

"Ministry: What to Expect, How to Pray"

Acts 13

After the message we will be laying hands on and praying over Nick and Kate as they prepare to embark into full-time ministry, first for some training time out west and Lord-willing to Manitoulin Island with Canada's indigenous peoples. I thought it would be helpful if we looked at a biblical account of a church sending out workers into the field for the first time in Acts 13. Here we see the church at Antioch laying hands on Barnabas and Paul and praying over them as they head out beyond their homes to reach a different culture (mostly Gentiles) in their own country as well as in the greater Roman Empire. What I want to do is survey their experiences on their journey so we can know what to expect wherever ministry happens, but especially beyond our doors so that we can more informed on how to pray. Sometimes we do not know how to pray for ministries and missionaries because we don't understand what's all involved. So my prayer is that from Acts 13 we will better understand what to expect in ministry so we are better equipped for our own ministries as well how to pray for our missionaries and churches.

As we come to Acts 13, some major shifts have happened in the Jerusalem church. The church that began in Jerusalem had spread throughout the Roman Empire because of persecution led by a zealous rabbi named Saul. However, God miraculously saves Saul and tells him he will suffer much as he takes the gospel to the Gentiles. God opened this ministry to the Gentiles with a vision to the apostle Peter that a Roman Centurion named Cornelius was coming to Peter to hear the gospel. Cornelius is saved and word spreads that the gospel is now reaching Gentiles.

Another major shift occurs in Acts 12 when Herod (same Herod who killed John the Baptist) arrests Peter and has the apostle James killed. By this, Herod was sending a message to the church. A message however that God reverses because at the end of Acts 12 Peter is miraculously released from jail, God strikes Herod down for allowing people to worship him as if he was a god and the *"word of God continued to increase and spread"* (12:24). In spite of the martyrdom of James, the chapter ends with Barnabas and Saul/Paul returning from Jerusalem after delivering a gift for the poor and taking on a new helper named John Mark.

Jerusalem is still the southern headquarters of the church but Antioch in Syria has become the northern headquarters. And Ch. 13 opens up telling us that the church had numerous prophets and teachers, including a Jew from Cyprus named, Barnabas, a Jewish black man named Simon (Niger means black), a former colleague of Herod's named Manaen who got saved and a Jewish rabbi trained under Israel's most famous Rabbi named Gamaliel, Saul of Tarsus. Quite a diverse crew of leaders. So the church has some good leaders who are teaching and discipling the believers.

In the context of a worship and fasting gathering, the Spirit of God somehow makes known God's will (possibly through a prophet) that Barnabas and Saul should be set apart for the work which God has called them. So they fasted and prayed, laid hands on them and sent them off – a very condensed summary of a series of circumstances that probably took longer than 20 seconds! But here's the first thing we should expect when we're involved in a church where people are being fed and growing in the Lord:

God Will Set Apart Some for His Work to Accomplish His Purpose (13:1-3)

We need to understand that growth doesn't just mean we get more people, it means we produce more disciples who will serve God; and they won't all stay here. Some move away because of work, school and seasons of life and use the gifts and learning from their church to serve another church. As well, some will sense God's hand for fulltime ministry and be led away from us to serve God elsewhere.

When Luke said the Antiochan church had prophets and teachers and listed four of them, we see that God set apart two of the main four! And often the initial cry of the church is 'Oh no, don't take them! They are essential to the work here.' God will only set apart those who are already actively growing and serving Him! He's not going to send out the uninvolved and not serving Him. So this helps us to ...

Pray For Their Obedience and Our Willingness To See Then Go

The church was in agreement with God that – in spite of their personal desire not to lose them – Barnabas and Saul should follow the Spirit's leading. So they fasted and prayed, discerning the will of God and letting go of personal preferences. Then they laid hands on them: for identification that they are in agreement with God's choosing and that they personally support this extension of the church's work beyond her geographical doors. Moreover, that they have their blessing in going.

We should be praying for everyone in our churches to obey the leading of the Spirit if and when God's Spirit moves them to extend theirs/our ministry beyond our geographical boundaries. We should pray that we are willing to agree with God's call on their life in spite of our personal loss or disappointment. And we continually pray that God would affirm this call as they go and serve Him elsewhere.

All of us are on loan from God to our churches for periods of time. No one is indispensable. All of us are replaceable. If any of us are absent for a period of time the church continues. Others pick up the slack. The work continues because it's God's work not ours.

