

Acts of the Apostles – Paul and the Spread of the Church

New Testament Survey – Lesson 17 (Part 2)

In ninth grade, we took an aptitude test measuring our skills and interests for possible careers. I think the goal was to help guide us in our decisions over what courses to take as high school unfolded before us. I had never really given much thought to a career, but taking this assessment certainly focused my mind on the options!

By the time the test results came in, I was really intrigued. I wanted to know what I was built to do! The results gave me three main career aptitudes. I don't remember the order, but I never forgot the three that rose to the top. My aptitude test indicated I would do best as a preacher, a lawyer, or a politician.

I was thrilled. All three of these sounded like marvelous careers! I signed up for debate and Latin as my next electives, figuring both would serve me well in any of the three fields. I also had our church intern, who was taking New Testament Greek at the time at Lubbock Christian University, start tutoring me in New Testament Greek. I kept up the Latin and debate throughout High School and then went to college to study for the ministry or law school. (I never was sure how you studied to be a politician!) My college degree was a B.A. in "Biblical Languages," but it came through the Bible Department and was appropriate in my church background to place me in a pulpit preaching. I think I was the only Bible major with a minor in Economics, but I figured that would serve me well in politics or law.

As graduation neared, I had to decide my career path a bit more directly. I sat down with our minister, a friend to me to this day, and I asked him what I should do? Ken (Dye) asked me a few probing questions and then had a suggestion. He thought I should go to law school while I could and then even as a lawyer I could always teach Sunday School in church, fulfilling my desire to do that as well.

This marvelous advice made sense, and I started law school 8:00 a.m. the very Monday after my Saturday night graduation. Now here I sit, 32 years later, at my lawyer's computer, typing away on my Sunday School (now "Life Group") lesson while I pause periodically to answer emails that come in on various litigation matters. My heart overflows with thanks to our Heavenly Father that he has enabled me and blessed me in a walk that seems to pull together the interests and skills that had manifested themselves already by 1974!

This occurs to me as I consider Paul's first missionary journey we study today. I love to study Biblical texts for what they have to say. But especially with Paul, someone we can know so much about from his voluminous writings as well as from those that Luke put into his Book of Acts, I like to do more than simply dig into the passages. I like to ruminate on what happened. I like to think about Paul and what his thoughts might have been as he experienced his landmark life.

Paul had a unique upbringing, as we have discussed in the last two lessons. He had a foot in the Greek world, something we know from Luke and Paul's writings. Luke told of Paul's birth and citizenship in Tarsus. Paul's writings reflect intimate familiarity with Greek ideas, Greek metaphors, and more. Yet Paul also at a fairly early age experienced a formal rabbi's education at the feet of Gamaliel in Jerusalem. Paul was either a member of the Sanhedrin or was being groomed for such. I suspect Paul saw his own future as a Pharisaical leader in Jerusalem in some respect.

But along came the Damascus road experience and things changed. Paul realized how wrong his theology had been, at least on the most important issue of God's identity and the work of Christ on Calvary. Paul was no longer to be a leader of Pharisees. In fact, after a brief stint in Jerusalem, Paul returned to Tarsus and lived without historical note for several years (Acts 9:30). God had told Ananias of his intent to use Paul as an instrument for carrying the Lord's name to "Gentiles and kings the children of Israel (Acts 9:15). It seemed this was something Paul did, at least in a minor way, immediately after his conversion in both Damascus and Jerusalem. Paul later noted that God had said to Paul while Paul was in Jerusalem that God would be sending him "far away to the Gentiles" (Acts 22:21), but what God meant, was far beyond what Paul could have ever conceived. It was much more than a simple life finished in Tarsus or Antioch.

Paul received a personal summons out of his Tarsus life to return to active service in the church when Barnabas sought help for the Antioch effort (Acts 11:25-26). They worked together there for a year, but then the summons came. The Holy Spirit directed the Antiochians to,

Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them (Acts 13:2).

