

The First Overseas Mission of the NT Church

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Date: 28 April 2021

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[0 : 0 0] first 12 verses. When we come to chapter 13, it's a very important juncture in the book of Acts and the way that it sets out for us the early New Testament church, and it's going out with the gospel, having here come to the first overseas mission of the New Testament church, because as we see here from Antioch in Syria, they went across to Cyprus, and then north from there to the mainland again, coming to the cities that are then mentioned in the book of Acts as it follows on from there. So this very first missionary journey, it's quite often called the first missionary journey of Paul, the Apostle Paul, but it's actually more than that. It's not just Paul, as we see here, he and others actually went on this mission. So it's the first overseas mission, you could say, having grown in the area of Judea and then north to Antioch in Syria. Now the church is moving out with the gospel towards what we know as southern Europe, and it will actually then be described in the book of Acts from there on. It's interesting how these chapters are arranged, 11 to 13, because at the, as we saw reading chapter 11, you find the emphasis there on Barnabas and Saul being sent by the elders there to send relief to those who were in Judea, that's from Antioch in Syria, back down south to Judea. And then in between that you have chapter 12, between them going out and coming back again, chapter 13, you have chapter 12. And chapter 12 is largely about the opposition, the violent persecution that broke out involving Herod in particular, and the demise of Herod, as it's actually also recorded for us in that chapter. So there's a really strong spiritual message in that, that all the attempts that were made, and will be made in this chapter as well, to stand in the way of the gospel's advance, actually come to nothing, and in many ways only served by God's own arrangement and blessing to further the gospel, because these persecutions actually scattering people far and wide, they actually went abroad with the seed of the gospel in themselves. And as they spoke about Jesus, and as they preached about Jesus, so it happened that the gospel advanced. Despite the efforts of those who were trying to stop it, all they did was actually facilitate its further increase and spread. And that's a really superbly encouraging emphasis for ourselves today. We might think that the gospel is in danger of being extinguished. Well, the gospel may move from place to place. It may actually disappear, as it has from many of these regions, may disappear altogether after the course of many decades or centuries, but the gospel will never disappear from the earth until the Lord returns, because we are promised that as long as sun and moon endure, there will be those who fear the Lord, who worship the Lord. That's a great encouragement for ourselves, not that we shouldn't be concerned about the gospel moving on from our locality and leaving us as a barren wilderness. We hope that will never come, and we have to pray that it will never come, and that it will continue to spread amongst ourselves. So, from its base in Antioch here in Syria, and that church in Antioch in Syria, what a vibrant living church that was. As you find it described there in chapter 11 and verses 19 to 26, as we've read there, they preached the Lord Jesus there in Antioch.

The Lord was with them. A great number who believed turned to the Lord. So, those who were in Jerusalem heard about this. They sent Barnabas there. When he saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose. So, then he actually sent a message to Saul, or rather, he went to Tarsus to look for Saul. When he had found Saul, he took him back. The two of them came back to Antioch, and look what it says there in verse 26 of chapter 11. For a whole year, they met with the church and taught a great many people, and in Antioch, the disciples were first called Christians. It's little wonder that this was a vibrant church when they had that input, that spiritual injection of pure gospel preaching from those spiritual giants. That's what the result of that preaching was. It became such a huge missionary church, and indeed, from the start of this Christian movement that began, of course, with the death of Christ and the resurrection and the spreading out of the church. We have to take hold of the fact and keep hold of

the fact that from the beginning,

Christianity was a missionary movement. Christianity was a missionary movement, and it was that not just accidentally following from other things that were true of it as the faith that is Christianity. Christianity, this is something that followed on from the Old Testament, because the Old Testament is full of references to God's own arrangement of the Jewish people of Israel, that they would be a missionary people, that they would reach out to the nations, the pagan nations around them, with the message of God, the God of Israel, being the only true God. So when you move into the New Testament, that emphasis continues. The church in Antioch was a missionary church, not accidentally, not as something that was, as it were, tacked on to the rest of their activities, as if it was of secondary importance. It's actually an integral part of the church's life, that it is a missionary movement, a missionary organization. Just as we'll sing at the end tonight, or he recorded singing, of Psalm 67, which is one of the great missionary Psalms of the Old Testament, looking to all the nations of the world, and seeking and praying that the nations will come to know the Lord. And that's really what you see in Antioch in Syria, a burden to bring Jesus, to bring the gospel, to bring the Jesus of the resurrection on the cross, into contact with paganism, with lost humanity, in places such as Antioch here in Syria, first of all, and then on to these other parts.

[7 : 05] So I want to look at two things that you find from this passage. First of all, how it emphasizes the commissioning that took place at Antioch, the commissioning that took place at Antioch. And you notice in this passage that there is such a great variety and diversity of individuals actually named for us. You have, for example, Barnabas himself, who was actually a native of Cyprus.

