

Engage Your Life God-ward
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January 18, 2009

When you work your way through the New Testament you start with Matthew, Mark, Luke, John—the Gospels, the story of Jesus. Then you come to a book called Acts. Kind of a strange name, but that's because it's such an action-oriented book that it got the "Acts of the Apostles." It's a book that starts with Jesus leaving. He'd been with His apostles, His disciples, for four-and-a-half years; He had done miracles, He had taught, He had traveled throughout Galilee with the message of good news. Then He had been arrested, condemned, crucified, buried, rose again, and then He had met with those apostles. He had spent time with them. And then, finally, He was exalted, raised up into heaven.

Just prior to rising up into heaven we open the book of Acts, chapter 1, and in that chapter Jesus gives instructions to His apostles. He tells them what it is they are going to be doing and be about as He leaves. And He says very simply, He says

"...you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest parts of the earth."

"*You will be My witnesses.*" That has been the calling of the church throughout the centuries ever since. Every circumstance, every condition, every generation—we are called to be witness to the reality, the wonder, the glory, the mystery of Jesus Christ.

That early church took right to that task. They set out from Jerusalem not with strategy, but because of persecution. And they moved with that gospel message to the west, and ended up on the coast of the Mediterranean. And then they worked their way north. They were scattered to various places, and they worked their way north to Antioch. And everywhere these scattered Christians went, they kept talking about Jesus. They kept giving witness to the reality of Jesus risen from the dead. Took about ten years for them to move from Jerusalem up to Antioch with that message; and the first twelve chapters of Acts covered that movement of the gospel from Jerusalem to Antioch. The rest of the book now picks up what happens after the gospel reaches Antioch, and things are gonna pick up their pace dramatically. And that's where we're gonna start today, in Antioch, ten years after Christ has risen from the grave, ascended into heaven; ten years after the church was first called to give witness, to give testimony to the reality of Jesus. We're gonna start with Acts chapter 13 and see the next step in the story.

We're told in Acts chapter 13, verse 1,

There were at Antioch, in that church that was there...

...this city that was one of the...that was the third largest city in the Roman Empire; it was called the Queen of the East in terms of cities. It had beautiful, beautiful buildings and amphitheater, and everything else. It was a cosmopolitan wonder. Major trade routes, major political center, people from all over the Roman Empire, people from the Far East were here. It was an amazing place to be.

And there, in that city, there was a church. And in that church, we're told, there were some prophets and teachers. It goes on in that verse to name five of them. Two names that stand out are Barnabas and Saul, because they will become so integral to the story. But there are five of these individuals there. Prophets—these were individuals who spoke direct God's word to His people, God's message to His people. It tended to be something that was usually very situation-specific; it tended to be a message of encouragement, sometimes direction, and sometimes even foretelling what would happen up ahead. We've already seen this happen in Antioch, where the prophet Agabus told the congregation that there was gonna be a great famine, and there was. And so some of these leaders in this church were people who spoke for God in specific situations. Others were teachers. And these were individuals who took the scriptures and made them understandable and applicable to the people. They dealt with both doctrine—teaching truth, and practice—how do you live out that truth. And so, at the very core of this church were prophets and teachers.

And we're told that, verse 2, that while they were ministering to the Lord and they were fasting, the Holy Spirit spoke. While these five men were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit spoke. We're not told how He spoke. We're not told that it was one of the prophets speaking out and saying, "Thus saith the Lord..." We don't know that it was one of the men coming in and saying, 'Man, I had a dream last night, and I think...and I dreamed, and God spoke to me, and this is what He said.' We're not told...maybe it was just...maybe they were all thinking the same thing, and one of 'em said, "I'm thinking this," and another says, "I'm thinking that, too," and pretty soon all five of 'em are saying 'Whoa! This must be comin' from God!' We're not told the dynamics of how it happened. For all we know it could have been a little child walked by the five of 'em and said something, and they 'Whoa! Man, that had a special ring to it; that might have been from God!'

The only thing we're told is the Holy Spirit spoke, and they recognized it as the Holy Spirit speaking. And what the Spirit said to them, these leaders in that church, was

"Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."

