry there for an unspecified amount of time before the Spirit impelled them to launch out on a 2nd even wider missionary journey.

Discussion Questions

1. James the brother of John was killed by Herod; Peter was rescued by an angel. What does this tell you about God’s unique and sovereign plan for each one of us?
2. If you are a believer in Jesus, can you recall a situation in your life when the Holy Spirit directed you to a new assignment (like Barnabas and Paul were directed by the Spirit – Acts 13:1-3). Who and/or what inner stirrings or circumstances did He use?
3. John Mark left this mission trip early on. How long would you have lasted, given the difficult and potentially deadly circumstances in each city?
4. The Bible records that Barnabas took John Mark out with him again on another mission trip (Acts 15:37-39). Later the Apostle Peter took Mark under his care like a ‘son’ (1 Peter 5:13) whose sermons Mark recorded which became the ‘Gospel of Mark’. And in the end, even Paul was talking about the value of John Mark (2Timothy 4:11). How does this encourage you?
5. God has placed OPC in a unique situation where the nations are coming to our region. How can you be a “missionary” to the nations by getting involved in our growing ministry to the internationals living around us?