And it's interesting that that's the case, because this was a mission that went through to Cyprus. Was it Barnabas himself that instigated this? Was it he who was largely responsible for choosing to go to Cyprus, first of all? Well, we don't know, we're not told, but he was a Cypriot. And then you've got a mention here of Niger or Niger, who was undoubtedly black. He was someone who had come probably from North Africa. He says Simeon, who was called Niger or Niger. And undoubtedly, that was a black man.

He was part of the church here in Antioch. He was very much in the leadership of the church in Antioch. And then you've got this Lucius, Lucius of Cyrene, which is what we would nowadays refer to as Libya or that region of Libya. Again, it's North Africa. This is not simply people confined to Jerusalem.

These are a combination of various backgrounds and cultures. And then you've got Manan, interestingly, a member of the court of Herod the Tetrarch. Somebody was brought up in the court of Herod, probably, possibly even alongside Herod himself. For whatever reason, we're not told, but he was often the court of Herod the Tetrarch. And then, of course, there is Saul. This is the Apostle Paul.

And interesting, this is the passage that firstly refers to the first time where Saul is called Paul. Saul. We're not told why that is, but Paul would be something more of a Gentile emphasis rather than Saul, which is his Jewish name. In any case, he is the other one that's mentioned here. And that's such an interesting diversity, isn't it? But the interesting thing is that for all of that diversity, these different cultures and backgrounds that these people have come from, the different color of skin, the different experiences, they are one together in Christ. They are united in the burden they have to bring the gospel out from Antioch to other parts of the world. They are filled with the Holy Spirit.

[9 : 44] Despite the diversity and the differences, they are all a unity with purpose and with relish and with intent to go out with the gospel and bring that through to the other parts of the world they will go to. That's how it should always be, isn't it? We've all got different backgrounds, different cultural backgrounds, different personalities, different types of family backgrounds.

And just because we're in Stornoway or in the island of Lewis doesn't mean that you don't have all of that diversity in our personalities and in our makeup. But this is something that's emphasized for us here. It's part of the richness of Christ's church. It's part of what makes it truly to be unique in its own self under Christ's leadership. That despite that, or even through that diversity, there is a unity of missionary endeavor where minds together, despite the diversity, or using the diversity, actually reach out with the gospel.

And as you come to notice that diversity, secondly, you notice in terms of this commissioning at Antioch, the direction that they were given by the Holy Spirit. 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.

Now, that's very interesting. First of all, that the direction of the Holy Spirit was something that came to them while they were worshiping and fasting. There's an interesting and important connection there. It wasn't that they were given direction and then they began worshiping and fasting.

And it's interesting that fasting itself is not detached from worshiping. It's not an end in itself. It's not something we would regard as improper today, but we don't actually detach it from its connection with worship, its connection with the kind of activity that these people, this church, and it was the whole church. It wasn't just these individuals that are mentioned there. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, set me apart Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them. It was the gathered church that were worshiping and fasting. And the Holy Spirit presented his message through that. We're not told how. We don't know exactly how the Spirit communicated this. Was it through one of the prophets? We mentioned their prophets and teachers.

[12:20] It must have probably been through one of them or some of them. But in any case, the Spirit made it clear to the church what they were to do and that they were to set apart Saul and Barnabas here for the mission to which they work, which he had called them. And the important thing there is that the initiative for mission came from the Holy Spirit. It did not come from these leaders of the church even.

It did not come even from the Apostle Paul. It did not come from any of these leaders that are mentioned. It did not come from the church itself. It did not come from any body within that church that decided it might be a good idea to send some people over to Cyprus and on to the mainland after that with the gospel. The Holy Spirit said, separate for me, set aside for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them. Before this message was ever given to the church, the Holy Spirit had actually called Saul and Barnabas to this work. That's why we still lay an emphasis to this very day upon the Holy Spirit who are calling people to be gospel preachers. And as a church, we rightly lay store by that. It's not that some group in Edinburgh decide who should or should not be ministers of the gospel. It's not even that any local Kirk session or body or the board of ministry or the mission board actually decide, well, I think that would make a nice missionary or good missionary or he would actually make a really superb preacher. We depend upon the Holy Spirit or should be to identify and to impress upon us as a church, not just on the leadership of the church, but on yourselves as well as people who are under the guidance of the Spirit of God. And we must maintain that emphasis because that is the biblical pattern that the Holy Spirit made it clear to the church who he had called to actually go forth with the gospel to these regions, the work to which I have called them.

