

THE GOSPEL PROJECT – CHRONOLOGICAL

THE CHURCH ON MISSION

THE GOD WHO SENDS

The Method: Missionaries

As the book of Acts begins, Jerusalem was the center of ministry, and Peter was the key apostle. As with every ministry, change is bound to come. Today, we learn that Antioch in Syria would become the new center and Paul the new leader. The Gospel was on the move! Why? Because of Jesus' command in *Acts 1:8 (ESV)*⁸ *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.* Understand that His command is for each individual. We like to 'put things off' on the church – let the church do that, we say! It is time we accepted the truth that WE ARE THE CHURCH and in order to be like Jesus, we must be about our Father's business!

If we are willing to admit it, each of us chooses to do the things in life that we want to do. When we have a heart for missions, it will be our desire to work in the Lord's kingdom. *Psalms 37:4 (ESV)*⁴ *Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart.* Our gifts and abilities will in part determine our work for the Lord. However, since the Lord's work is always empowered by the Holy Spirit, God empowers those who answer His call.

It has been said that missions are the theme of the Bible, the lifeblood of the church, and the hope of the world. These words sound beautiful but the real question is: do we believe these words enough to personally get involved? Today's lesson is about how God calls some Christians to invest their lives as missionaries in other cultures. But, the lesson also reminds us that God calls each of His children to serve Him. *Isaiah 6:8 (ESV)*⁸ *And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Then I said, "Here I am! Send me."*

God sends out missionaries through His church.

Read Acts 13:1-3 (ESV)¹ *Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.*² *While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."*³ *Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.*

There is more than one place named Antioch in scripture. This Antioch in Syria had a mixed population of between 500,000 and 800,000. This city was the location of the first church to send out missionaries and the first group of believers to be called Christians. This designation was initiated by the non-Christian population of Antioch. Originally it may have been a term of derision. Eventually, however, Christians used it of themselves as a name of honor, not of shame. Prior to their adoption of the name, the Christians called themselves

believers, brothers, or saints, names that also continue to be used today. In modern times the name of Christian has been somewhat emptied of its true meaning as a follower of Christ. To some today, Christian means little more than a person who is not Jewish or Muslim.

As we look in on the Antioch congregation gathered for worship, and in particular to its leadership team, we immediately see the ethnic diversity of this group.

- Barnabas heads the list indicating he most likely was in charge. Barnabas was a Jewish Levite from Cyprus who had given great financial support to the Jerusalem Church.
- Simeon is a Jewish name. However, it is also mentioned that he was called Niger which is Latin for black. Many believe he was an African Gentile who had been transplanted in Syria.
- Lucius is a Latin name. He was from Cyrene, a city in Libya located in North Africa.
- Manaen came from the court of an earthly king – Herod Antipas, the man responsible for beheading John the Baptist.
- Saul/Paul – was both Jewish and Roman – a former persecutor of followers of Jesus.

The common thread among these five men was their deep faith in Christ. Even though they came from diverse backgrounds, their message was eternally the same. Jesus is our Savior and the God who sends ‘connects’ us like nothing else ever will. Some are called to go and some called to stay. Barnabas and Paul were called to go. The pair went to Cyprus, Antioch in Pisidia, and Iconium with a few other stops along the way. Our focus picks up with the missionaries in Lystra (modern-day Turkey). At the time Lystra was a city in the Roman province of Galatia.

God sustains missionaries through opposition and suffering.

Read Acts 14:8-13 (ESV) ⁸ Now at Lystra there was a man sitting who could not use his feet. He was crippled from birth and had never walked. ⁹ He listened to Paul speaking. And Paul, looking intently at him and seeing that he had faith to be made well, ¹⁰ said in a loud voice, “Stand upright on your feet.” And he sprang up and began walking. ¹¹ And when the crowds saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in Lycaonian, “The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!” ¹² Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. ¹³ And the priest of Zeus, whose temple was at the entrance to the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds.

On most occasions the missionaries would begin in the synagogue among Jews or Gentiles who already had some knowledge of God. The significance of the story at Lystra is that for the first time in Acts the Christian missionaries came to a town where there was apparently no synagogue, or at least no mention is made of it. Be warned! Jewish troublemakers will show up shortly.

