

Christ the Lord Episcopal Church
Study of the Book of Acts
Easter Season 2024

Week 4

Chapter 13

Beginning in chapter 13, Luke's history of the church focuses almost exclusively on outreach to the Gentiles and the consequent growth of the church "to the ends of the earth" (1:8). Here we find the Spirit's selection of Paul and Barnabas to become special missionaries, and we see a shift as Paul replaces Peter as the central figure in the book. Paul's entourage (Barnabas and John Mark, at the very least) sets sail, stopping on Cyprus, where the messengers of Jesus confront a false prophet named Bar-Jesus.

Then the mission moves north to Perga. For an unknown reason, John Mark abruptly leaves the venture and returns to Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas continue inland to Antioch of Pisidia. The initial reaction to Paul's preaching is favorable. But among the audience is a number of jealous Jewish leaders (verse 45). Despite efforts by these men to discredit both Paul and his message, the assembled Gentiles eagerly embrace the gospel. This further incites the Jewish leaders, who are eventually able to stir up a mob that runs Paul and Barnabas out of town. These events serve as a kind of microcosm of the entire ministry of Paul: stiff opposition from most Jews and joyous acceptance of the gospel message by many Gentiles (verse 52).

MacArthur, John F.. Acts (p. 66). HarperChristian Resources. Kindle Edition.

Chapter 14

Journeying through the region of Galatia, the missionaries visit Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe, and God confirms their message in each place with miraculous signs and numerous conversions. Even so, the Jewish mobs turn murderous and Paul is stoned. But God is not finished with the apostle from Tarsus. Paul's joyful perseverance in the face of extreme persecution is testimony to the power of the Holy Spirit in a believer's life. Following a successful evangelistic campaign in Derbe, the missionaries backtrack through all the cities visited on their missionary enterprise. The goal is to strengthen and encourage the believers, appoint elders in the churches, and pray with and for them. At last Paul and Barnabas return to their home church in Antioch of Syria and report on "all that God had done with them, and that He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles" (verse 27). These chapters not only demonstrate God's grace and faithfulness but also set the stage for a coming controversy over the presence of newly converted Gentiles in a previously all-Jewish church.

MacArthur, John F.. Acts (p. 66). HarperChristian Resources. Kindle Edition.

Chapter 15

The flood of Gentile believers into the church surfaced underlying attitudes of pride and prejudice. Some legalistic Jews even tried to demand that the new converts be circumcised. Fierce arguing among the parties resulted in the first church council. At Jerusalem the apostles and elders convened to consider the relationship between Jewish believers and Gentile Christians, between the Mosaic law and the gospel of grace.

The council concluded, based on the Old Testament book of Amos (as expounded by James, leader of the proceedings) and in light of the sovereign experiences of both Peter and Paul, that Gentiles were equal partners with the Jews in God's eternal plan. Further, the council ruled that salvation depended solely on belief in Jesus, not on keeping the law of Moses. The Jerusalem Council summarized its decision regarding Gentile circumcision in a letter. This letter was carried to Antioch of Syria by Judas and Silas. Paul and Barnabas accompanied these specially chosen messengers. The letter instructed the Gentile converts to strictly avoid idolatry, immorality, and eating the meat of un-bled animals—activities common among the Gentiles that were especially offensive to Jewish sensibilities.

This decision and directive brought joy to the believers at Antioch. The Jerusalem entourage stayed with the Gentile church there for a while, strengthening the believers and teaching God's Word.

MacArthur, John F.. Acts (p. 76). HarperChristian Resources. Kindle Edition.

“Throughout its history, the church's leaders have met to settle doctrinal issues. Historians point to seven ecumenical councils in the church's early history, especially the Councils of Nicea (A.D. 325) and Chalcedon (A.D. 451). Yet the most important council was the first one—the Jerusalem Council—because it established the answer to the most vital doctrinal question of all: ‘What must a person do to be saved?’ The apostles and elders defied efforts to impose legalism and ritualism as necessary pre-requisites for salvation. They forever affirmed that salvation is totally by grace through faith in Christ alone.” R. C. H. Lenski

MacArthur, John F.. Acts (p. 80). HarperChristian Resources. Kindle Edition.

“To add anything to Christ as being necessary to salvation, say circumcision or any human work of any kind, is to deny that Christ is the complete Savior, is to put something human on a par with him, yea to make it the crowning point. That is fatal. A bridge to heaven that

is built of 99/100 of Christ and even only 1/100 of anything human breaks down at the joint and ceases to be a bridge.”

MacArthur, John F.. Acts (p. 80). HarperChristian Resources. Kindle Edition.

Chapter 16

Luke records that when the time came for a second missionary journey, Barnabas and Paul had a sharp disagreement concerning John Mark. Barnabas wanted to take his nephew, but Paul refused, citing the young man’s desertion during the first evangelistic endeavor. Thus, in the sovereignty of God, two missionary teams were formed: Paul and Silas, and Barnabas and Mark. Even though no further word is given regarding the results of Barnabas’s and Mark’s evangelistic efforts, we see kingdom messengers departing Antioch in two directions. The Apostle Paul and Silas returned to the churches of Asia Minor. At Lystra Paul met Timothy, who proved to be a beloved and dependable colleague. Forbidden by the Holy Spirit to go into the provinces of Asia and Bithynia, Paul and his companions were directed, instead, through Mysia to the city of Troas. There Paul had a divine vision instructing him to go to Macedonia. In response to this Macedonian call, Paul and his assistants immediately set sail.

At Philippi (in what is now northern Greece) they encountered a group of God-fearing women. Among these was Lydia, a wealthy cloth merchant, who embraced the gospel. She became the first European convert and hosted Paul and his entourage in her home during their ministry in Philippi. Despite opposition and a run in with the authorities, Paul and his team continued to spread the gospel powerfully to every strata of society. Leaving Luke in Philippi, Paul, Silas, and Timothy journeyed to Thessalonica. The response was typical—a revival among the Greeks and a riot at the hands of the Jewish leaders! But God continued to use persecution and opposition to spread the good news of forgiveness and eternal life through Jesus Christ.

“Courage must be coupled with the proper content if a believer is to shake the world. To have the right message, but not the boldness to proclaim it, renders it useless. On the other hand, to boldly proclaim error, as the cults do, causes even greater harm. Proclaiming the truth with great boldness, as Paul did, cannot help but change the world.”

MacArthur, John F.. Acts (p. 91). HarperChristian Resources. Kindle Edition.

MacArthur, John F.. Acts (p. 82). HarperChristian Resources. Kindle Edition.

Questions to Ponder

At Pisidian Antioch, Paul preached a message that is recorded in 13:16–41. What did Paul say in his closing words about the issue of justification? How did this square with the typical Jewish understanding of salvation? What does his message mean to the church and you at this time?

In what ways do you see people today getting angry because of the gospel? What lies behind these reactions and phenomena? 13:48 makes clear that in salvation, God chooses the person; the person does not choose God. Do you feel you have been chosen?

What do you think it means that the Holy Spirit guided the apostles? Especially when they are guided away from Asia? Do you think there are places where the Gospel should not go?

How can a Christian choose joy in the midst of unpleasant circumstances?