So it's God's Spirit speaking as God, Himself, and saying 'I have these two individuals, Barnabas and Saul...', they are leaders of this church, they have spent a year in Antioch helping that church get established; they were the leaders of that church. And now the Spirit says, 'I want them to go elsewhere. Set them apart, because I have something I need them to do.' So the church decides 'That's the Spirit's leading, we're gonna respond,' and that's exactly what they do. They recognize the Spirit and they respond.

And so we're told in the next verse that when they had fasted after that, and when they had prayed after that, and they laid hands on these men—they put their hands on them to acknowledge, to confirm, to commission them as ones being sent out by God, and so we have this special time of prayer and fasting and appointment and confirmation of these two men—we're told that they sent them away. Now, that can sound a little bit harsh, you know, like they're kicking them out. It's not the idea. The idea is that they *released* them. They let go of them. In essence, they said 'Ok, you're done here. Go ahead to where the Spirit wants to take you.' And that's what they did.

The next verse is a verse that really...the opening line of it is a...the line that really is the point of these first four verses in Acts chapter 13, as we get ready to follow the story of Paul and Barnabas as it goes on for many chapters ahead. The next line is the all-important one. It's the main point that Luke wants us to get as he tells this story and introduces it. And it reads like this. It says

So [or as a consequence], being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they [Paul and Barnabas] went out.

Important phrase...being sent out by the Holy Spirit. Luke wants us to understand right here, at this crucial point in the book of Acts, that the next step in the progress of the gospel was not the result of a strategy meeting. It wasn't the result of the best, wisest Christian leaders in Antioch sitting down and saying, 'What is the best way to spread the gospel?' It was not the result of a visionary leader in their midst that could see great dreams and dream great things, and challenge the people to do great work for God, and motivate the people and cast a vision in front of 'em and encourage 'em and organize 'em, and get set out and march for Jesus. It wasn't somebody standing up and saying, 'I will lead!' The Holy Spirit spoke. And it's because of the Holy Spirit that these two went out. This is not a human plan, strategy, or effort. It was initiated—and we'll see that it was sustained—by the Spirit of God.

The chapters that unfold make for a very, very interesting story. And we will be going on in the months ahead, the weeks ahead, going through it. Paul sets out on a journey with Barnabas. They set right out here in this chapter, and they move from Antioch, and they move down to the island [Cyprus], and they move up to the north, south Asia Minor. And once they're up in south Asia Minor, what we now call Turkey, they kinda wander around and do a number of things there, and visit a number of places. And then they make their way back to Antioch. And it's a pretty, pretty... (Is this gonna make it there? There we go. Isn't that kinda cool? Did you see it unfold? [Referring to PowerPoint tracing of the travel route] Ok.)

So they get back to Antioch, and that's their first trip; and there's some exciting things that happen in that trip. And then pretty soon they're sent out again, and they go on a second journey. This one goes north over land, goes across Asia Minor (which we now call Turkey), gets way up to the north of that, and then it jumps across to Macedonia, comes down the coast of Greece, and ends up way south in Greece, and from there it goes across back to Asia Minor, and they come back to Jerusalem. And after Jerusalem... Wow. I'm sorry guys...I'm captivated by this down here [refers to small screen].

They eventually get back up to Jerusalem. And this is taking years to happen. I mean, this isn't like 'Ok, we just took a quick route on a cruise ship and it took three weeks.' These are major journeys and trips. And the whole time they're doing this the gospel is spreading. Everywhere they go they keep speaking of the reality of Jesus.

He has a third missionary journey that we'll get to in the book of Acts. Once again, he heads north over land. Only this time he crosses the Aegean Sea on the south end. He gets over in Greece, goes to the south tip of it, then he turns around, goes back north, hits across the water, comes back to Jerusalem; only this time he doesn't get out of Jerusalem. He doesn't get back to Antioch. Instead, he's arrested. And that leads to his final journey in the book of Acts, where he starts at Jerusalem and he goes all the way to Rome. He did that in a prison boat. But the whole way, the gospel was spread.

