

Acts 13: 1-52 Partners in Mission

As we've seen over the last few weeks Saul had an amazing conversion. Chapter 9 tells us that Saul was heading to Damascus to persecute and arrest Christians but on the road he met with the risen Christ in a most dramatic way. As a result just a few days later, this killer of Christians was preaching the good news of Christ in the marketplace.

Understandably Saul was treated with some suspicion by many of the Christians. If a German SS officer had seen the light and wanted to join the resistance many of those resistant soldiers would have taken quite a lot of convincing that he wasn't a double agent. But with the help of Barnabas Saul is introduced to the leaders in Jerusalem and when persecution breaks out there Saul ends up in his home town Tarsus.

Now we don't know how long Saul spent in Tarsus, but no doubt it was a time when Saul grew in his understanding of Jesus and of all he had done, so that when Barnabas turns up again Saul is ready and equipped to go. By now the Holy Spirit had fallen upon the Gentiles as well, and Dan took us through that wonderful event last week. And since the gospel was now being preached to non-Jews the church needed more missionaries and Saul was trained and ready.

It sounds as if Saul and Barnabas were working at Antioch for quite some time. The end of chapter 11 speaks about them being there for a year and at the start of chapter 13 they are both named, with others, as leaders of the church in Antioch. What an amazing transformation! Saul had gone from being a persecutor of Christians to a teacher and leader in the church. But God's plans for Saul were just getting off the ground, and that's what we see throughout the rest of the book of Acts.

Now there is a huge amount within this long chapter, and we don't have time to look at it all in detail, but I do want to focus on six chunks today as well as making some other comments as we go through. So you'll need your Bibles open to Acts chapter 13, and you'll find that on page 1107 of your church Bibles.

The first place I want us to look is verses 1 to 3 where we see **God's call to Barnabas and Saul**.

The church leaders were worshipping the Lord. They had set aside some time for prayer and fasting so it was a deliberate seeking of God, rather than a regular Sunday gathering. And it's into that situation that God spoke through the Holy Spirit. We don't know how that came about, whether it was an audible voice or a deep conviction within, but as they praised God and prayed it was clear that God was asking the church leaders to release Saul and Barnabas for the work God had prepared for them to do.

There are two things to note here: Firstly, Saul and Barnabas were probably the best leaders they had, but they didn't belong to the church – they belonged first and foremost to God. And if God is going to grow his kingdom in all probability there will be times when we, as God's people here, will need to release people and send them to work elsewhere. And if that happens we must not be possessive about that and they must go with our prayers and our blessing if that's what the Lord is calling them to do.

Secondly – if you are wondering what God is calling you to do then this is a wonderful model of how that usually works. Saul and Barnabas were already active in God's kingdom, not sitting on their backsides waiting for a sign. And then they set aside time, with other leaders to pray and worship God and that's when God called them. So if you are sensing or seeking a call from God on your life, for a clear direction, then you need to be active in God's kingdom, serving him where you are, but you also need to seek him, purposefully, clearly, passionately through prayer and fasting and worship.

And when God called, Saul and Barnabas answered. They travelled with a guy called Mark who may have been the author of Mark's gospel and they went first to Cyprus, which was where Barnabas came from. We read about that in verses 4 to 12. It's our second heading today.

Cyprus: preaching and spiritual opposition

What's striking here is that the opposition is satanic in origin. Throughout the Gospels Jesus confronted demonic powers time and time again, and it is just the same with the apostles. The battles we fight are not against flesh and

blood but against principalities and powers, spiritual forces of darkness and evil. In our own town many, many people, spend time and money visiting spiritualist churches or mediums or having their tarot cards read and as a result Satan himself will have some influence over their lives. I'm not saying they're going to be possessed by evil spirits like we see in the Bible; that was rare then and I'm sure it is rare now. But when we take the gospel out we will face opposition in the spiritual realm which will stir up opposition in the physical realm. That's what happened here.

But do you notice what happened? Despite this opposition God's kingdom advanced. Jesus himself said that he would build his church and the gates of hell would not prevail against it. As will see in a moment, that doesn't mean it's always an easy fight. It does mean that our ultimate victory is certain. And that should give us great confidence shouldn't it? Of course it should! And no doubt buoyed by that certainty, Barnabas and Saul and Mark set sail from Paphos, landed on the shores of modern day Turkey, then travelled inland to Perga.

Now if you've been following the Bible closely you'll see that in verse 13 Saul is now referred to as Paul. He's the same man, but having had a new start he now takes on a new name - so I'll call him Paul from now on.

