

19. Paul's first missionary journey begins

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Traveling foreign countries is not exactly like traveling to Phoenix, even to Los Angeles. First, you have to go through departure and entry process with your passport and visa, then followed by customs where they think that you are some sort of smuggler by digging through every nook and cranny of your luggage.

After you go through all that, when you step out of the airport, you know how Dorothy from the movie the Wizard of Oz felt and said, "We're not in Kansas anymore." That's right, you are not in your comfort zone anymore. Different languages, different customs, different foods, and all the convenience of your home town are not there.

The American people in general think that the U.S.A. is the center of the world. But in truth, Israel is and has been. That is one of the many reasons the Lord chose Israel over other nations to bring forth the Messiah His Son Jesus. Israel was the connecting point of Eastern and Western culture.

Then the Lord allowed the young ambitious conqueror Alexander the Great to conquer all the countries around the known world that were Southern Europe, Asia Minor, Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, Persia, and even India. With his conquest, Alexander commanded every conquered nation to learn and speak Greek language.

After the Greek Empires, the Roman Empire piggybacked the advantages of the Greek culture and spread out their influences all over their highways which were known as Roman Roads that comprised more than 250,000 miles of paved roads.

All of these were prepared for apostle Paul to make his three missionary journeys to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ to all the world. From chapter 13, we are traveling companions of apostle Paul for all of his missionary journeys. We will learn many people's names and city names that we can hardly pronounce, yet we will learn very important truth of Jesus Christ from these journeys.

A. CALLING TO MINISTRY

Acts 12:25 And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had fulfilled their ministry, and they also took with them John whose surname was Mark.

Acts 13:1-3 Now in the church that was at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. 2 As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, "Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." 3 Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away.

I am sure that you remember Saul and Barnabas left Antioch with a gift of support from the Antioch church to the believers in Jerusalem who were suffering due to the big famine in that area. They just returned from Jerusalem with Barnabas' nephew John Mark.

Until now, Jerusalem had been the center of ministry, and Peter had been the key apostle. But from this point on, Antioch in Syria would become the new center of Christianity, and Paul the new leader. The Gospel was on the move.

In v2, these men were ministering to the Lord. What does this mean? In Greek, the word, 'minister' is "leitourgeo". Ministering to the Lord means doing what pleases Him and honors Him – worship, praise, prayer, listening to, honoring God.

According to the Greek Lexicon, 'minister' is for the service of priests and Levites in the temple. In other words, these five men were doing worship, praise, prayer, listening and honoring the Lord God. It is no wonder the Lord answered their prayer by commissioning Saul and Barnabas to the missionary ministry.

Unlike finding business direction in the corporate world, finding direction of ministry can be vague. Because we serve the One whom we cannot see with physical eyes; we listen to a voice we cannot literally hear; we often feel that we are told to follow a plan, but we have no idea how it will unfold.

During the process of discovering God's leading, we are subject to enormous changes – out of our comfort zone to the area we are not familiar with physically, or emotionally, or spiritually. These are the changes we must embrace in the power of the Holy Spirit if we choose to obey Him.

Though we are accountable to the church we serve in ministry, ultimately, each of us must answer to the Lord. Without that kind of single-minded devotion to Him, we can run the risk of becoming people-pleasers. Any people-pleasers in ministry are pathetic spiritual wimps and he or she will fail to please the Lord. Rather than being a warrior for the King, it is easy to become an insecure wimp, relying on human opinions and longing for people's approval. By His grace, I haven't been there and won't go there.

Many of you think, "OK, this applies to those who are called to ministry, not me, because I am not a pastor or elder or deacon or missionary." No, you are wrong about that. If you are a born-again Christian, you are called by God and He is changing you and you know that. Besides, you don't want to remain in the same situation as before you became a Christian anyway.

So stay open to whatever the Lord has for you. Tell Him that you are willing to obey. You never know that you might become the next Barnabas or Paul the Lord wants to use.

These men laid their hands on Saul and Barnabas and their church officially sent them out. This is the first official missionary commission that was recorded in the Bible. They seem to have done this without a committee report, without a demographic analysis, without a marketing survey, without what is sometimes called "spiritual mapping." Barnabas and Saul went out without any of these things, only with the call and power of the Holy Spirit. What a noble concept!