The church did so, first fasting and laying hands on them before sending them off. Thus began the first of multiple missionary journeys, and a spread of the church hitherto unthinkable!

PAUL'S FIRST MISSIONARY JOURNEY

We find the story of Paul's first missionary journey beginning in Acts 13. We might borrow a timeline with some modification from F. F. Bruce to place the journey into time perspective:

Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension, Pentecost	April-May 30
Conversion of Saul of Tarsus	c. 33
Paul's first post-conversion visit to Jerusalem	c. 35
Paul in Cilicia and Syria	35-46
Famine in Judea; Paul and Barnabas sent with relief	46
First Missionary Journey	47-48 ¹

Luke begins this part of his history with Paul and Barnabas in Antioch as part of the team of prophets and teachers. Luke adds in passing that another of the teachers is Manaen, who had been “a member of the court of Herod the Tetrarch.”² The Greek for “a member of the court” is *suntrophos* (σύντροφος). This title “was given to boys of the same ages as princes, who were brought up with them at court.”³ As a *suntrophos*, Manaen would “have been brought up with” Herod, hence some translators even use the term “foster brother” for *suntrophos*.⁴ Other literature of the period used the word for “an intimate friend.”⁵

¹ F. F. Bruce, *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, (Eerdmans 1977) at 475. See also Bruce's *The Acts of the Apostles, The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary* (Eerdmans 1951) at 55. McRay dates it slightly differently arguing that Paul's conversion came in 34 making his first visit to Jerusalem in late 37. McRay places Paul in Cilicia and Syria in 37-43 adding placing Paul in Antioch from 43-47. McRay does agree with Bruce, however, on the first missionary journey explaining it started in late 47 and lasted to mid 48. John McRay, *Paul, His Life and Teaching*, (Baker Academic 2003) at 73-75.

² There are many Herods in the New Testament. Josephus gives us enough history to put together a family tree of the Herods. See the Biblical Literacy lesson 27 downloadable at www.Biblical-Literacy.com.

³ Bruce, *Greek Commentary on Acts* at 253.

⁴ Vincent, Marvin, *Vincent's Word Studies of the New Testament* (Hendrickson 1888) Vol. 1 at 514.

⁵ Danker, Frederick, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* 3d ed. (U. Chi. Press 2000) at 976.

Luke does not want the informed to miss the point; Herod Antipas and Manaen are brought up together as playmates at the royal court. Herod Antipas goes on to behead John the Baptist and participate in the killing of Jesus, while Manaen becomes a Christian leader in the Antiochian church whose name is set out for the ages in Acts. What a difference choices in life can make!

The Call

So in this growing church, the Holy Spirit staked claim on a mission for Paul and Barnabas, as noted earlier:

Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them” (Acts 13:2).

This was God’s plan. We are about to see God’s calling on Paul bear fruit in a most remarkable way. God (the Holy Spirit) is the true missionary here. Barnabas and Saul were called to be the tools of the Spirit; but it was the Spirit who had the mission. It was the Spirit who made the call. It was the Spirit that giving direction.

