

# God's Unstoppable Mission, Part 1

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Date: 13 January 2019

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[ 0 : 00 ] 20 or so Jewish people who could gather in a single room to the end of Acts, where the church has expanded throughout the Roman Empire until it reaches Rome itself, crossing cultures and languages and religious beliefs and boundaries on the way.

And I want us, as we think about that, as we examine Paul's missionary journeys, to think about things like, what did Paul and his companions talk about?

How did they go about their missionary task? What reactions did they encounter? So that we ourselves, as a people on mission, as a church on mission, might be informed and equipped for our mission.

Because for us, Jesus is still Lord. Our message is still a radical message that provokes different responses. Jesus is still King.

And through His church, He's calling others to citizenship of His kingdom. So we have much to learn, I think, from this section of the book of Acts.

[ 1 : 14 ] So we're going to be in three places, and we're going to learn three lessons this evening. The first place we're going to be is in Antioch. Verses 1 to 3, we find ourselves in Antioch.

And there, our lesson is this, that the Spirit is the one who directs our mission. The church in Antioch is an interesting one.

It's often seen as a model, sending church. So what was it like? There are qualities within this church that would be useful for us to pray towards, for every local church to pray towards.

First of all, we see that this church was equipped by God. Verse 1, we see that God had provided prophets and teachers from its beginning.

Those prophets were foretellers rather than predicting the future people. They were training the church in the Word of God, training the church how to live for God in their community, grounding the people in the gospel.

[ 2 : 18 ] So the church was equipped. You also see that the church was really diverse. When you look at that list of leaders, you discover that some of them were from Israel. You discover some were from North Africa.

We discover this man, Mananae, who it seems like was Herod the Great's foster son. So it was his brother who was involved in the trial of Jesus.

But this foster brother is one of the leaders in the church in Antioch. So the church is as diverse as the city of Antioch was. And I think, again, that's a great thing to pray for.

There are churches would be diverse groups of people reflecting the way the gospel breaks down barriers. Another thing that we see about this church is that they were a people who were seeking God.

You see how they're described in verse 2. They're worshiping the Lord. They're fasting. In verse 3, they're praying. Here's a group of people who are evidently living to honor God.

[ 3 : 20 ] We see devotion to God. We see them seeking God's guidance and help as a group of leaders and as a church. And it's in this context that the Holy Spirit comes and the Holy Spirit begins to direct mission.

As the Spirit says, Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them. Just as we hit that, there's an important reminder about the Holy Spirit.

That the Holy Spirit is fully God. Did you notice that he said, Set apart for me. And he says, I, the Holy Spirit speaking, I have called them. So the Holy Spirit is personal.

He's not a force. And what the Spirit does in the church is he directs the church in mission. The Spirit is concerned for the glory of God, for the glory of Jesus.

And so the Spirit wants to see more churches established, more people coming to submit to the good and loving rule of King Jesus. And the Spirit is involved in that.

[ 4 : 26 ] In many ways, the call of Barnabas and Saul sounds a little bit like the call of God to Abraham. Maybe Abraham was called to leave his country and go to the place God would show him.

There's no set details for where Barnabas and Saul are to go. They're just to be set apart. They've been called and they're sent off.

This is part of the adventure of faith. Following God, living a life of faith will sometimes take us to surprising places if we put ourselves in the hands of the Holy Spirit.

But here at this point, we are reminded of one of the dominant themes of the Bible, that our God is a missionary God. Ever since that promise to Abraham when he said, from one of your seed will come blessing to all the nations of the earth, there is that movement where God is bringing people in.

We see it, glimpses of it, I guess, in the Old Testament. We see it and hear it in the story of, for example, Ruth from Moab brought into the people of God. We see it in the story of Jonah, where he reluctantly goes and preaches to the enemy city of Nineveh.

[ 5 : 41 ] But then you come to the New Testament, you read the life of Jesus, and you discover that he's crossing boundaries and borders in order to draw people in. And the book of Acts, then, is very much God's mission continued.

The work of Jesus continues through his church, and it spreads through the world. And another theme that emerges in the book of Acts is Jesus is a king with a kingdom.

And so, God the Spirit is directing Saul and Barnabas to go on this mission so that they might call people to citizenship.

One of the ways the Bible pictures it is if Jesus is king and he has this kingdom, then the church, the local church, are like embassies.

What are embassies? Embassies are institutions that represent one nation inside another nation. They exist to declare the interests of their home nation to the local nation.

