

Acts

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. (Acts 1:8 ESV)

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42 ESV)

Lessons in Launching Out

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Acts 13:4-12

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Introduction:

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to Acts 13. As I mentioned last Sunday, we have officially turned a significant page in the book of Acts. From here on out, we will be following the Apostle Paul in his missionary journeys. And, as we prepare to do that, I want to invite you to consider what an amazing blessing that is!

In the entertainment world, for example, documentaries are being pumped out faster than you can watch them. Netflix has specials on Michael Jordan and Arnold Schwarzenegger. Disney+ has documentaries on Ed Sheeran and the Beatles. Amazon Prime has a documentary on the Toronto Maple Leafs.

These shows are being EATEN up! Why? Because we recognize the value of observing and learning from the example of people who have accomplished great things.

Brothers and sisters, the Apostle Paul accomplished great things. In these chapters, we have the privilege of walking with him as he embarks on a missionary journey that will transform the world. These stories are a tremendous gift.

Our passage this morning tells the story of the very first stage of Paul's missionary travels where we will discover some valuable **lessons in launching out**. So let's lean in close and learn from this example. Look with me to Acts 13:4-12. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today.

So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus. ⁵ When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. And they had John to assist them. ⁶ When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they came upon a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet named Bar-Jesus. ⁷ He was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. ⁸ But Elymas the magician (for that is the meaning of his name) opposed them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith. ⁹ But Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him ¹⁰ and said, “You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord? ¹¹ And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and unable to see the sun for a time.” Immediately mist and darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking people to lead him by the hand. ¹² Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord. (Acts 13:4-12 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Lessons In Launching Out

As we observed last week, this is the first time in the New Testament that a church has sent out cross-cultural missionaries. And the first thing we learn from their example is that – before launching out – it is important to:

1. Assemble a good team

For all of his giftedness, it is striking that the Apostle Paul never opted to minister as a lone wolf. He always surrounded himself with a team. The church sent Paul *and* Barnabas, and verse 5 tells us:

And they had John to assist them. (Acts 13:5b ESV)

This pattern of traveling in team is in keeping with the pattern that Jesus set with his disciples. In Mark 6, we read:

And he called the twelve and began to send them out **two by two** (Mark 6:7a ESV)

So, there is a clear pattern in the New Testament of *team ministry*. Why is that?

Well, for starters, the Mosaic Law taught that a testimony was not to be received without a witness. So, as Paul marched into the synagogues and preached about the resurrection of Jesus, he needed a witness to verify his story. Teams bring credibility.

Teams also provide support. We don't go out into the world as lone wolves because ministry is hard, and we are weak. As we read in Ecclesiastes 4:

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. ¹⁰ For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But **woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up!** (Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 ESV)

So, a team brings credibility, and a team brings support, but it also needs to be said that a team brings diversity. The Apostle Paul understood that no one possesses all the gifts, and that's why he wrote to the Corinthians:

For the body does not consist of one member but of many. (1 Corinthians 12:14 ESV)

The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." ²² On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable (1 Corinthians 12:21-22 ESV)

We are all *strategically deficient*. We need each other. That is by design. You can't do everything. And that's okay! You're not *supposed* to do everything. *You* are not the body of Christ. *We* are.

So, we need to be in team *on the mission field*, but we also need to be part of a team back home. Look back at verse 3. There, we read:

Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off. (Acts 13:3 ESV)

Paul and Barnabas were *sent* by the church in Antioch. They were not lone wolves taking off on an adventure of their own choosing. They were members of a local church who were commissioned by a local church to minister as an extension of that local church who then *reported*

back to that local church. We see that in chapter 14. At the end of their first missionary journey, we read:

from there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had fulfilled. ²⁷ And when they arrived and **gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them**, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. (Acts 14:26-27 ESV)

No one was as gifted as Paul. And yet, even Paul saw himself as accountable to a local church.

This principle seems to have been forgotten in our day and age, and the results are dangerous. So, let me say it plainly: Run from teachers that are not accountable to a local church. Run from missionaries who are not accountable to a local church. Run from the kinds of people who see themselves as too gifted, too smart, or too ambitious to submit themselves to accountability. As St. Cyprian famously said:

No one can have God for his Father, who does not have the Church for his mother.¹

Assemble a good team. That's the first lesson we learn from this example. Second, we learn to:

2. Prepare a thoughtful strategy

Look again at verse 4:

So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus. (Acts 13:4 ESV)

It is obvious in this story that the Holy Spirit sent Paul and Barnabas out on mission. We're going to talk more about that later on. But what is less obvious in this story is how specific the Spirit was in directing the details of this mission. Did the Spirit tell them to go to Seleucia? And then to Cyprus? Or did He simply tell them to go?

¹ St. Cyprian as quoted in <https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/study/module/cyprian>, accessed June 13, 2023.

Those might seem like trivial questions, but they're worth asking. How many times have we found ourselves staring at a significant life decision? We could go left. We could go right. So we pray, and we wait, but no answer seems to come. Have you been there?