That's the story of Acts—how the witness to the reality of Jesus spreads out. As you go through it the message will tend to be very simple, and very plain, and very repeated. The message goes like this...everywhere he goes, the message is "Jesus is the Christ. He's the Messiah. He's the long-awaited Savior. He's the One the prophets of old spoke of. Jesus is God's anointed ruler for mankind, the eternal king." That is the repeated message everywhere they go as they bear witness to Jesus. As they do that Paul repeats over and over again that men crucified Him. Jesus is God's appointed Messiah, ruler over all mankind forever, but men crucified Him; in *Jerusalem* they crucified Him; the place where He should have been welcome, He was put to death. But, repeatedly in the message, God raised Him. He didn't stay in that grave. He is alive, He's raised, He is exalted, He is the living Lord of all and will return.

That's the repeated message. With it there is a call to respond. And the call to respond is simply 1) Repent. Repent. And I like to rephrase that—rethink everything. If Jesus is the Christ, crucified by men, raised by God, you need to rethink everything about life...your priorities, your purposes, your directions, your future...everything else needs to be rethought in the terms of the reality of Jesus, and change direction towards Him. Repent, believe the good news, grip it as the truth to live and to live out, and finally, repeatedly, a call to be baptized—to make a commitment, to acknowledge, to go on record as a follower of Jesus. That's the repeated response that's called for.

As that response is called for, there is a repeated promise that you'll hear throughout the book of Acts over and over again as we go forward on these journeys. Number one will be the promise that you will be forgiven all your sins. Everywhere the Apostle Paul went and preached the gospel, he gave the promise of amnesty to sinners with God. Whatever's on your record, whatever you've done, God will accept you and forgive you if you respond to Jesus Christ—total, free amnesty as a sinner before the Holy God. Promise of forgiveness, a promise that you'll receive the Spirit; that God's very Spirit would renew you from within—tremendous, amazing promise! That no longer would the spiritual life be one where you're trying to live a bunch of rules that are on the exterior, that you have to live up to. Instead God was gonna put His Spirit in His people, and He would shape you from the inside out with new desires, and new directions, and new purposes. And then the last promise that is repeated continually as you move through the book of Acts as they give witness to the reality of Jesus is as you respond to that witness you will have eternal life. You will never die.

We can rattle those off, but I want you to stop a second and think about the enormity of the promises these individuals were making as they spread out over the Roman Empire. Think about it. They were promising full amnesty with God—every wrong you've ever committed wiped off your record with God. They were promising God's Spirit residing within you, and they were promising that you'll have eternal life. Those are astounding promises. And when I read what their message was, what their call of response was, and I read what their promises were, I frankly wonder how anybody came to believe 'em. I mean, what would happen if I came in here today and you didn't know me; you'd been living fine, you'd been worshipping a number of different gods, and all of a sudden I came in and said, "Hey, Jesus is real! Rethink everything—rethink everything you were ever taught about God, believe in Jesus, and commit to being a follower of Him. And guess what? You'll be forgiven, you'll have eternal life, and the Spirit of God will live within you." That is an astounding message! And you wonder how was it that people came to believe it.

And that leads to the last distinctive with respect to their...oh man, I got way ahead of myself. Ok? The pattern with that message—their pattern with that message is 1) they went to the Jews first. They went to the Jews who had been expecting a messiah and looking for the Messiah; they went to them first. After they looked to them they most often they would come into a city, they would find the Jewish worship center, the synagogue; they would go there, they would talk about Jesus. And then after that most often the Jews would reject 'em and they would go to the Gentiles, who had not been looking for the Messiah at all. That was a general pattern.

As they went through that pattern there was a response. Oftentimes it would be resistance and persecution. It would be people saying, "You are absolutely nuts! Nobody could believe that. That is absolute foolishness, it's ridiculous." In fact, there were people that said, "You're blaspheming!" But there were people who accepted, and there were churches planted, and the gospel grew across the Roman Empire. And that leads to the question—how would that happen?

How did it happen that it took root and grew? And the response here is the Holy Spirit. There was more to this story than men talking about God. There was a working of the Holy Spirit. Let me give you a sense of what it was like. In the verses that follow our text immediately, there's the first instance recorded as Paul and Barnabas head out to talk about Jesus. Called, they're sent out, and they go to an island. And as they're at that island they move across it. And they come finally to a city where the provincial leader and governor of that area is there. And they're witnessing in that town, and the governor calls them. He wants to hear their message. He hears about 'em and he calls 'em in. He's a proconsul, they call him; and he brings them in. And we're told he was a very intelligent man, but an odd thing about this intelligent man is he had a magician...a fake miracle worker...who was with him all the time, who would do things that looked miraculous. And this guy was kind of the local religious guru.