[ 6 : 46 ] And as a local church, we are to act, as they were, as an embassy of the Lord Jesus Christ and his future kingdom.

That we are to live within society declaring Jesus is Lord. That our direction comes primarily not from government, but from the Word of God.

Yes, we obey and honor government, but our primary allegiance is to Jesus. We live by his values, and we call all people to do the same.

And when we start to think about that as a church, we recognize this is a huge calling for our lives. In some ways, it's a scary calling, perhaps. And so we need this promise from what we see in Antioch, that the Spirit is the one who directs mission.

What we see in the life of Saul and Barnabas is that the Spirit will use his people. The Spirit will give words to his people. Therefore, we are called as a church to rely on the Spirit in our day-to-day mission.

[ 7 : 55 ] That's why we gather together as the people of God, Sunday by Sunday, to sit under God's Word, where God's Spirit speaks to us. It's why we rely as God's people on Word and prayer, why we need the wisdom of the Spirit, because we are to live for the glory of King Jesus.

So in Antioch, we discover that the Spirit directs our mission. And then, so they move from Antioch and they begin their journey through Cyprus.

And the lesson I want us to see from the island of Cyprus is that there will be opposition to our mission. The Bible's always very honest about that reality.

So attention here in Cyprus really focuses on two men. If you look at verse 7, we're introduced to a man called Sergius Paulus, the Roman proconsul.

He's clearly some kind of spiritual man because he's got this guy, Bar Jesus, as an advisor, this Jewish sorcerer. But we discover that this guy, Sergius Paulus, he wants to hear the Word of God.

[ 9 : 08 ] In verse 7, he's drawn by the gospel of Jesus. And so he wants Barnabas and Saul to come and speak more about it. So we've got that man, Sergius Paulus.

But then we also have, verse 6, this Jewish sorcerer, this false prophet, sometimes known as Elymas, sometimes known as Bar Jesus. And what we see from these two guys is a picture of spiritual conflict.

We've got the fact that there's one man who wants to hear and another who very much wants to oppose the hearing of the message. Verse 8, Elymas the sorcerer opposed Barnabas and Saul and tried to turn the proconsul from faith.

And so into this situation of spiritual conflict, there is Barnabas and Saul. And Saul, verse 9, also called Paul, is filled with the Holy Spirit.

So notice that as he's on mission, he's relying on the power of the Spirit. And he's very aware of spiritual reality and spiritual battle.

[10:15] He looks at this man, Elymas, and calls him a child of the devil. His name, Bar Jesus, means son of Jesus. But the way he's acting, he's not a son of Jesus.

He's a son of the devil. And he speaks a word of judgment against Elymas. There is a blindness that comes on him because he's full of deceit.

He's perverting the right ways of the Lord. And so Paul, filled with the Spirit, demonstrates the power of God there in Cyprus. And the impact is striking.

It's striking on Elymas because he's struck blind. But also in verse 12, when the proconsul saw what happened, he believed. For he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord.

So he sees this miracle, this judgment miracle happen. But he's also heard the word of the gospel. And this combination of word and sign causes him to believe.

[11:14] It was often the same pattern in Jesus' ministry. His miracles are described as signs. They are revealing his glory. They're revealing that he is a king with a kingdom, with a kingdom message.

And that causes people at different times to listen. But I think the reminder for us is this, that to be part of Jesus' kingdom is then to be called into spiritual battle.

If we're not Christians, we're not in a spiritual battle. But by the moment we're trusting in Jesus, we're brought into this battle. We are introduced here to the work of the devil.

We're told in the Bible that the work of the devil is to blind the minds of unbelievers so they won't see the glory of God. Elymas tries to do that. The work of the devil is to try and steal the word of God away.

Either from people who are just hearing it and haven't come to faith. Or to steal the word of God away from God's own people. He wants to make people question the goodness of God.

[12:14] To rob God of glory in people's lives by keeping them away from trusting in the Lord Jesus. And from turning his own people, Jesus' people, away from wholehearted devotion to him.

So we need to be aware of that spiritual battle that we find ourselves in if we seek to live for the glory of God. And as a church, we want to be on mission.

What we discover from Barnabas and Saul is this. That to be sent by the Holy Spirit on mission does not mean that mission will be easy. It does not mean it will be plain sailing and everything will go smoothly.

What we discover instead is that opposition and persecution and rejection are a part, are a feature of the Christian life. We know it in small measure here.

But we hear about the persecuted church. We realize how intensely some of our brothers and sisters suffer because they want to follow King Jesus.