And you can see then in verse 4 that being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia. That's not in any way a contradiction because what you find is that the church acts upon the fact that the Holy Spirit said this to them, made this clear to them. So what they did then was they actually fasted and prayed and laid hands on them and sent them off. They were praying and fasting and then the Holy Spirit made this clear to them. And after the Holy Spirit made it clear to them, they kept on worshiping or fasting and praying. And then after that, they laid hands on them and they sent them off. That way you might say that was their valedictory service, their commissioning time of sending out these missionaries. But then the emphasis comes back again in verse 4 that they were sent out by the Holy Spirit. That doesn't contradict the fact that the church sent them out, that the church commissioned them because it's coming back really again just to the emphasis that it's actually the Holy Spirit who's in charge. He's the president. And they are the cabinet under him that act according to his direction. What a wonderful situation to have. What a wonderful position to be in. That the Holy

Spirit made it so clear to them. They then acted on that basis and then they were sent out, commissioned and sent out with the gospel. And you know that avoids two dangers. It avoids the danger of some individual coming along, for example, you find this in the world today even, that says the Lord has actually made it clear to me that I'm to establish a church and that I'm to establish a church myself independently of any other church structure and I'm going to do it come what may. I'm not saying that's impossible, but it's very much the biblical pattern that it's not an individual decision and it's not an individual foundation to the church, to our congregation. It's the Holy Spirit's direction, direction given to those who are already in the church. So it avoids that individualism or that individual assertion. I'm sure you heard the story of the man who came to C.H. Spurgeon.

Spurgeon, of course, ran a biblical college. And this man said, and the Holy Spirit has made it clear to me that I must be educated in your college. And Spurgeon said something like, well, that's fine. You can actually study in my college when the Holy Spirit has made it clear to me that that's what you should do. Because you see, every calling of that kind by which the Holy Spirit calls people to specific ministry of gospel ministry is corroborated by the church because the Holy Spirit gives the ability to the church to identify and to correspondingly authenticate and acknowledge who it is the Holy Spirit has called. And that's what you find in the chapter. So the church sent them off. It avoids that individualism, that terrible insistence by individuals that they really matter.

[18 : 02] They have the Holy Spirit. Doesn't matter what anybody else says. We have in our situation as a church, like many other churches, such a healthy biblical position that we have the balance between the leadership of the Holy Spirit and the church of God as the Spirit speaks to them and through them.

And so it avoids that, but also avoids, on the other hand, the other extreme is where the church is in total control and where there's no reference at all to the Holy Spirit. The church decides, well, so-and-so, you really would be very good and we're going to place you in such and such a place and you'll go there and this is the work you'll be doing and I'm sure that things will be blessed. There's no reference to the Holy Spirit, no waiting upon the Holy Spirit. It's just a kind of secular appointment. And here are both extremes avoided. And that's what we always have to look to, friends, that we live by the leadership of the Holy Spirit in our lives individually, in our lives corporately as a church, not just in terms of selection of those who will be preachers or leaders of the gospel, but in every aspect of the church's work and the church's ministry. So there's, first of all, the commissioning that took place at Antioch. Secondly, let's look at the conversion that took place at Paphos, just more briefly, because I don't want to keep you too long with your masks on. I know that's not very comfortable. But the conversion that took place at Paphos, following on from the commission at Antioch. They reached Salamis, first of all, and they went down, they sailed to Cyprus, and they arrived in Cyprus at Salamis, and they proclaimed there the word of God. Now, it's interesting, they focused on cities or larger places of population, first of all, because they were centers of population. You would find them as centers of culture and also centers of religion. And this is a deliberate policy under the direction of the Holy Spirit that these missionaries began there. And they began with Jews in the synagogues. The synagogues, of course, were already point of contact with them, with the population, with the people. And it really meant that people in the synagogues knew the Old Testament scriptures, so the apostles and those who were with them here could actually focus on the scriptures they already had and bring out of that, as you see all the way through the book of Acts, teaching about Jesus, prophecies about Jesus, prophecies about the cross, emphasis about the resurrection. It's just a clean flow from the Old Testament into the preaching of the new.

And that's why, as they went here, they went then through the whole island. And some commentators take the view that the word that's used there, where you find verse 6, when they had gone through the whole island, that that actually means it was a preaching tour, that they were on a preaching journey. And it very likely is the case. You can't imagine these men filled with the Holy Spirit to the extent that they were going from Salamis to Paphos across the other side of the island and never speaking to anybody about Jesus. It's, no doubt it would be a preaching or missionary journey that they had across the island. But they came to Paphos, Paphos, one of the main centers on the island. And when they came to Paphos, the rest of the passage then deals with what happened in Paphos. Now, Paphos was a senatorial province, a province under Roman control, but in a senatorial kind of arrangement with senators, of which this man, Sergius Paulus, was the chief officer. Come to that in a minute.

[21 : 56] But Paphos was also a center of the cult of Venus, or the goddess Aphrodite, a goddess of love in Greek religion, pagan religion. And of course, that meant that Paphos was a very immoral place. That Paphos was a place where depraved practices took place, of a sexual kind particularly, in honor of the so-called goddess Venus, or Aphrodite. And that really dominated life in Paphos. It dominated life in Paphos to the extent that, for example, every woman in Paphos was required at least once a year to visit the temple and prostitute herself to temple workers. That's the kind of society you found in Paphos, a depraved, immoral, pagan society. That's what they were taking the gospel into.