For some reason, when this missionary band of brothers arrived at Perga, Mark left them and went home. We are not told why, but a few chapters later Paul refers to Mark's disappearance as desertion. Maybe things were getting hard and Mark, being quite a young man, wasn't quite up for it. In his letter to the Galatians, and it was to the churches in this area that that letter was sent, Paul refers to a serious problem with his eyes. So perhaps Mark thought that Paul had lost the plot and should have been calling it a day due to ill health. We don't know. It's all speculation, but we do know that the team of three was now a team of two. We also know that despite the difficulties Paul and Barnabas faced, they preached the gospel there before travelling another hundred miles north to Pisidian Antioch. Pisidian Antioch was a Roman colony and an important town in the region and therefore a wonderful base for Paul and Barnabas to use for their mission.

So far in the book of Acts the gospel of Jesus has been largely spread by Jewish Christians going into the synagogues and speaking about Jesus. And that is what Paul and Barnabas do here.

It's a normal Sunday. The service would have begun with words reminding the congregation that 'the Lord your God is one and you shall worship the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.' There would have been some prayers and two lessons: one from the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible, and the other from one of the prophets. There was also a sermon. But on this occasion the leaders of the synagogue, perhaps recognising by his dress that Paul was a Rabbi, invited him to speak. Luke records for us some of the details of that sermon, and if you've been here through the series so far it will seem awfully similar to the one that Peter gave at Pentecost, and to the one that Stephen gave before being stoned to death. And it's a sermon with three parts to it, today we have one more than that, but often sermons have three points and that habit goes right back to the early church. So how does Paul structure his talk? He connects to his listeners, he points them to Jesus and then he gives them a challenge.

The sermon: connecting with the listeners

I don't know whether you've ever tried to explain the offside rule to someone who has never seen a game of football. It's sometimes pretty tricky to explain even to people who have some knowledge of the game, but to someone who has never seen a game of football before the offside rule is completely baffling.

In the same way, trying to explain the good news of Jesus can sometimes be just as baffling. Christianity isn't a philosophy that you can deduce for yourselves by gazing at the stars or walking in the woods. It is based on facts in history, rooted in the real world and it needs to be explained. But for that to happen somehow we need to connect the truth of the gospel with the experience of the people we are speaking to. And that's what Paul does here brilliantly. He spends verses 16 to 25 reminding his Jewish listeners of their own history, from Abraham to Moses and the Judges and Samuel and Saul and King David and right up to date with John the Baptist, so that when he comes to the real events in the life of Jesus they fit seamlessly into that context.

So here's my next challenge: can you do that? Are you able to see the connections between everyday life and the good news of the gospel? You see, as disciples of Jesus we are all called to be able to give a reason for the hope that we have, but hope is needed because often life looks hopeless. When tower blocks catch fire, when bombs go off, when people die young, when you lose your job or your family disintegrates around you, how does the hope of the gospel speak to those situations? We need to be thinking about these things. We need to be engaging with our culture, understanding how people around us are thinking so that we can speak the good news of Jesus to them in a way they can understand. Can you do that? Sometimes it's hard. Often I need to do it better with my talks on Sunday mornings. But it's so important. If people are going to hear the good news of Jesus we need to speak that unchanging truth in a way that fits with our changing culture or they won't be able to understand.

Because there are things that people need to hear aren't there? That's what Paul gets do with the main chunk of his sermon when in verses 26 to 37 he comes to the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The sermon: The life, death and resurrection of Jesus

As I said a moment ago, the Christian faith is rooted in real events in history. Jesus really did die. He really was buried in a real tomb cut out of real rock and on the third day after his death he really, really, really rose from the dead again in the flesh and was seen by real people. And if those events weren't dramatic enough Paul was able to point his Jewish listeners back to the Old Testament and show them that those events were exactly what God promised!

David was a great King he said, but he died and was buried and his body decayed but that is not what happened to Jesus. Jesus rose again from the dead! His resurrection is the key event in human history. Without Jesus' death on the cross we could not be forgiven, but without the resurrection it would have all ended in failure. Paul himself says in 1 Corinthians 15 that if Jesus Christ was not raised then our faith is futile and we are still dead in our sins. But Jesus was raised from the dead. And plenty of people saw him raised. And they passed on that message in word across the known world and then in the written word the Bible. And that word has been taken around the globe over the centuries so that today billions of people know that Jesus Christ is Lord and there are believers in every country on the globe.