As Barnabas and Saul head out from Antioch in the north, they sail about 220 km southwest to the island of Cyprus – not terribly far away – where they use Paul's rabbi background to their advantage in attending synagogues. They proclaim the word of God and we read that John Mark was also with them. Why Cyprus? Because according to Acts 4:36, Barnabas was from there. Their intent is to head west of there but also to share the gospel where they know people need it. Barnabas of course knowing many people need it there and since he knows people there, they probably got material support there. Here is something else we can expect from following God's leading in ministry; that we will receive ...

God's Leading and Help (13:5-6)

Inevitably, when we boldly go where we believe God has called us go, we pray for affirmation along the way. 'Lord, are we on the right path? Did we discern Your will correctly? Show us we're where You want us to be' and God answers those prayers with guidance and meeting our needs. They go; God gives them opportunities to share. Most likely they received help from Barnabas' family and connections. We continually read 'they' assuming it only refers to Paul and Barnabas but when you get to v.13, we read 'Paul and his companions'. So, I am guessing God affirmed their ministry along the way with additional help here and there.

When we obey God, we will see His leading and helping hand so then we should pray for those called out but also for ourselves to ...

Pray for Them to Trust God's Guidance

This should sound obvious but sometimes in our temporary disappointments or self-focus or in the routine of ministry, we can miss God's guidance and affirmation and not give glory to God for affirming our obedience. For example, here they went to Barnabas' home where people knew him and they could expect help from his family and friends. It could be very easy not to thank God for that because you would expect that to happen. Of course, his family and friends are going to help him. We can be guilty at times of assuming God's guidance and leading in familiar areas or in familial contexts. Always assume God is behind it and thank Him rather than your family or friends, whom God moved to help you. It does not always work that smoothly. However, enjoy those and be thankful for those obvious affirming situations in friendly places because it will not last when you are in ministry. Because while on Barnabas' home island they experienced ...

Opposition from the Enemy **(13:6-11, 45-46, 50-51)**

While ministering on the island they encounter a Jewish sorcerer named Elymas but also known as Bar-Jesus; bar means 'son of'. Jesus was a popular name in that day but it does seem rather ironic that this demonic influenced advisor to the Roman procurator (same position as Pontius Pilate) was called 'son of Jesus.' Paul calls him out for what he is and deals boldly with him charging him with 'perverting the ways of the Lord' (v.10). The word means cause to doubt or not believe. So he was deliberately trying to prevent the proconsul from believing the gospel.

Later on in vv.45-46, Paul has to deal with jealous Jewish religious people who realize many of their own people were listening to Paul more than they were listening to their rabbis. Then in vv.50-51, they stir up persecution against Paul and his companions to the point where they are expelled Paul and his companions from the area.

We need to expect opposition to gospel ministry and yet sometimes we are surprised by the anger it stirs. We need to see past the angry faces and realize they are being deceived by the enemy and that he doesn't want people saved or to grow in the Lord. Knowing opposition will happen helps us to ...

Pray for Spiritual Strength and Biblical Discernment

Paul discerned exactly what Elymas was doing. The more we know the Word the better we are equipped to see error and the enemy's purposes. Pray that people in ministry identify error and the enemy and have the spiritual strength to deal with these issues and people. Greater is He that is in us than He that is in the world. Pray for them and yourselves to use the spiritual armor of God so we can all withstand attacks and stand firm in the truth. We have the tools; pray we use them.

In v.13 Barnabas, Paul and the others sail from the western side of Cyprus northeast to Perga, southwestern Turkey. Whether the demonic scared John Mark or it was something else, he quit the ministry and returned to Jerusalem. Later on in Acts 15 Mark wants to join them again but Paul refuses to have him. Barnabas is willing to take him back but that might be because Mark is actually his cousin (Col. 4:10).

While we expect opposition from the enemy, we should be prepared to expect the occasional

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Frustration from the Family **(13:13)**

Disciples of Jesus are not perfect. People involved in fulltime ministry are not perfect. We all have unique personalities, strengths, weaknesses, fears, maturity levels and a sin nature. We sometimes get frustrated with our personal families so why are we surprised when we have disagreements or get frustrated with our spiritual families. This event left a bad taste in Paul's mouth. Enough that he did not want to take Mark along with him the next time around.

We should anticipate the possibility of being frustrated with our spiritual family so we should ...

Pray For Endurance and Flexibility

Why Mark quit when he did we do not know. Nevertheless, he quit. And sometimes Christians quit on us. Maybe they are too busy, maybe they are not mature yet or maybe they just didn't count the cost as Jesus said to do. Either way we need to have a patient and forgiving attitude towards one another. Eph. 4:32-5:2 should be a mainstay prayer for all of us:

³² Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children ² and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Christians hurt Paul many times. Some of those who initially worked with him in ministry but then left the ministry and church altogether. He mentions their names. But he also mentions Mark's name in 2 Tim. 4:11 near the end of his life when he was wasting away in prison awaiting his beheading. He wrote to Timothy,

Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry.

