

Unit 4, Lesson 30: The Gospel goes north

Memory Verse: “Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses.” (Acts 13:38, 39)

Just before the account of Peter's miraculous escape from prison, Luke notes that a prophet named Agabus predicted a famine. The believers in Antioch heard this and prepared gifts to help the people of Judea. They then sent this gift with Barnabas and Saul. When they returned from Jerusalem they brought with them John Mark. These details come from the last verses of chapters 11 and 12. This Antioch, by the way, is well north of Judea and even Galilee, near the northern border of modern Syria.

Some of the believers in Antioch had met for worship and fasting. That's when the Holy Spirit spoke to them and asked them to set apart Saul and Barnabas for a work the Spirit would direct. So these believers laid their hands on Saul and Barnabas and sent them off. They sailed first to the island of Cyprus. Here Saul spoke to the proconsul, Sergius Paulus.

In telling of Saul's run-in with a Jewish sorcerer who opposed them and tried to prevent the proconsul's conversion, Luke says this:

Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, “You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord?” (Acts 13:9, 10)

And with that Saul of Tarsus, devout Pharisee and persecutor of Jesus' followers, is forever after referred to as Paul. Elymas was temporarily blinded, an event that led Sergius Paulus to believe.

From Cyprus Paul, Barnabas and John sailed to Perga in Pamphylia, part of modern Turkey. There John Mark left them and returned to Jerusalem.

Paul now does what he almost always does when he enters a new area:

On the Sabbath they entered the synagogue and sat down. After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the synagogue rulers sent word to them, saying, “Brothers, if you have a message of encouragement for the people, please speak.”

Standing up, Paul motioned with his hand and said: “Men of Israel and you Gentiles who worship God, listen to me! The God of the people of Israel chose our fathers and made the people prosper during their stay in Egypt.” (Acts 13:14-17)

Paul went on to briefly review the history of Israel, leading up to the words of this lesson's memory verse. This far away from Jerusalem, their words did not stir up immediate opposition. In fact, as Paul and Barnabas left the synagogue they were invited to speak again next Sabbath. But when the Jews saw how many people came to hear them next Sabbath they became jealous and began to oppose the message.

Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: “We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to

the Gentiles. For this is what the Lord has commanded us: 'I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.'"

When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed. (Acts 13:46-48)

Luke reports that the word spread throughout the region. But the Jews got some women of high standing to stir up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from the region. The two shook the dust off their feet in protest and went to Iconium. There they again went to the synagogue, again stirring up opposition from Jews who refused to believe. They were able to keep speaking boldly in that city for some time. Eventually, however, they heard of a plot to stone them and left for Lystra and Derbe.

In Lystra Paul healed a cripple. This led the people to worship them as Greek gods Zeus and Hermes. Paul and Barnabas stopped them, with some difficulty. Then Jews arrived from Antioch and Iconium and got the crowd to stone Paul and leave him for dead. The disciples gathered around, and Paul got up and went back into the city. He and Barnabas went to Derbe and won many disciples there.

After that they went back through the cities they had come through and strengthened the believers in each place. Then they returned to Antioch, completing the first missionary journey of Paul. There would be trouble, however.

Some Jews came to Antioch from Jerusalem and began teaching that men had to be circumcised in order to be saved. Paul and Barnabas had not taught their Gentile believers that they had to be circumcised, and they disagreed with these teachers from Judea. The matter was eventually sent to Jerusalem for input from the apostles there. Paul and Barnabas, along with some other believers, made the trip to Jerusalem.

On their way to Jerusalem Paul and Barnabas told groups of believers they encountered about their experience of taking the gospel to the Gentiles. This made these believers glad.

At Jerusalem they reported the same to the apostles and elders. That's when some believers who had been Pharisees said they thought the Gentiles ought to be required to be circumcised and to obey the laws of Moses. After some discussion Peter made the following speech:

“Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us.... Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear?” (Acts 15:7-10)

Paul and Barnabas recounted the signs and miracles that had accompanied their ministry to the Gentiles. Then James, not the disciple, but the brother of Jesus, offered a compromise. They would not require Gentiles to keep all the laws of Moses, but they wouldn't drop all the requirements either. James listed four things they would teach Gentiles to avoid, meat offered to idols, sexual immorality, meat from animals that had been strangled, and blood. This was communicated to the rest of the believers in a letter from the leaders in Jerusalem.

In this way a split of the believers was avoided. We know that Paul didn't agree with everything, for he

later writes that an idol is nothing and there's no reason not to eat meat that had been offered to one. But he also warned that if doing so would offend the conscience of another brother then you shouldn't eat such food.

Possible thought papers:

1. Imagine you are a Jew in one of the cities Paul visited, one who doesn't accept Jesus as the Messiah. Write what you feel about the work of Paul and Barnabas and about the signs that accompanied their message.
2. Imagine you are John Mark. What reasons might you have for leaving Paul and Barnabas and returning to Jerusalem? How did you feel when you left them?
3. Do you think James' compromise was wise? Why or why not? What other options could have been considered?