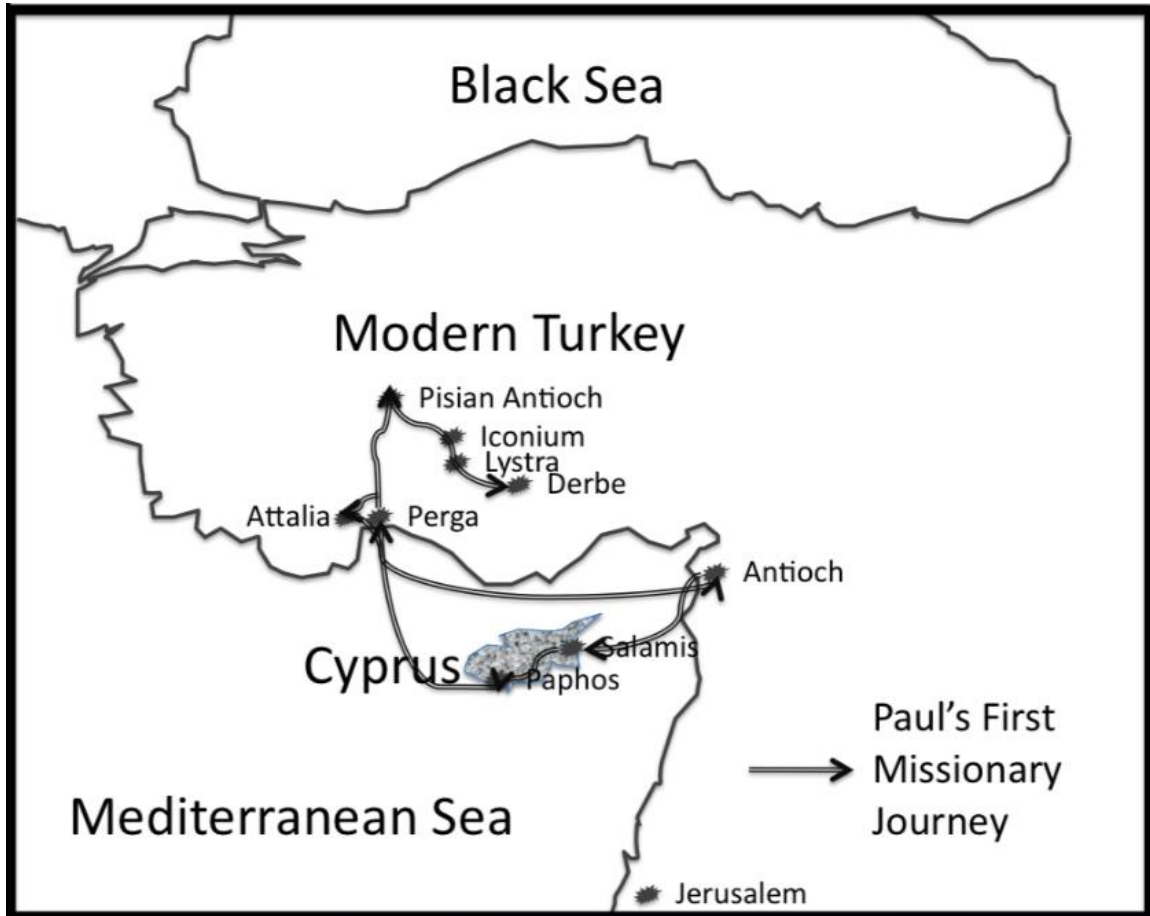
The Trip

Barnabas, Paul (still called by his Hebrew name Saul) did not make this trip alone. They took with them John Mark “to assist them” (13:5).⁶ This is the Mark we have already discussed as the author of our second gospel. The three leave Antioch and head by boat on the Mediterranean Sea to the island of Cyprus. We are not told why Barnabas and Saul chose Cyprus as their first destination. We do know that Barnabas was from Cyprus (Acts 4:36), so he would have likely been returning to share the gospel with some of his own relatives, friends and

⁶ The English Standard Version may lose some of the import of Mark's role by translating him simply as assisting. The word Luke uses is *hupereten* (ὕπηρέτην), which means "attendant" or "minister." Luke used the same word in Luke 1:2 speaking of the things that were delivered by “those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers (*hupereten* - ὕπηρέτην) of the word." Some scholars believe that Mark might be included as one of the eyewitnesses who was a minister of the word. Typically these scholars posit that Mark was taken along to provide eyewitness accounts of a portion of the life of Christ. Church history records that Mark wrote his gospel based largely on Peter's information. But for centuries scholars have thought that the “youth” referred to in Mark 14:51-52 was Mark himself. These two verses could easily be a passing entry in the narrative that the author (Mark) likely put in for personal reasons. Others also note that since Luke clearly used Mark's gospel in his composition, that his identifying Mark as a “minister” might reference Mark's gospel.

acquaintances. Since John Mark was a cousin of Barnabas's (Col. 4:10) it is also reasonable to assume that he had relatives of some degree on the island as well.