And so when the proconsul calls Paul in and says, 'Hey, I wanna hear your message,' this magician is there. And he starts contradicting and debating and arguing and disputing with Paul and his message. And he tries, the text says, he tries to keep the proconsul from believing this message. Now this is what happens. Pick it up at verse 9. It says

Saul, who was also known as Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit,

...the Holy Spirit just controlling him...

...fixed his gaze on him...

...this magician, who was fighting against the faith, trying to keep the proconsul away from it. And Saul looks at him and he says this. I love this. This is a man filled by the Holy Spirit, controlled by the Holy Spirit in the moment. He says this...

"You who are full of all deceit and fraud, you son of a devil, you enemy of all righteousness, you will not cease to make crooked the straight ways of the Lord. Now behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blinded and not see the sun for a time."

I just love this scene! Ok? It's not Paul sitting there saying, 'Let's talk a little bit.' It's not the Holy Spirit making Paul sweet. It's Paul sittin' there saying, 'You son of a devil, God's gonna blind ya!' Now, that had to be a moment, huh? Can you imagine that governor sittin' there? He's got this advisor who...this spiritual advisor over here, and he's got the new guy in town, and they're facin' each other, and Paul says, 'You're gonna be blind.' The next moment, the very next moment, is critical, 'cause if the man goes blind it says somethin' about Saul. If he *doesn't* go blind it says somethin' about Saul.

The man goes blind. He starts groping around; he's tryin' to find somebody that will help him. And then we have this statement that follows up, the result of that; verse 12—

Then the proconsul believed when he saw what had happened, being amazed at the teaching of the Lord.

It's intriguing. It isn't that he was just amazed about this showdown. He was amazed at the content of the message that came with that kind of power, and he believed. That's the kind of stuff you find in the book of Acts.

And one of the challenges you find when you read through the book of Acts like this and you see these things, the question that will keep coming back in your mind is 'Could our story ever read like this one?' Could our story here, in Wasilla, Alaska, in this church, you and I individually, you and I congregationally—could our stories ever read like this? I mean, would the Spirit of God speak to us and work through us like that?

Absolutely, uncategorically, with full conviction, I say yes. And if it can't be, I don't know that I would want to live our story. Listen...the same Spirit that spoke to them and worked through them is the same Spirit with us who can, who will, and who does speak to us and work through us. And if that isn't the truth, we're no different than any other civic, religious, political organization in the world. We're just people doing what people can do.

That's why it's so, so very crucial to us. The elders spent last summer workin' this out. It is so crucial to us as we go through the book of Acts and we read it and we study it, it is so crucial to us that along with that we're teaching people classes about how to recognize and respond to the Holy Spirit, so that we recognize when He is speaking to us, and we respond when He desires to work through us—because that's the dynamic reality that Jesus has given to us.

One of our application groups... Oh man, we're late. That's ok. You're gonna stay with me. One of our little application groups, these little home groups, about 8-10 people, this past year...this past fall, and we're just startin' the new ones up...this past fall we were doin' this one. And I remember one of our ladies goin' through it, and she came back and she was tellin' her story from the week. And she says, "You know, I was readin' the text, and it just...I felt, I felt convicted. It was like the Spirit tellin' me, saying "You know what? You're not serving anywhere." And she said "That really bothered me, and I was wrestlin' with that. And so I said, 'Lord, I wanna serve.'" And it's like the Lord gave her an idea. She just went over, she picked up the phone, and she called Heartreach, the crisis pregnancy center. And she got 'em on the phone, and she says, "Listen, do you need blankets for like little babies? I make blankets. I make quilts. Can I make some for you?" And they sat there on the other side of the phone, and they said, "You know what? We don't need blankets for babies." And it's kinda like her heart sinks a little bit. But they go, "You know, just right now we were talking about the fact...right this moment we were talking about the fact that we need blankets for mothers." This lady spent the next week making ten quilts. That's significant, because for over a decade before, she'd never been able to finish the quilts she'd started for her daughters. She made ten, and then she made more for her daughters.