[13:15] And I think one of the things that that says to us is that we must endeavor to make the honor of Jesus our top priority. Because when opposition comes, when we try and share our faith and people are disinterested or hostile, unless our hope is in Jesus, we're going to become discouraged, perhaps bitter.

Perhaps we might be tempted to just give up. But if we're living for the glory of God and if our eyes are on Jesus, then we'll be able to move beyond that.

To see that just as he suffered, so we too as a church are called to suffer. But also as we see from the example of Paul, we must go into battle with the full armor of God.

Paul is filled with the Spirit as he speaks. Some of us will perhaps remember the disturbing reports that came out after the Iraq War, sometimes even during the Iraq War, about British troops being sent into battle with defective protection and a lack of ammunition and faulty weapons at some times.

And it was incredibly dangerous then for troops, sometimes fatal for troops in that condition. We must go into battle equipped with the full armor of God.

[ 14 : 34 ] We need the Spirit of God. We need the Word of God. And we also need the people of God. Because we're not to go on mission as some kind of solo SAS project behind enemy lines and we're just doing it ourselves.

We stand together on the battlefield. We're called together to be on mission. But we are to take heart from what happens in Cyprus.

Yes, there is spiritual opposition. But what we see is that Jesus is greater. Greater is he that is in us than he that is in the world. This is not an equal battle of equal and opposing forces.

Jesus is stronger. And we discover in the gospel that the decisive battle between Jesus and the devil has already been played out, that Jesus has won that victory through the cross and the resurrection.

And so we live with hope of victory secure. And the same Holy Spirit that strengthened Jesus is the same Holy Spirit that lives and works in us.

[ 15 : 45 ] So we take heart even while we face opposition. And because we're serving our King, we know that his victory is secure and we have the Holy Spirit to help us.

And that takes us to our third location. It takes us to Pisidian Antioch. And I think the lesson that we can draw here as a church is that our mission as a church always has a message.

So it's a really long chapter. And Luke spends a lot of time recording this first missionary sermon.

And if we were to summarize, what themes can we see if we just have a brief overview?

I think the first thing that stands out for us, verse 16 to verse 22, we see that the Old Testament, as Paul teaches it, the Old Testament prepares us for the coming of Jesus.

As Paul gives a very brief overview of the Old Testament, he draws attention in different ways to the grace of God that Old Testament believers knew. For example, in verse 17, we see that God chose his people.

[ 17 : 01 ] And he did that on the basis of loving kindness and not merit. It's God that made the people prosper. It's God, in verse 19, who overthrew the nations, who gave the land to his people.

God is at work saving his people, providing for his people, freeing them from slavery to become the people of God. And in the midst of that, what are the people doing?

The people are showing that they are anything but faithful. Verse 18, God endured their conduct for about 40 years in the desert.

The people of Israel, released from slavery, very quickly turned to worship an idol, turned to grumbling and complaining against God, showed a lack of faith. And then in verse 21, what else are they doing?

They're asking for a king. And they're not doing this out of holy motives. They want a king like the other nations. There's a people-centered choice of king.

[ 18 : 00 ] But God, in his grace, is patient to them, continues to love his people, faithful to his promises, gives them, in verse 22, a good king, a king after God's own heart.

And so one of the things that Paul is saying to us in his sermon is that God's mission from beginning to end is a story of grace. It's not that Old Testament was all about the law and then he shifts to grace with the coming of Jesus from beginning to end.

It's all about God's grace, God's undeserved kindness coming to sinful people. But Paul is also showing us a helpful way, and we see this from the teaching of Jesus, a way for the church to read the Bible, to teach and explain the Bible to others.

A 19th century preacher put it this way, Just as every road in England will eventually lead to London, so every story, every theme in the Old Testament eventually leads us to Jesus Christ. And that's the way the apostles taught the Bible. They read their Old Testament and they saw the way that it pointed forward to Jesus.

[ 19 : 16 ] And that takes us to the second big theme, I think, that Paul draws our attention to, and it's this. Jesus' death and resurrection fulfills God's promises of salvation.

So in verses 23 to 37, we see Paul frequently connecting the resurrection of Jesus with Old Testament passages as a way to say, Jesus fulfills all that was promised in terms of God's saving grace.

Jesus is the true king in David's family line. He is the true savior. Verse 23, from this man, from David's descendants, God has brought to Israel the savior Jesus as he promised.

And so then we get, just as we got a very brief review of the history of the Old Testament, we get a history of the events of the life of Jesus, particularly around the death of Jesus and the resurrection.