The following map gives us orientation to their journey:



The three sailed into the Cyprian port of Salamis, 130 miles from Antioch, and wasted no time presenting the Word of God in the synagogues. Going through the island, they arrived at the far port of Paphos, a three to four day journey depending on which road was taken. In Paphos, Luke detailed a specific encounter.

Paphos

While at Paphos, Paul and Barnabas were summoned by the Roman Proconsul Sergius Paulus. The Proconsul kept near him a false Jewish prophet named Elymas Bar-Jesus ("Bar Jesus" meant "Son of Joshua") who was constantly opposing the teachings of the missionaries, trying to turn away the Proconsul from any faith. We have then a pivotal place in Luke's Acts narrative:

But Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him [Elymas] 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? 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 (Acts 13:9-11).

Immediately, we are told, mist and darkness fell on Elymas and the Proconsul “believed” being “astonished at the teaching of the Lord” (Acts 13:12).

This passage is pivotal for several reasons. First, this is the first place where Luke gives us Paul by his Roman name “Paul” rather than his Jewish name Saul.” From here on, Luke uses “Paul” and does not return to “Saul” except for three places where Paul is telling the story of his own conversion, quoting the usage of “Saul” by Jesus and Ananias (Acts 22:7, 13; 26:14).

We are not told why Paul began using his Roman name, although there are many reasons that seem reasonable if not obvious. First, Paul’s common Roman name (“Paulus”) was the very same as that of the Proconsul. It would have been a logical point of connection that Paul would not likely overlook. Second, the Roman Proconsul was not Jewish. We know that Paul was sensitive to this as he interacted with people. Paul would later write,

To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law (1 Cor. 9:19-21).

Second, up to this point, the Acts has always spoken of “Barnabas and Saul” (Acts 11:26, 30; 12:25; 13:2, 7) giving Barnabas the leadership role of first listing. That changes with Paul taking charge before the Proconsul. As Paul calls God into play with Elymas, Paul becomes the leader henceforth. Now Luke will write of “Paul and Barnabas” (Acts 13:42, 43, 46, 50; 14:1, 3, 23, etc.).⁷ It is as if we are seeing

⁷ There are two more places where Luke reverts back to “Barnabas and Paul.” The first is Acts 14:12, 14 where the pagans think that Barnabas is Zeus and Paul Hermes. Yet even here, we are told that Paul was Hermes because he was the chief speaker. In Greek mythology, while Zeus was the lead God, he was always assumed to be too high and mighty to even have much interaction with humanity. Therefore, Zeus had others do his speaking for him, principally Hermes. We see that Barnabas was taking the quiet role at this point while Paul was the outspoken leader. The second place where Luke returns to “Barnabas and Paul” is Acts 15 where the two are back in Jerusalem. Before the church “Barnabas and Paul” recount the stories of the missionary trip. No doubt out of longstanding respect and history with the Jerusalem church, Barnabas again takes lead position.

Paul “come into his own” in modern speak. God had planned much more for Paul than Paul thought of on his own.

Finally, in this verse we see for the first time Paul as God’s hand in a miracle that attests to the power of God in conjunction with the delivery of God’s message. Before this time, we read of God working miracles through Peter and the apostles, but Paul was God’s tool through his teaching and words. Now Paul was used by God in a profound miraculous way, as would soon become very common in his ministry. God always gave Paul what was needed for the moment, whether common in the eyes of man or miraculous. God empirically showed that as the mission was His, so was the ability to complete the mission!

After their experiences in Paphos, the missionaries, now “Paul and his companions” in Luke’s writing, sailed to the mainland putting in at Perga (now modern south-central Turkey). In Perga, Paul and Barnabas decided to head inland up into the mountain regions going first to Pisidian Antioch.⁸ John Mark, however, did not continue on. John Mark turned back and returned to Jerusalem.

