

BIB204 NT2 Early Church

Unit 4a

The First Missionary Journey

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Hello. This is Unit 4 for NT2, The Early Church. And as I said, Unit 4. For this particular unit, we're going to be covering quite a bit of material. We're running from Acts 13 to perhaps half of chapter 21, going all the way up to about verse 26. So 13:1-21:26, which will cover Paul's three missionary journeys. So that's the plan. And so let's begin. If you would, please open your Bibles to Acts 13:1, which is where we ended sort of, arguably, in Unit 3. 13:1 states, "Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off."

Context. So we started off in the last unit with Peter, who was going around strengthening the churches in the Levant in Palestine, going up and down on the coast. He went to Joppa. He went to Caesarea and he raised a woman named Dorcas from the dead. He healed a cripple by the name of Aeneas. He went up on the roof of a man named Simon, who was a tanner, apparently during Peter's ministry of healing and resurrection, physical resurrection, that is, temporal resurrection. He falls asleep on the roof and has a vision. And when he wakes up from the vision, puzzling out its meaning, there are people waiting for him. He is taken to the home of a centurion by the name of Cornelius. He evangelizes that Gentile household. Those people are uncircumcised. The Holy Spirit falls on uncircumcised Gentiles, that astonishing event. They speak with other tongues. They glorify God. Peter baptizes these Gentiles. Then he goes back home to Jerusalem. He is challenged on what he did. He explains what happens. There is an acceptance of sorts that the Gentiles have now become recipients of eternal life.

Sort of coincident within the context of the narrative of Acts, you have people who were scattered as a result of the martyrdom of Stephen. They travel through the province of Galilee into Syria and into other points, to Cyprus, which is away from the Levant, away from Palestine. It's an island in the Mediterranean. They traveled to Cilicia, which is basically contiguous to or next to Syria. Those are provinces, Syria and Cilicia. Actually, provinces or districts or regions, any of those terms are interchangeable. And they're traveling around, and initially, they speak to other Jews about Messiah. But at some point, that evangelization leaps from Jew to Gentile, and it's in tandem with what Peter did. Now, either they heard that Peter had evangelized a Gentile by the name of Cornelius, or what God did was he simply moved the church along the trajectory of his purpose so that Peter's evangelization of a Gentile centurion basically precipitated the evangelization of Gentiles. It just sort of spontaneously happened. At least that's how the narrative reads.

And of course, the church at Antioch is formed. Barnabas is sent by the apostles to see what this church is about. He is greatly encouraged and he encourages the Antiochene church. Then he goes to Tarsus, Saul's hometown, to seek him out. He finds him. He brings him to Antioch. They teach the church there for about a year. They're called Christians. Prophets come to Antioch from Jerusalem. They travel north from Jerusalem, and Agabus signifies that there is going to be a famine. And so the church of Antioch, comprised of Jews and Gentiles, determines to send a contribution to Jerusalem. They send it by the hand of Saul and Barnabas. Saul and Barnabas get to Jerusalem, and there they find that James, one of the apostles, has been beheaded. And of course, Peter has been thrown into prison, but prayer is being made for him. Much prayer. And of course, in the course of time, Peter is released by an angel, taken out of the prison, in full view of the men who see nothing, a remarkable miracle. And Peter ends up at the doorway of the house where many of the saints are praying. He gives final instructions, leaves a message for James, the half-brother of Jesus, and he leaves.

The content of the New Testament as a whole, in particular, the content of Acts, this section of Acts, and chapters 1 and 2 of the letter to the Galatians, strongly suggests that Peter, whose Aramaic name was Cephas, traveled along the coast, stayed near the coast, and departed any regions of influence under Herod Agrippa I, because it was Herod Agrippa I who beheaded James, the brother of John, the son of Zebedee. So what he did was he went into the province, Peter did. He went into the province of Syria where the church of Antioch was, and he stayed there for a while. Seems like a reasonable assumption to make. Of course, we cannot be absolutely certain. But in terms of taking these primary documents and constructing a background, a possible sequence of events, if you like, a timeline, it seems that Peter, Cephas, went to Antioch and basically decided to stay there for the foreseeable future.