Friends, it's very easy to spend our time talking about church and God and faith, but we need to spend time speaking about Jesus. That's why I've been recommending that series on Rightnow Media called '*Go Fish*'. It's one of the reasons we are working through the book of Acts. It's one of the reasons we were involved in *Love Stevenage* yesterday and why I'd love you all to go to the big event at Hampson Park this afternoon. It's one of the reasons we are having a mini mission next February. It is why we run short courses term by term because people need to hear about Jesus.

So don't be put off mentioning his name. The evidence for the death and resurrection of Jesus is utterly compelling because they are real events that actually happened in history. Our faith is not based on wishful thinking or rumours or strange superstitions but on truth. And if you're not a Christian here today, then let me challenge you to examine the truth about Jesus. Let me challenge you over the summer to examine the claims about the reliability of the Bible and especially the New Testament accounts of the life and work and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

That's what Paul does here before he ends his sermon with a challenge, because the facts about Jesus Christ force us to choose.

The sermon: The challenge to choose

We can see this final part of Paul's sermon from verse 38 to 41. Paul reminds them here that since obedience to the Law of Moses is impossible so it is impossible to be justified by keeping that law. According to the Bible to have eternal life we need to be perfect as God is perfect. That's the meaning of the word justified that Paul uses here. To be justified means to be made right with God, to have our sin and our rebellion, and we are all guilty of that, dealt with once and for all so that we can stand before God with confidence and know him as our Father. Despite our very best efforts we can't achieve justification or the forgiveness of our sins through our own efforts but, through Jesus full and free forgiveness is available to all who believe.

Now Paul may not absolutely clearly set out two ways to live here but the implication is plain enough isn't it. To have eternal life we need to be forgiven and be made righteous and that is only available through Jesus; so rejecting him means that we remain in our sin and facing a lost eternity.

Paul uses some words from the book of Habakkuk to challenge listeners. It's as if he is saying "I know this sounds amazing. I know you weren't expecting me to say this today, I know you may have trouble believing it but Jesus is the fulfilment of God's Old Testament promises and if you reject him you are rejecting God."

Friends what we decide about Jesus matters enormously. Deciding who to marry is a big decision. Deciding where to live or what career to pursue is important. But no decision you will ever make is as vital as this one because only this decision lasts for all eternity. And if you have not yet made up your mind yet let me beg you not to wait too long. Last week I took the funeral of someone in their 60s; this coming week I have a funeral of a man aged just 53. None of us know how long we have to live and our choice as to whether we accept Jesus as our Lord and Saviour or reject him will decide our eternal future.

The response: Mixed – but God was at work!

The response on that day was mixed, as it always is when the gospel message is proclaimed. Some believed, some were curious and some rejected the message entirely. Sadly over the next week those responses became more and more polarised so that when an enormous crowd, including perhaps many hundreds of Gentiles, gathered at the synagogue a number of the Jews were filled with jealousy and started to argue against the gospel.

Paul's response was to walk away. He doesn't debate on this occasion and he doesn't argue with them. They have heard the word of God, he has told them clearly about Jesus and since they refuse to listen he would not waste his time. He knew that the gospel is for everyone and he wanted to see as many people saved as possible so he left those who had heard and not believed and went to preach and teach the Gentiles. And verse 48 tells us that the Gentiles who heard this were *"glad and honoured the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed."*

Through the preaching of the gospel many became Christians and then they went out and told others so that the word of God spread through the whole region.

And this is my final challenge for today. How is it that so many of us have lost our passion for telling others about Jesus? How can that be? Perhaps we've got used to the wonder of it all? Perhaps we've got complacent and are over-whelmed with the cares of this life? Perhaps we've forgotten how important it is the people hear and believe in Christ? But my brothers and sisters, our friends and our neighbours and our colleagues are facing a lost eternity unless someone tells them about Jesus. And that is down to us.

Of course when we speak about Jesus there will be opposition, as there was here, but some will believe and some will be saved and they will tell others and God's kingdom grow. Don't you want to be a part of the church like that? I know I do.

I want my life to count for something, to make a difference in eternity. It was one of the reasons I left being a Primary School head teacher, a job I really enjoyed, so that I could tell people about Jesus and equip people not just for this life but forever. That's the kind of legacy we have a chance to build.

The passage ends with the persecution building up and getting so strong that eventually Paul and Barnabas were expelled not just from the town but from the region. But as we'll see next week the gospel wasn't chained, and God used that expulsion to send them to other places where they could preach also.

And the believers left behind were not downhearted but were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.

Is that how you are feeling today? I hope so! The gospel is the power of God for those who are being saved. But how will they hear if no one tells them? That's our call. Perhaps not in Turkey and Greece, or some far flung shore. But like Paul and Barnabas we are called to go out with the message and we will see God's Kingdom grow as we do.