Luke stayed silent on why John Mark left the mission field at this time. Scholars, always trying to find any morsel of information, have offered a number of reasons. Sir William Ramsay in *St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen* set out one that is often cited by scholars since. Ramsay, as we have noted in previous lessons, was a first rate scholar, historian, and archaeologist who wrote a definitive book on Paul, Acts, and the archaeology of the region in the late 1800’s.

Ramsay believed the key to understanding Mark’s departure lie in a change of plans that Paul put into place. Ramsay pointed out that the narrative style of Luke lets careful readers realize that Paul and crew had planned on staying and teaching in the lowland town of Perga, but instead journeyed deep inland up to the mountainous region of Pisidian Antioch. Ramsay noted that Luke tied this change of plans into Mark’s departure. Ramsay then added that while Luke did not give the reason for the change of plans, Paul himself did in his letter to the Galatians.

We should note here that the Galatians are the very churches that Paul and Barnabas started up in the mountainous lands of Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe. Ramsay pointed to Paul’s passage to the Galatians about why Paul came to preach to them. Paul wrote in Galatians 4:13:

You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first.

⁸ Pisidian Antioch is a different city than the Antioch where Paul and crew began this journey.

This was an illness that was apparent to people and was of some duration, for Paul adds,

...and though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me, but received me as an angel of God.

Ramsay concluded that “Paul had a serious illness in Pamphylia, and on that account he left Perga and went to Antioch.”⁹ Ramsay believed the illness was something that was prevalent at sea level with a perceived advantage for treatment coming from higher altitudes. Ramsay suspected the illness likely some kind of malaria.

Anyone who travels much knows the difficulties of travel, especially when one gets severely ill. It seems normal to expect that if Paul were sick, **Paul** would be the one to call off the mission and return, or at least head home to family in nearby Tarsus. But not Paul! Paul was there because God put him there. This was the most important thing in Paul’s life. If Paul could not do this, Paul had no reason to stay on earth. As Paul would later write the Philippians,

For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith (Phil. 1:21-25).

While we do not know for certain the reasons, we do know that John Mark did not continue the journey, but instead returned home. We also know that John Mark’s departure left “a deep and painful impression on Paul and remained rankling in his mind for years.”¹⁰ Luke noted as Paul and Barnabas prepared for their second missionary journey that Barnabas again wanted to take John Mark, but

Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work (Acts 15:38).

Pisidian Antioch

Pisidian Antioch was a difficult journey up through the Taurus Mountains onto a plain that was about 3,600 feet above sea level. Archaeologists have uncovered some key information at Pisidian Antioch. One of the most important discoveries

⁹ Ramsay, Sir William, *St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen* (Baker 1949) at 93.

¹⁰ Ramsay at 90.

might shed some additional light on Paul's and Barnabas's selection of this area for missionary work. The Roman proconsul Sergius Paulus who came to faith on the island of Cyprus was actually from the area of Pisidian Antioch. His family was a prominent family in the Pisidian Antioch region, and archaeologists have uncovered inscriptions of the family name in the region.

For this reason, a number of scholars have traced the logical point that Sergius Paulus would have not only likely sought Paul and Barnabas to go share his new, found faith with his family, but would also have given letters of introduction and recommendation as well.¹¹



One can find this stone on display at the Yalvac Archaeological Museum in Yalvac, Turkey. The stone is seen as confirmation of the large land holdings the family of Sergius Paulus would have had in the area. It is easy to see the letter "P" in the center of the stone's top line. From there one can see the Latin spelling of P-A-V [modern U] L L I S as well as the SERG in the following line.

Who were the people of this area? We know a number of things about them both from the Bible as well as from other historical sources.

First, Paul wrote to them as "Galatians." That is the title that most assigned to these people at the time (and for several hundred years before). The Galatians were originally marauding soldiers of Celts that came to the area from "Gaul" (parts of modern France, Germany, Western Switzerland, and Northern Italy).