Now, of course, sometimes the answer DOES come. In future stories – for example – we will see instances where the Spirit directs Paul in the specifics. In chapter 16 He will tell Paul not to preach in Asia, and He will tell him in a dream to travel to Macedonia.

So, that clear direction DOES happen. But, often times, it appears that Paul is told to GO without any specifics on the WHERE. So, what does he do in those situations?

Let's consider this missionary journey as a case study. Why, for example, does he start this mission in Cyprus? Well, for starters, we read in Acts 4:36 that Barnabas grew up in Cyprus. Not only that, but in Acts 11:19 we are told that some of the Christians who fled from Jerusalem made Cyprus their new home.

Humanly speaking, then, Paul and Barnabas seemed to have selected Cyprus because they had some pre-existing connections. Some workers were already on the ground.

And then, when they arrived, where did they begin their evangelism? Look at verse 5:

When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God **in the synagogues of the Jews.** (Acts 13:5 ESV)

They went straight to the synagogues! Why is that? Well, there is an awful lot that could be said about this, but at the most foundational level they went to the Jews first because the Jews had already been prepared to receive the message of the Gospel.

The Jews were steeped in the Scriptures. They were primed and ready to recognize Jesus as the Messiah King in the line of David, the Prophet like Moses, and the Suffering Servant of Isaiah. No one in Cyprus – or anywhere else for that matter – was better positioned to recognize Jesus than the Jews. So, Paul and Barnabas went to the place where they were most likely to find good soil, and they threw the seed of the gospel.

We could say more, but we need to keep moving. Here's the lesson: It is not sinful or faithless to think strategically. We trust God to lead us AND we make careful, strategic plans. That's what the Bible calls *wisdom*. Proverbs 21:31 says:

The horse is made ready for the day of battle,
but the victory belongs to the Lord. (Proverbs 21:31 ESV)

Prepare the horse! Make a plan! But remember that God is the One who brings the victory.

Some people seem to be paralyzed – waiting for God to tell them who to share the gospel with, who to disciple, and what to eat for breakfast. Sometimes God leads us through common sense. Look for the connections that already exist. Look for the doors that are already open a crack. Look at the gifts that God has given to you. Start there. Make a plan. But then:

3. Expect to encounter resistance

Whenever we push forward and attempt to make new ground, we need to remember that there is a spiritual enemy pushing back who does not want to give up an inch. We see this in verses 6-8:

When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they came upon a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet named Bar-Jesus. ⁷ He was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. ⁸ But Elymas the magician (for that is the meaning of his name) opposed them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith. (Acts 13:6-8 ESV)

The resistance that Paul and Barnabas faced came in the form of a false prophet who worked in the proconsul's court. He professed to be a Jew – a worshiper of the God of Israel – but he was a hypocrite. When he heard Paul and Barnabas preaching from the Scriptures, he interjected himself and opposed them.

Pause here. Haven't we been conditioned to believe that pushback is an indicator that we've made the wrong choice? "I thought I was called to evangelize my neighbours, but now they're making fun of me." "I thought I was called to minister at the Lighthouse, but I come away feeling dark and

discouraged.” “I guess I’m not where I’m supposed to be...” NO! As you launch out you should EXPECT resistance! Jesus was not ambiguous. He said:

In the world **you will have tribulation**. (John 16:33b ESV)

Not “you might” or “you could”. You will have tribulation. In missions. In evangelism. In church planting. In disciple making. You follow a Saviour who was hung naked on a tree. When he called you, he told you that you would need to take up your cross to follow him. We need to come to terms with this so that we don’t throw in the towel the first time we get punched in the nose.

You will have tribulation. But that opposition is no reason to throw in the towel, because Jesus went on to say:

But take heart; I have overcome the world. (John 16:33c ESV)

Paul and Barnabas didn’t stop preaching when Elymus burst in with his opposition. They turned to their opponent, and they addressed him head on. And that leads directly to the fourth lesson that we learn in this passage. As you launch out, expect to encounter resistance but also:

4. Expect the help of the Spirit

Last Sunday, we talked about how the Holy Spirit *sends* us on mission. We see that again in this passage, but more than that, we are reminded here that the Holy Spirit *defends* us in the mission. Look at verses 9-11:

But Saul, who was also called Paul, **filled with the Holy Spirit**, looked intently at him ¹⁰ and said, “You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord? ¹¹ And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and unable to see the sun for a time.” Immediately mist and darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking people to lead him by the hand. (Acts 13:9-11 ESV)

Stop and picture this scene. Paul and Barnabas are standing before this prominent political leader, and they’re in the middle of sharing the gospel with him, when all of the sudden this court magician starts heckling them and shouting them down.

I'm going to go out on a limb and guess that many of us fear situations like this. "What if I get dragged into a debate at school?" "What if someone in my workplace publicly drags me through the coals?" "I'm not quick on my feet! I'm not smart! What will I say?"

We forget that Jesus taught us:

when they bring you to trial and deliver you over, do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour, **for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit.** (Mark 13:11 ESV)

That is exactly what we see here. As Elymus erupted into the conversation and tried to keep the proconsul from hearing the gospel, the Holy Spirit filled Paul and left the magician temporarily blind.