B. STEP OUT AND FACE THE ENEMY

Acts 13:4-12 So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus. 5 And when they arrived in Salamis, they preached the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. They also had John as their assistant. 6 Now when they had gone through the island to Paphos, they found a certain sorcerer, a false prophet, a Jew whose name was Bar-Jesus, 7 who was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, an intelligent man. This man called for Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. 8 But

Elymas the sorcerer (for so his name is translated) withstood them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith. 9 Then Saul, who also is called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him 10 and said, "O full of all deceit and all fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease perverting the straight ways of the Lord? 11 And now, indeed, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you shall be blind, not seeing the sun for a time." And immediately a dark mist fell on him, and he went around seeking someone to lead him by the hand. 12 Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had been done, being astonished at the teaching of the Lord.

It was logical to go first to Cyprus, because this was the home of Barnabas. Salamis, the great commercial center was located at the east end of the island. Then these men traveled ninety miles to Paphos on the west end of the island, and there they met their first opposition.

This city Paphos on the west coast of Cyprus was known for its immorality. Here Barnabas and Saul faced a combination of immorality and spiritual darkness that was common across the pagan world of the Roman Empire. This city was infamous for its worship of Venus, the goddess of love which actually was the goddess of pure lust.

Though Proconsul Paulus was an intelligent man, he was manipulated by Bar-Jesus which means "Son of Jesus", a Jewish sorcerer. When the governor started to seek the truth from Saul and Barnabas, this sorcerer would not sit on his hand and let him find the truth.

By the way, Eminent archaeologist Sir William Ramsay reports that inscriptions bearing Sergius Paulus' name have been found on Cyprus confirming that he was a Christian and that his entire family became Christians.

I've met and heard some Christians who think that we are not supposed to confront the people with demonic influences. They say that we are supposed to love them in tolerance. You don't find that anywhere in the Bible. The word 'tolerance' has been overrated and deified to the point that it is used to attack Christianity.

Yes, Jesus teaches us that we ought to love people including our enemies, but that doesn't mean that we shrink from standing up for holiness and righteousness of God in the name of love. Great danger lies in the notion that we can reason with the devil. We don't and cannot reason with the devil. We fight against the darkness of Satan with the power of God which is the truth from His Word.

I like what the British statesman Edmund Burke said:

The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.

So, how do we fight?

2 Corinthians 10:3-6 For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. 4 For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, 5 casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ, 6 and being ready to punish all disobedience when your obedience is fulfilled.

The Sword of the Spirit that Ephesians 6 speaks of is not only for deflecting a blow from the enemy; it is also for inflicting one. This is something the devil doesn't want

you to know. He doesn't want you to start attacking, because if you are always defending, then the devil is in the superior position. But if you are attacking, then you are in the superior position. So, we are not just using the Sword of the Spirit to defend ourselves against the enemy's temptations and condemnations, but we are also using it to attack.

Make no mistake about it: there is authority and power in the Word of God. My own words will fall to the ground, but God's Word stands. God's Word breaks through. We could spend all day trying to defend and explain the Bible, but I have a better idea: use the Sword of the Spirit.

We shouldn't be surprised or shaken by opposition. Wherever there is likely to be great success and the open door, the opposing adversaries will be there to hinder the work of God. If there are no adversaries, you may want to check whether you are doing what the Lord wants or not.

Apostle Paul made a strong counter attack against this Jewish sorcerer because the eternal destiny of the proconsul was at stake. I've told you guys that there is something better than going to heaven. That is taking someone with you. At the same time, there is something far worse than going to hell. It is dragging someone with you.

By the leading of the Holy Spirit, Saul gave a divine judgment of physical blindness to the sorcerer who was already spiritually blinded. Sadly, we never hear of Elymas repenting like Paul did.

We find Paul's name for the first time in v9. His given name was Saul, a Jewish name after the first king of Israel. But his Greco-Roman name was Paul which meant "Little" and sounded similar to "Saul." The author of this Book, Dr. Luke made the significant transition from the name Saul to Paul in order to show us that Paul was now on a predominantly Gentile mission.

D. APPLICATIONS

- 1) Stay open to whatever the Lord has for you. Tell Him that you are willing to obey.
- 2) Great danger lies in the notion that we can reason with the devil.
- 3) When we stand for God, we stand with God. He's got our back. So we can stand with confidence.