¹¹ Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles, A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Eerdmans 1998) at 403 and cites therein. See also Gill and Gempf, *The Book of Acts in its Graeco-Roman Setting* (WIPF and Stock 2000) at 386-387.

These Gauls were active in the region fighting around 278 B.C. and then staying afterwards. As the Gauls became more and more Hellenized (mixing with Greeks in both race and custom), they became known as “Gallo-grecians.” It is the Gaul, or “Gallo” part of their name and heritage that is the source of the word for their territory, “Galatia.”¹²

Not all the people in Galatia were Gallo-grecians. There were also a good number of Jews. Josephus, the Jewish historian, wrote (just a few decades after Paul’s first missionary journey) of the Jewish settlement in the Galatian area. He explained that when Antiochus III “the Great” (242–187BC) was in power, there were rebellions in the Galatian region of Phrygia and Lydia. Antiochus decided to move 2,000 Jewish families into the region “because of their piety towards God, and because I know that...they are faithful, and with eagerness do what they are desired to do.”¹³ Antiochus not only relocated these Jews, but also gave them land, possessions, and ten years of “tax free” status! The Jews were also allowed to use their own laws.¹⁴

Of course, these Jews with these special privileges quickly became established as a wealthy segment of the population. It is not surprising that over the next 200 years they were able to build synagogues for worship.¹⁵ It is to one of these synagogues that Paul and Barnabas first went.

We read the story of Paul and Barnabas in Pisidian Antioch in Acts 13:13-52. Paul and Barnabas arrive and Luke immediately as Luke wrote up “on the Sabbath day, they went into the synagogue and sat down.”

The Synagogue

If we were in a time machine and got to attend that service, what would we have seen? We have ancient Jewish sources that detail for us the procedure behind such a Sabbath synagogue service in Greek areas outside of Palestine. In some ways,

¹² Gill and Gempf, at 381.

¹³ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 12, Ch. 4, v. 149-150 (Whitson translation, Kregel Publications 1999).

¹⁴ Josephus, *Antiquities* at Book 12, Ch. 4, v. 150-153.

¹⁵ In fact, the letter where Antiochus orders the Jewish relocation even provides that the state was also to pay for the Jewish religious “functionaries.” These Jews were being relocating to provide for a military stability in the region. See, Safrai and Stern, *The Jewish People in the First Century*, (Fortress Press 1974) Vol 1 at 469ff.

these synagogue services differed little from 21st century church services, and in other ways, they were quite different.

We would find the synagogue likely around a river or some type of water, typically on the outside of town. This provided easy access to the water needed for purification by the priests or others as deemed necessary under the law.¹⁶

As we walked into the synagogue we would first find a very special seating arrangement. We catch glimpses of this in the New Testament as we read Jesus talking of hypocritical scribes and Pharisees who sought “the best seats in the synagogues” (Mt 23:6; Mk 12:38-39; Lk 11:43, 20:46). Schurer wrote, “The congregation sat in an appointed order, the most distinguished members in the front seats, the younger behind; men and women probably apart.”¹⁷

Once we took our seats, we would have time to look around. We would see a closet (*tyboh* תיבה) that held scrolls of the law and the other “books” of the Old Testament. Each scroll would be wrapped in linen and have its own case.¹⁸ At the front would be a raised platform (*bema* במה) which would hold a “pulpit” or “reading desk.” This *bema* would be for reading the scriptures as well as for preaching.¹⁹ We would also likely pick out the “ruler of the synagogue.” Luke used the term *archisunagogoi* (ἀρχισυναγωγοί). His responsibility was to make sure the needs of the service were taken care of and were supervised. He was not the one who actually read the scriptures, prayed, or preached. The members themselves typically did those tasks, but he would choose those fit to perform those functions and secure their help before each service. Schurer called him the “conductor of their assembly.”²⁰

There was someone we might call a “minister” in the synagogue.²¹ This man was responsible for bringing out the scriptures and replacing them after their use (Luke

¹⁶ Emil Schurer, *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ* (Hendrickson Publishers 1998 reprint of 1890 publication), Div. II, Vol II at 69.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* at 75.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* at 74.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* at 75.

