

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES - NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP STUDY - PART FOURTEEN - CHAPTERS 13 AND 14

The church in Antioch began with two teachers,(11:16) but within 2 years there were five.(13:1) Barnabas and Saul had taught in such a way that others became teachers because they quickly learned how God could be their teacher and use them also. Barnabas and Saul welcomed others into the team rather than feeling threatened by competition.

The three new recruits to the teaching team were an interesting contrast to Barnabas and Saul. Simeon called Niger of Cyrene is presumably Simon of Cyrene who was compelled to carry the cross for Jesus.(Mark 15:21) No-one ever had a more powerful illustration of what it means to 'take up your cross and follow Me.' He must have learned to do that not just on the road to Golgotha but in his heart. 'Niger' means black, so Simeon is likely to have been an African convert first to Judaism and now to Jesus Christ. He would have been among the first group(11:20) who reached out to Gentiles in Antioch. Simeon was the father of Rufus. This was probably the same family, to which Paul was referring in Rom.16:13, who had welcomed him when he first came to Antioch. We know nothing else about Lucius of Cyrene but it may well be Simeon who led one of his countrymen to Christ.

Manaen had been brought up with Herod the Tetrarch, who had imprisoned and executed John,(Matt.14:1-12) and demanded signs from Jesus.(Luke 23:8) The Herods were Edomites who had worked themselves into favour with the Roman emperors so that they could rule the Jews. They were scheming, ruthless, godless men. What a family to grow up in! What amazing things Jesus must have done in this man's life to make him a teacher of the gospel! Barnabas and Saul themselves seem an unlikely combination. Barnabas was a Levite from Cyprus, a warm encouraging father figure who knew how to reconcile people, and Saul was a Pharisee from Tarsus, a newly converted religious fanatic who had let nothing stand in his way - until Jesus did.

The Spirit of God welded these five into a dynamic combination for whom serving the Lord and listening to His instructions was more important than food.(13:2) How the Spirit spoke we do not know but all five came to the same conclusion. Like the occasion at the end of chapter 11, this was a prayer meeting as prayer meetings are meant to be. God spoke and they acted by freeing Barnabas and Saul from other responsibilities, seeking further instructions from God, identifying with them and sending them out.(13:3) God calls us individually to a task but He also usually speaks to those to whom we have already been a blessing, confirming His call to us and involving them to help and back us up. When they left Antioch it was with a clear sense that God, not just the church was sending them.(13:4)

Cyprus, a large island in the Eastern Mediterranean, was Barnabas' home so it was the logical starting place for Barnabas to begin just as Tarsus had been the natural place for Saul. As on many other occasions in the future, they began in the synagogues simply because there were the Jews who knew the Old Testament and should have been waiting for the Messiah. If they trusted Him they would make mature leaders fast.(13:5) They also looked for every opportunity to reach leaders who would quickly affect many others when they came to Christ.(13:6-12; I Tim.2:1-4)

The Devil had seen the same potential in the proconsul so he infiltrated a false teacher into his household to keep him away from Christ.(13:6) Saul (Paul in Greek) exercised his God-given authority over the Devil to prevent him hindering the proconsul finding Christ.(I Jn.4:4; Rom.8:37-39) Elymas was blinded for a while to show him and Sergius Paulus how spiritually blind he had been. Paul remembered clearly what it felt like,(9:8,9) and no doubt hoped Elymas would make the same discovery he had made.

We do not know why John Mark went home to mother.(13:13) He may have been frightened by the episode with Elymas. He may have been overwhelmed by the prospect of a new and bigger task on the mainland. Either way he had not yet learned the secret of how the Lord made him adequate.(II Cor.2:16)

Paul and Barnabas came next to Antioch in Pisidia, the first of a series of towns in the central plain of Asia Minor on the trade route to the East.(13:14) Again they began in the synagogue being prepared to wait until they were asked to speak. They knew how to take every opportunity without discourtesy.

Paul's message began with his audience's knowledge of God in the Old Testament and His past dealings with them. He emphasised two things, resurrection and promises fulfilled,

as illustrated by the Exodus and the rise of David in place of Saul.(13:16-22) John the Baptist, known and respected by most Jews, had also promised Jesus. God had raised Jesus up. Just like Peter in Acts 2,3 and 4, Paul put responsibility for the cross onto the Jews and their leaders, because his audience was Jewish.(13:23-29) Elsewhere the crucifixion is made the responsibility of the whole human race. The resurrection is presented as firstly a life changing experience and secondly as a frequent Old Testament theme.(13:30-41) Paul closed with a simple explanation of the choice the gospel placed upon them, forgiveness and freedom from the impossible demands of the Law, or judgement and destruction.(13:38-41)

At first the response was a mixture of interest to know more, and faith in Christ.(13:42,43) To the Jews it seemed just a Jewish issue until word spread throughout the city and everyone turned up next Saturday. As often before and since, violent reaction began with jealousy by those who saw their position threatened.(5:17) Paul gave three reasons for withdrawing from the synagogue which may well be the reasons we should move on from an unsympathetic church. They repudiated the word, rejected salvation, and refused their God-given missionary task.(13:46,47)

Persecution spread the word rather than extinguishing it. Paul and Barnabas moved on not because the going was tough, but because God moved them. The new Christians had been taught how to manage without them.(13:48-52) One hundred miles down the road was Iconium.

14:1-3 Q.1 What was Paul and Barnabas' approach to evangelising Iconium? Why was there opposition and how did they react? What can we learn from their experience?

14:4-6 Q.2 What was the effect of the gospel on the people of Iconium? What conclusion might we draw if no-one ever gets upset by what we say? How did Paul and Barnabas handle opposition?

14:7-13 Q.3 Lystra was 20 miles further on. How did the lack of a synagogue affect the response to the gospel? How do we see different problems today according to how much Bible background people have? How did the people of Lystra respond to the miracle of the lame man walking? How do we see the same response today?

14:12 Q.4 What conclusion can we draw from the way Barnabas and Saul have become Paul and Barnabas as their journey has gone on? How do you think Barnabas handled their changing roles?

14:14-18 Q.5 What starting point did Barnabas and Paul use in their brief message to Lystra? What can we learn about where to begin with an audience ignorant of the Bible? What should we do when people treat us as gods?

14:19,20 Q.6 How was it that the people could change their minds so totally about Paul and Barnabas? What important warning does this story contain for us? Why did God let Paul get stoned? What would it have taken for Paul to re-enter Lystra after being almost murdered?

14:20-23 Q.7 Derbe was another 20 miles on and appears to have been a quiet place. What were Paul and Barnabas' purposes in re-visiting Lystra, Iconium and Antioch only a few months after their first visit? Why had they not appointed elders before? What qualities did they look for in those they appointed?(I Tim.3:1-7; Tit.1:7-9)

14:24-28 Q.8 The missionaries returned home. How did they view their time away? What did they now see as their purpose for being in Antioch in Syria? What can we learn from this about the task of a missionary returning to his home church and our responsibility towards him?