Both Peter and Paul healed men who were lame from birth (*Acts 3*). Had their lameness been caused by disease or accident, the cure might have been attributed to a sudden change in their health. As it was, the cure was clearly a miracle.

The folks in Lystra did not have the background of the Jews or the God-fearers who had some knowledge of the true God. Barnabas and Paul had truly stepped into ‘unchurched’ territory where the inhabitants worshipped false gods. The ‘principal’ god of the ancient Greeks was Zeus. They believed Zeus to be the father of their other gods and Hermes was his messenger. They decided that Barnabas was Zeus and Paul was Hermes. It is no surprise that Paul would later write in *Galatians 1:11 (NIV)* ¹¹ *I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up.* as translated in the New International version of the Bible. To coin today’s rhetoric, we might just say, brothers, the gospel is not fake news!

The people of Lystra were putting their trust in something that man had made up. People still make up their own gospel today and that can cause the next generation to never knew the Truth unless we go and tell.

It is never the purpose of the missionary to bring glory or attention to themselves and the two most certainly began to refute that the people thought they were gods.

Read Acts 14:14-20 (ESV) ¹⁴ *But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their garments and rushed out into the crowd, crying out,* ¹⁵ *“Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them.* ¹⁶ *In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways.* ¹⁷ *Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.”* ¹⁸ *Even with these words they scarcely restrained the people from offering sacrifice to them.* ¹⁹ *But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead.* ²⁰ *But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city, and on the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe.*

Barnabas and Paul were beyond horrified when they realized that the people’s intent was to worship them as gods. They knew it was wrong to accept such praise and could even be life-threatening. For example, when King Herod accepted the adulation of the people as him being the voice of a god, we read in *Acts 12:21-23 (NIV)* ²¹ *On the appointed day Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people.* ²² *They shouted, “This is the voice of a god, not of a man.”* ²³ *Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died.*

The words spoken to this crowd were not based on the Old Testament as earlier sermons in Acts had been. The Jews and God-fearers already acknowledged the one true God and needed to understand Jesus as the fulfillment of the Promised Messiah. Because of the people in Lystra’s lack of knowledge of the scriptures, it was necessary to go back to creation since creation and nature always point to the Creator. The intention of the

message was to draw the people away from pagan idols and Greek mythology to the One True Living God! Our message of Jesus is always the same but our message must be tailored to our audience for the purpose of opening up our hearers' understanding.

At first the people thought the missionaries were gods and then when some troublemaking Jews came and stirred them up, they quickly turned on them. Hateful Jews were now following Paul just like he had followed other Christians before he came to know Christ.

From all the opposition that the early Christians faced as they worked to spread the gospel, I cannot help but wonder why we are ever surprised when we face opposition in our own work for the Lord. But, even though I know I should NOT be surprised, I still am at times. But, there is something all workers for the kingdom need to keep in mind, as we see with Paul and Barnabas, God closes and opens doors. It is our mission to walk through those doors with the message of Christ. It was 60 miles to Derbe – a hard trip – especially for someone who has been so near death.

God strengthens His church through missionary efforts.

Read Acts 14:21-28 (ESV) ²¹ When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, ²² strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. ²³ And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed. ²⁴ Then they passed through Pisidia and came to Pamphylia. ²⁵ And when they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia, ²⁶ and from there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had fulfilled. ²⁷ And when they arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. ²⁸ And they remained no little time with the disciples.

Yes, it was a hard trip to Derbe; but, their reward for 'keeping on keeping on' was that many disciples came to know the Lord.

After sharing the good news in Derbe, the missionaries retraced their steps. Now, that was a bold move! Despite the hostile atmosphere which they had left, Barnabas and Paul returned for the specific purpose of strengthening and encouraging the groups of believers which they had established when they were sent out not only by the church at Antioch, Syria but by God Himself. In particular, they made sure that some kind of leadership was established among the fellowships. This area was known as Galatia and Paul would later write a letter to the Galatians where he shared how to go from religion to relationships. Again, I want to say, each of us chooses to do the things in life that we want to do. Hopefully, it is the desire of our hearts to share the good news of Jesus not just occasionally – not just when it is convenient or the audience is sweet – but every chance we get!