²⁰ *Ibid.* at 65.

²¹ In the Greek, Luke uses the word *huperetes* (ὑπηρέτης) and the ESV translates this man as “attendant” in Luke 4:20.

4:20). This was also the man who had to execute any required scourging and would provide the instruction for children to learn to read.²²

A final thing we might notice were containers for the alms or tithes. There was a box that was for money. This is where the hypocrites Jesus spoke of would sound a trumpet (an expression for exaggerated displays of “showiness” in giving) as they made their donation (Mt 6:1-2). There was also a plate or dish that was for the giving of natural products. This would include the “mint and rue and every herb” that Jesus spoke of some tithing, even though they neglected the important matters of mercy, justice, faithfulness and the love of God (Mt 23:23; Lk 11:42).

The main purpose behind the synagogue services was not so much corporate praise and worship, but “instruction in the law.”²³ We read constantly in the New Testament about Jesus “teaching in their synagogues” (Mt 4:23; 9:35; 13:54; Mk 1:21; 6:2; Lk 4:15; 13:10; Jn 18:20). We would see this as the service itself began to unfold.

The service would have a reciting of the *Shema*. The *Shema* is found in Deuteronomy 6:4-9, 11:13-21 and Numbers 15:37-41. In the main, it contained the core confession,

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one (Dt. 6:4).

In fact, the word “*shema*” is the first Hebrew word in Deuteronomy 6:4 translated “Hear.” There would be prayers recited with the *Shema*, although the *Shema* was considered a confession of faith more than a prayer.²⁴ Certain formula prayers were offered rather than extemporaneous prayers. The whole congregation did not say the prayer, but rather the one assigned to pray. This prayer leader would typically stand in front of the chest of scrolls while pronouncing the prayers. The congregation would answer the prayers with “amen.” Schurer wrote that the prayers were typically offered while standing and facing Jerusalem. This is also consistent with what we read in the New Testament.²⁵

²² *Ibid.* at 67.

²³ Schurer, Div. II, Vol II at 54. The Jewish Philosopher and historian Philo (born around 20 B.C.) wrote of the synagogue services as focused on teaching the law. In his *Hypothetica* (7:12ff), Philo wrote of the Sabbath assemblies as “sitting together in a respectful and orderly manner [to] hear the laws read so that none should be ignorant of them.” Philo, (Loeb 2001) Vol IX at 433.

²⁴ Schurer at 77-78.

²⁵ Mt 6:5, “And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues.” Standing in prayer was not only in the synagogue. Jesus also spoke of

Following prayers, the scripture readings would occur. Two parts of the Old Testament were read, one section from the Law (*Torah*)²⁶ and a portion from the prophets. The Law section was rather large so that the entire Law would get covered every three years. The prophet section was simply a paragraph and was typically chosen by the reader. The reader of the scripture would stand while reading.²⁷ We also see this in the New Testament (Lk 4:16 speaks of Jesus going to synagogue on the Sabbath stating “he stood up to read” choosing to read from Isaiah 61:1-2, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor...”).

After the reading, an “edifying lecture or sermon”²⁸ was given in explanation of the scripture read. The role of teaching, like that of the readings and the praying were open to qualified members of each congregation. The ruler of each synagogue typically gave the assignments.²⁹

The service was closed with a benediction or blessing which was announced upon the congregation with hands raised to shoulder height. The congregation responded with “Amen!” and the service was finished.³⁰

Paul at Synagogue

We now return to the story of Paul and Barnabas at the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch found in Acts 13.

In verse 14, we read that Paul and Barnabas,

came to Antioch in Pisidia. And on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down.