Aren't you glad that is in the Bible when you know his disagreement with Mark earlier in life is also in the Bible? Mark matured later on, got back in ministry thanks to Barnabas types and reconciled with those they needed to ask forgiveness like Paul, rejoining them in doing ministry together.

Of course, what we pray primarily for when it comes to missions and ministry is that those involved will have many

Gospel Opportunities **(13:14-44)**

Paul used his former rabbinic position as a way to get into the synagogues. It was the custom in Jesus and Paul's day that during a Shabbat service after the Torah readings for the day, that if the host Rabbi noticed visiting rabbis in the service that morning that he would invite them up to speak on the portion of Scripture just read. Jesus was invited in Luke 4 and Paul was invited numerous times. When the opportunity to share the gospel arose – in synagogues or not – Paul was ready to share Christ. Sometimes you do not always get an opportunity like the one Paul had here in Pisidian

Antioch from vv.14-41. Without going into detail here for the sake of time, Paul constantly quoted or referred to Scripture as he moved toward the gospel. Time after time he says things like 'fulfilled the words of the prophets', 'what God promised', 'as it is written' and then he claimed forgiveness of sins is available through Jesus Christ. He even warned them about the punishment of rejecting God's message.

We don't often get opportunities to say that all in one sitting, but over the course of sharing, those are the main things to share. God has made promises to us that began in Genesis that were fulfilled in numerous ways culminating in the coming of Jesus, His Son, who lived a sinless life. He died in our place, paying the price for our sins, rising from the dead, proving all those who place their faith in Him and asking forgiveness of their sins will receive eternal life and enjoy His presence and power now as well as for all eternity.

The best way to pray for those in ministry and all of us is to ...

Pray We Would Share Jesus with Grace and Boldness

We have the truth. We have the authority from Jesus to share the truth. We do it because people are lost and going to suffer greatly if they reject Jesus. So we pray that we would share it with grace (not arrogance because none of us earned it on our own) but also with boldness (confidence in God's power) because we know it's what people need. And as Paul prays for himself in Eph. 6:18-19 to declare it fearlessly as we should. We might be persecuted for sharing, but when you know eternity is at stake it's crucial we share.

And if we are faithful in sowing seeds for the gospel we can be assured that at some point some of those gospel seeds

Will Produce Spiritual Fruit **(13:12, 43, 48, 52)**

The governor of Cyprus accepted the gospel in v.12 in spite of the efforts of the enemy. In v.42, the people invited Paul and Barnabas to come back and share again and when they did, many of the Jews and Gentiles followed them. They were then '*urged them to continue in the grace of God*'. I.e. they accepted Christ. In spite of the protests by the self-righteous Jewish law keepers, in v.48 we read,

"When the Gentiles heard this they were glad and honoured the Word of the Lord; and all who were appointed to eternal life believed."

Here is the most important verse to understand this morning. God saves people, not you or me. We are the tools through which the gospel comes but God changes hearts. Yes, we must decide to accept Jesus but in retrospect, God is the one who moves us to make that choice. This perspective should change how we pray and how we approach evangelism. We should ...

Pray That Those Who God Appoints to Eternal Life Would Believe

That puts the focus on God, not us. We do not win souls – God does! We do not know who He will appoint to eternal life but now we can pray confidently and share confidently knowing that someone, somewhere will respond to our gospel witness because God has already been working in

their heart, drawing them to Himself. That takes the pressure off missionaries and us to 'get decisions made'. Many years ago, I was involved in an evangelistic campaign where we were told to share the gospel with a very specific formula – which was okay. However, what bothered me was that they pushed us to get people to make 'that decision' and keep track of how many do. They measured 'fruit' by how many 'made the decision', which we really didn't know was true in their heart and it puts the emphasis on people and us and not on God.

When you and I realize that God appoints people to eternal life that takes the pressure off us as individuals and off the inaccurate measuring standard of numbers. God gives us the authority and responsibility to share the message, not get decisions; not win souls or converts. When we get gospel opportunities and share Jesus with grace and boldness, God will produce the fruit and those that He will appoint to eternal life will believe. Then it is our responsibility to help them grow and mature as disciples.

Acts 13 is a great summary of what we can expect in ministry and as a result, how we should pray for missions, our ministries and ourselves. I hope you keep this handy in your bibles so we can all remember what God expects us to do and how to pray so that He causes the growth when we are faithful to plant and water.

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If you have any comments or questions about this message please contact us at olivet@rideau.net