You can't plan ahead for that. You don't write that on a cue card. The Spirit knew how to silence the false prophet, and he delivered the same judgement to him that he had used years earlier to bring Paul to a place of repentance.

"But," you might object, "why did the Spirit deal so severely with this man?"

This false prophet was trying to keep the proconsul from hearing and believing the gospel. He was trying to keep this man on the road to hell. But God is seeking and saving the lost, and like a husband protecting his wife or a lion protecting her cubs, His love is FIERCE and FIRM. If you attempt to oppose God's rescue mission – if you cause one of these little ones to stumble – it would be better for you to have a millstone tied around your neck and to be thrown into the sea. As G. Campbell Morgan writes:

The severest words of the Bible, Old and New Testament, are reserved for those who stand between men and truth, for those who stand between men and God.²

² G. Campbell Morgan, *The Acts Of The Apostles* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1924), 317.

Paul didn't retaliate in anger. He responded with Holy Spirit power. That same Spirit dwells in us and goes with us as we launch out into the world. The Spirit sends. The Spirit defends. Therefore, when opposition arises, we should expect the help of the Spirit.

Fifth and finally, we learn from this story that as we launch out in ministry we must:

5. Never stop preaching the Word

Immediately upon their landing, Paul and Barnabas went into the synagogues and began to teach. From there, they went out through the whole island. In verse 12, we catch a glimpse of the fruit:

Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for **he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord.** (Acts 13:12 ESV)

This man just watched as his magician friend was struck blind, but did you notice what truly left him astonished? The miracle isn't ultimately what transformed him. What transformed him was the message! And can I encourage you this morning? The message that led this man to repentance is the same message that you and I are holding in our hands today!

The Word of God WORKS! Alexander MacLaren was right when he said:

He who has the Holy Spirit in his heart and the Scriptures in his hands has all he needs.³

Amen. The Word of God works. And there really are people out there who are ready to hear it. Look at the proconsul in this story. Verse 7 describes him as:

a man of intelligence, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. (Acts 13:7b ESV)

He was an intelligent man. A thoughtful man. He saw the world, and he saw himself, and he knew that there were some questions that needed to be answered. So, he leaned in, and he listened close. As one old preacher notes:

³ Alexander MacLaren as quoted by John Blanchard, eds. *The Complete Gathered Gold: a Treasury of Quotations for Christians*. Accordance electronic ed. (New York: Evangelical Press, 2006), paragraph 7119.

There is nothing in this world the devil dreads like a man who dares to think. Such a man will inevitably touch the realm of the spiritual and the supernatural. He may not come to certainty on these matters, but he will face their possibility.⁴

There are people out there who are daring to think. There are people out there who are noticing that something is wrong. There are people out there who, like this proconsul, are more eager than you realize to hear the Word of God.

Do you see that when you look outside?

I know that the voices on the internet want to make you angry. They want you to look outside and to see a mob that is after your children. They want you to look outside and to see enemies. But shut down your phone for a second and go out there. They're not your enemies. They're made in the image of God, just like us. And they're lost.

The answer that the world is offering is no answer at all. "Indulge this lust. Follow these impulses. Take this pill. Have this surgery. Then you will be happy. Then you will be free."

But that's not where freedom is found. Jesus warned:

Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. (John 8:34b ESV)

The freedom that's being offered by the world is no freedom at all. It's slavery! People are rushing out of one prison cell only to find themselves enslaved in another.

And they're scared.

Suicide rates are skyrocketing. According to recent studies:

The teen suicide rate nearly doubled between 2007 and 2019⁵

⁴ G. Campbell Morgan, *The Acts Of The Apostles* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1924), 316.

⁵ Jean Twenge, *Generations: The Real Differences Between Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, Boomers, and Silents – and What They Mean for America's Future*, (New York: Atria Books, 2023), 398.

Brothers and sisters, there are people out there who are drowning in questions, and it is our greatest joy and privilege to point them to the answer! Jesus is the answer! The gospel is the answer! In this Book, we discover who God is. In this Book, we discover who we were made to be. In this Book, we discover what went wrong. In this Book, we discover what God has done to make things right.

He sent His Son – Jesus – to bear the curse of our sin on the cross so that we could be clothed in the righteousness of Christ forever! In him we find identity, forgiveness, hope, love, restoration, truth, joy and EVERYTHING ELSE that we were made to enjoy!

There are people out there who are literally DYING for good news.

The gospel is GOOD NEWS! It is good news for your neighbour! It is good news for your co-worker! It is good news for the same-sex attracted teen! It is good news for the young girl who feels trapped in the wrong body! This Book – the Word of God – tells the story of God’s plan to give sinners like you and me a glorious freedom and future! We were made to live with God and, as Augustine said, our souls will forever be restless until they find rest in Him.

So, GO! Launch out! You have a team here that is ready to support you! Stop waiting for an audible voice from heaven. Make a plan and go! Expect to be resisted. That’s going to happen. But expect the help of the Spirit! That’s going to happen too!

Launch out into a dying world, with the help of the Holy Spirit, and never stop preaching the word. People are dying for good news. So let’s preach it.