That's what faced these early Christian missionaries as they moved out with the gospel. They moved into a world that was crammed with such idolatry and immorality. And yet, it's there that gospel churches were established and grew and became powerful. Doesn't that really give us cause to not only just pray, but also be expectant and be encouraged? Because that's what we're taking the gospel out into today. Throughout the world, immorality of this pagan kind, even though it's been imported into certain aspects of so-called Christian thought. That's the kind of world we're facing. And it's out there right here. Don't expect that it's just in Glasgow or in London or in New York or any of these major conurbations. You will find in Stornoway, if you went around and interviewed every person in Stornoway, you would find not a few people agreeing with such things. That's the kind of society that we are actually living amongst, where we are lights for the truth of God.

And so, as they went out, we'll just leave it at that. We could develop that point. You can do that yourselves. But they came across this man, this Jewish prophet, a false prophet called Bar Jesus. It's an interesting name. It really means literally, son of salvation. And it just shows you, when you go out with the gospel, you're going to actually meet with people who maybe have a name that suggests they are Christian, but in fact, they're enemies of the gospel. That's what this man was, son of salvation. Jesus is, the Greek word is the same for the name Jesus and for salvation. This is what he was called. And he was actually not just a false prophet. He was very much corrupt and an occult magician. The word magician there doesn't mean the kind of innocent type of magic that sometimes people display just to entertain children or adults. This is occultism. This is darkness. This is evil. That's the kind of person he was. And yet he had this name, son of salvation. [25 : 36] How dependent we have to be on the Holy Spirit for discernment of such movements in the gospel's way. It's lies dressed as truth when you see this man and his name and see the contrast in his practices.

But why did Paul speak to him in such a strong way as he did? Paul, who was, this man opposed them, seeking to turn the proconsul Sergius away from the faith. But Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him and said, you son of the devil. You see the contrast? Son of salvation is the name that he went by. Here is Paul, full of the spirit, saying to him, son of the devil, rather than son of salvation. You enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy. Will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord? You should imagine a man standing in Speaker's Corner in London or somewhere else today. He'd be arrested. Have you said such a thing? You'd be whipped off to jail. As just recently, in the last couple of days, you found a man, I think it was in Uxbridge or somewhere down there, in his 70s, a mild man just standing up, teaching from the Bible. Nothing dramatic, nothing in the way of inciting violence or hatred. A few policemen come along. What do they do? They just cart him off to jail. And he's actually in jail overnight until the next day he's released. When did it become so illegal to preach the gospel in this land? That's the situation we have. And here's a man who actually is making such threats against the gospel that Paul has to speak to him in this way.

Why does he speak to him in this way? Well, not just because he detects in him the spirit of evil, the spirit of Satan. But even more than that, Paul's target is Sergius the proconsul, because he knows that if the proconsul is converted, he is the chief of the government of that region, if you like, then the influence is likely to be great throughout the rest of the Senate, throughout that area, and under his political leadership. Things can really advance for the gospel's benefit. That's why Paul has him in his view. That's why he has him in his viewfinder, if you like, as a preacher of the gospel. That's why he deals with this attempt to deflect Sergius Paul as away from the gospel.

That's why he speaks to him in the rough way that he does. And immediately he comes under the judgment of the Lord. But Sergius' response is positive. Sergius believed. What day that was for this man.

Now, he had sent for Paul and Barnabas. He was impressed, as we read earlier on, he was impressed by the preaching. He was impressed by the word of the Lord. So he sent for Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of the Lord in verse 7. And we read there, the record there says he was a man of intelligence. And Paul obviously saw that. And under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, this became his target, this man. And this man was then converted. Because there he believed. And it's not believing in the sense of other than a proper believing. It's a believing that has, that is faith in Christ, that trusts in the Lord. And you see what it says? The proconsul believed when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord. And that's just

emphasizing for us again, that his conversion, his being convinced of the truth of what Paul was saying, was not by any miraculous way in which Paul himself had spoken to this man, Elemas. [29 : 57] It wasn't due simply to the fact that in response to Paul's words, this blindness temporarily fell upon Elemas. No, the emphasis there is he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord.

That's what made the impact. The teaching of the Lord, the preaching of the gospel, the message of Jesus through these missionaries. That's what took hold of his heart. And so the commissioning at Antioch resulted in the conversion at Paphos. And things move on from there. We'll maybe come back and look at the rest of the chapter, if God leads us that way, to look at what happened subsequently.

And the cities that were then before them as they moved on with the gospel. But we'll leave it at that for this evening. Now we're going to...