Craig Keener is a New Testament scholar. I was readin' some of his story, a book I'd come across. I'd read his scholarship writing, and I came across another book, it's a little different. He's tellin' more of his life story. He describes how when he was a student, he was helping, working in an apartment complex, in an apartment building. And you know, he was reading the book of Acts; and he kept reading it and reading it, and he's kinda saying, "Oh man, you know, there's stuff going on here, and I wanna be a part of that." And he finally decided what he was gonna do in that apartment building was he would pray for people. Well, an older lady in the apartment building came to him one day and said...they're talking, and she goes, "I've got a bad knee." He says, "Can I pray for you about that knee?" She says, "Sure." So he prayed for her. She came back a few days later and said, "My knee's well! It's well! But know what? The doctors...I gotta go see a doctor tomorrow, and I've been coughing up blood, and they say I've got some kind of lung...possibly lung cancer. Will you pray for me?" He's goin' "Whoa!"

He prayed for her. 'C'mon Lord, help!' She was healed. She eventually said, "I want what you got." She became a believer, and she lived another fifteen years.

I'm absolutely convinced the same Spirit who spoke to, and worked through, the church in Antioch desires to speak to, and work through, this church in Wasilla, and every other church in Wasilla. You say, "Ok, well, where do we go with that? How? What?"

Key verse in this text...absolute key verse, and it's right here, verse 2. This, to me, is key to this chapter, key to everything that follows. It says "While they were ministering to the Lord..." While they were engaged God-ward is the way I describe it. The word 'ministering' here can be translated 'worship', it can be translated 'service', it can be translated 'ministering'. The idea used, this term used in a public setting usually meant 'of doing public service, of stepping into the public arena and doing your civic duty, carrying out responsibilities for the community at large that you, as a citizen, should take on.' Used in religious settings it referred to people doing their priestly duty, their religious responsibilities they had within the people of God. It could also refer to a worship service, but the priority was doing what God had placed you and called you to do. And so that's simply what these guys were doing. Now, they may have been in a worship service when the Spirit spoke. But more likely, it was simply they were going about doing what God had appointed them to do.

And they were doing something else. They were fasting. That is, they were saying "No" to certain things in their life; most likely food, because that's...when people fast, most often that's what they do without. But we do fasting in some of our home groups, where people say, "You know what? I'm gonna fast from the Internet for a week." And it's harder for them than goin' without food. Ok? But fasting has a very definite purpose. It's a negative action...you're saying 'no' to something with a positive purpose, because you want to say 'yes' toward God; you want to be attentive towards God. You want to pay closer attention to Him and what He's doing at that time in your life. And so, when I say fasting I'm referring to the fact that they were attentive God-ward.

It's in that setting that they hear and respond to the Spirit. And I'm convinced that's the way it is. We want God to speak to us, and work through us when we're not paying attention to Him? When we're not engaged with what He's doing and what He's about? Guess what? He's not going to speak to you and work through you. And that's why your Christian life may be so boring! It's when we go God-ward with our lives, we engage in what He has for us as a purpose and a calling as a believer, and we're attentive in the midst of that calling, that the Spirit speaks and works through us. It's powerful!

We went through our application groups this fall, and I debrief all of 'em. I say, "What do you find as people slow down and try to recognize and respond to the Spirit?" And the guys tell me, and we adjust the project, we adjust the studies and everything else. Here's the most consistent thing. Now, as soon as I say it some of you are gonna think I thought of you and I'm trying to pick on you right now. Let me assure you—the majority of our people were like this, so it's all of you. The hardest thing our people had, the hardest thing our people had for six weeks was to slow down and say, "God, what do you want me to do? I'm here. Speak to me." What we found consistently across all our groups is that we would give the assignment, we give the directions, we tell how it could be done, and it would be delayed and delayed, and they wouldn't get to it until the last day when their group was gonna meet. And then it was like, "I got homework to do. I gotta do this." And again, if you think I'm talkin' about you, there's many of you, me included.

Here's the problem with that...here's the problem with that. It's saying, "God, I'm engaged about many very things. And I'm paying attention to a whole lotta things. I'll get to You when I can. And when I've got my fifteen minutes to give to You, You better speak." Right now in our church life, I will say that is careless. In the future, I will say it is rebellious and sinful. You engage your life God-ward. You be attentive towards God. Then our story can read like the story of Acts.

Go and enjoy His grace. It's deep, it's rich. Amen.