In verses 26 to 28, he focuses on men's wrong verdict of Jesus, the fact that people had decided that he wasn't the Messiah, he wasn't the king, that they found no proper ground for a death sentence, but nevertheless, they asked Pilate to have him executed.

[ 20 : 39 ] So on one hand, we see men acting with injustice and getting the identity of Jesus wrong. But then on the other hand, we see that this is part of God's purpose, God's plan, and we see God's great reversal.

Verse 27, in condemning Jesus, they fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath. And then having executed Jesus, we read in verse 30, but God raised him from the dead. And then it speaks of the witnesses who then told others that Jesus was alive. Verse 32, we tell you the good news, what God promised our fathers, he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus.

The historical events of Jesus are key to the good news, especially the resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus is that guarantee that all God's promises find their yes, find their amen in Jesus.

And so we see that in verses 33 to 35. We see those references to Old Testament Psalms and prophecies that show the resurrection of Jesus fulfills God's plan.

[ 21 : 58 ] So we think about the message of the church. What's our message? If we're on mission, what is it that we are to communicate? Well, Paul and Barnabas show us we communicate Jesus, his life, his death, his resurrection.

We can draw connections like Paul does to the fact that Jesus is the one who is the greater than Moses, who leads people out of slavery. He is the true king, the one who calls us to submit to his rule.

That he calls us into true freedom. And we call people to recognize that these historic events matter.

There is a call in our message to respond to this truth.

It's not, this is my truth, now tell me yours. This is my truth and you can take it or leave it. This is an event of history-shaping significance for us all.

[ 23 : 12 ] And so we see, as we often see in the sermons and acts, that our message has life or death importance. That's how we finish in verse 38 to 41.

We see that positively in verse 38 in the fact that Jesus, through Jesus, through his cross, the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to us.

That the cross speaks. It's like a megaphone that God uses to communicate to people. To say that there is hope beyond our sense of shame and guilt.

It says that yes, we are sinful before a holy God. But at the same time, God in his grace has provided a way of forgiveness and salvation.

So there is a hope for us beyond a sense of condemnation and guilt and fear before God. There is good news in the cross.

[ 24 : 15 ] That the barrier that separates us from God has been removed. So we can have free access through faith in the Lord Jesus. Now we can enjoy salvation.

Or to use the language of verse 39, Through Jesus, everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses.

It's a courtroom picture that we found in Galatians last year. That believing in Jesus justifies us. If our faith is in Jesus, we can stand in God's courtroom and be declared innocent.

Even though we should, by rights, be declared guilty because of God's grace. Because Jesus, the judge, has willingly been judged for us.

And so we have this message that says that we're always saved by grace through faith, not works. And we need to respond to Jesus in order to know this forgiveness, to know this justification, to know this eternal life.

[ 25 : 21 ] But negatively, there is also a warning. Our message is life and death importance. And negatively, verse 40, Take care that what the prophets have said does not happen to you.

Luke, you scoffers, wander and perish. For I'm going to do something in your days that you would never believe, even if someone told you. That's a message of coming judgment from the book of Habakkuk.

And so Paul says to this group of people that know their Bibles, If you reject Jesus, if you reject his message of good news, then you will receive the righteous judgment of God.

And the result, as we saw in verse 42 onwards, is that some responded positively. They wanted to hear more. Some turned to faith in the Lord Jesus. But others rejected.

Others were jealous. Others were hostile to the message. And as we've probably discovered for ourselves, nothing changes in our day.

[ 26 : 26 ] As we look to be faithful, to tell people about Jesus' life and death and resurrection and his significance for us all, some people will hear gladly because the Spirit is at work. Some people will not hear because we're in the middle of a spiritual battle.

So what will this mean for us on Monday? We go in mission. Whatever our vocation is, wherever we find ourselves, if you're a Christian, tomorrow and every day, you'll be on a mission for God.

And so like Paul and Barnabas, whether it's at home or work or the school gate or the shops, we are called to live as citizens of the King. We're called to represent his rule and his message in the world.

And we're to have that awareness that there is a devil who is real and he is powerful and he wants to oppose us, to seek to discourage us, to seek to derail us.

And therefore, we must go every day, every situation, aware of our need, aware of our need for the Spirit to equip us, direct us, provide for what we lack.

[ 27 : 37 ] And in particular, to pray that the Spirit would guide us to those opportunities that we have to speak about Jesus and his good news.