Which seats they took, we do not know.

others standing while praying. See, Mk 11:25, “And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone...;” Lk 18:11, “The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus...”

²⁶ These were scrolls of what we consider the five books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

²⁷ Schurer at 79-81.

²⁸ *Ibid.* at 82

²⁹ *Ibid.* at 65, 82.

³⁰ *Ibid.* at 82.

We are then told,

after the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent a message to them, saying, ‘Brothers, if you have any word of encouragement for the people, say it.’” (Acts 15:15)

While Luke did not tell us what the readings were, many scholars note that the words Paul used in his sermon echo the words from passages that are conjectured to be the texts. A number think that the Law reading was likely Deuteronomy 1 (where Moses recounts the Israelites refusal to enter the Holy Land) or Deuteronomy 4:25-46 (where Moses recounts God’s faithfulness and power as the only true God).

Paul accepted the offer and stood to speak. Paul addressed both the Jews in attendance and the Greeks who were there.

Men of Israel and you who fear God, listen! (Acts 13:16).

Paul then began discussing God’s faithfulness in making the Jews “great” while in Egypt, then redeeming them from their captivity. God “put up with” the Jews for 40 years in the wilderness before giving them their inheritance. Paul then recounted God’s provision of judges, prophets, and kings. Paul added that with King David, God promised a Savior through David’s offspring. Paul explained that Jesus was this promised Savior. John the Baptist had come immediately before Jesus proclaiming a baptism of repentance while noting that one was coming “the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to untie” (Acts 13:25).

Paul then explained that the rulers in Jerusalem failed to understand the Prophets and the Law and condemned Jesus the Savior. The irony, as Paul explained, was that by attempting to dispel any role Jesus could have among the people as their Messiah, the rulers actually fulfilled the prophecies and brought about Jesus’ necessary death. Paul explained that although Jesus was executed and buried, God raised him from the dead. There were many witnesses to the resurrected Lord, and Paul and Barnabas came to Pisidian Antioch to bring the good news. Paul then cited several Psalms as texts to support the resurrection events.

Paul explained that even the great King David’s body was destroyed after death, yet the body of Christ never faced “corruption.” In Jesus, Paul explained, was a forgiveness of sins for people. This, Paul said, was the work Habakkuk spoke of when he prophesied,

Look, you scoffers, be astounded and perish; for I am doing a work in your days, a work that you will not believe, even if one tells it to you (Acts 13:41; Hab. 1:5).

After the synagogue meeting, many came to Paul and Barnabas asking them to stay around and return to speak more on this subject the following Sabbath. Paul and Barnabas do, but for that story, you must return for our next class!

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *“to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory”* (Eph. 3:20-21).

This passage by Paul in the Ephesian letter was born from the experiences of a man who had lived that very thing. God accomplished in Paul far more exceedingly abundantly more, than anything Paul could have ever perceived. The key? Paul sought to serve the Lord first and foremost. Everything else was distant second. That does not mean for us that we are to abandon jobs and family in pursuit of God’s will. Surely God wants us to love our families in committed love that demonstrates and models God’s love. Similarly he wants us to not be idle but work as unto him in our jobs and opportunities. Those are a part of pursuing his will.

But as we do these things, we are to do so in prayer and with a desire to be holy and right. In this, we will see the hand of God bringing about *far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us!*

2. *“Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them”* (Acts 13:2).

I find this simple passage thrilling. It tells me that I can be part of God’s plan and God’s mission. I do not have to ramble through life fiddling around with whatever is before me. I can choose to live with purpose and direction, working in concert with one who has eternity in mind. That is worth waking up for each day!

3. *“You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first”* (Gal. 4:13).

I love the letter to the Galatians. It has been very important in my understanding God’s grace and life in the Spirit. For me, it is a miniature Romans. Yet this letter came about by Paul writing to the churches born from his missionary efforts that came about from his own illness. I think I will see life’s difficulties in a different light if I see them through the eyes of faith.