So, in the meantime, Saul and Barnabas are there. They get to Jerusalem with this contribution from Antioch. Peter is in prison. He leaves before they do. They give the contribution and they return back to Antioch, but they take someone by the name of John Mark with them. And of course, the letter to the Colossians 4:10 states that John Mark is actually a cousin of Barnabas'. But we're getting ahead of ourselves. We also read in the rest of chapter 12 of the Book of Acts, the latter portion of it, that Herod has an issue with people of Tyre and Sidon, and there's an economic incentive on the part of the Tyreans and the Sidonians to make nice with Herod Agrippa I because he supplied grain. So they invite Herod. They fed him. And he wears a silver garment, gives a speech. Josephus talks about it to some degree. He gives us a bit more historical background. And apparently, his oration was profound in the hearing of the audience and so they ascribe deity to him. And at that point, he developed stomach pains and was dead within five days. Some sort of internal consumption kills him. "Eaten alive by worms," the text tells us in the Book of Acts.

That is the setting and the context for Acts 13:1. In Antioch, there are prophets and teachers. They are identified. They are worshiping the Lord. It's probably the Lord's Day. They are fasting. And the Holy Spirit declares. Remember there are prophets there. So the Holy Spirit declares, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." So they fast and they pray and they lay their hands on Barnabas and Saul, and they send them off. And that commences the first missionary journey. So verse 4 of chapter 13, they are sent out by the Holy Spirit and they go down to Seleucia, from the coast. They sail to Cyprus. They arrive at Cyprus. Verses 5 all the way to verse 12, we see the evangelization of Cyprus and the further establishment of the word of God. So verse 5, they arrive at Salamis. They proclaim the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. So they evangelize. John Mark assisted them. That's the individual there. They had John to assist. And that correlates with 12:25, "John, whose other name was Mark." That last clause there.

They went through the whole island as far as Paphos. That is, they traveled from east to west on the island. And they came upon a certain magician who was a Jewish false prophet. He's called Bar-Jesus. He's with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, who wants to hear about the gospel. But this magician resists these apostles, these missionaries. And Saul (verse 8) is filled with the Holy Spirit, looks at him (verse 10), and calls him the "son of the devil and enemy of all righteousness, full of deceit and villainy, seeking to make crooked the straight paths of the Lord." Sort of an allusion to Isaiah there. So he says to this individual, Saul does, "The hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and unable to see the sun for a time." And immediately this magician, Elymas, Bar-Jesus, is blinded. And this proconsul believes. He is, of course, a Gentile. He's uncircumcised. And so he believes. He's astonished at the teaching of the Lord. He becomes a convert.

So that takes us to verse 13. Paul and his companions (Paul, Barnabas, and John Mark), they set sail from Paphos, which is on the western part of the island, and they traveled to Perga in Pamphylia. That is, they traveled from Cyprus the island, all the way to the Phrygian shore. You have a region called Phrygia, which is basically southwestern Asia Minor in the time of the New Testament and today is southwestern Turkey. So they come to Perga in Pamphylia. And at this point, John Mark leaves them and returns to Jerusalem. We see that in verse 13. They go on from Perga and they come to Antioch in Pisidia. The Antioch in Pisidia is not the same as the Antioch in Syria. There are two Antiochs in the New Testament. The first one is Saul's (Paul's) and Barnabas' home church. They were sent from there. But when they come to Pamphylia, which is contiguous to Phrygia, practically Phrygia, they come to another Antioch. On the Sabbath day they go into the synagogue (verse 14). They sit down. The rulers of the synagogue read from the law and the prophets, and they invite these men to speak. So verse 16, Paul gets up, he motions with his hands, and he basically runs down the history. He summarizes the history of Israel. Let's just read the first couple of verses, just to set the stage for it.

"Men of Israel and you who fear God, listen." Verse 17, "The God of this people Israel chose our fathers and made the people great during their stay in the land of Egypt, and with uplifted arm he led them out of it. And for about forty years he put up with them in the wilderness. And after destroying seven nations in the land of Canaan, he gave them their land as an inheritance." So basically, he starts from the beginning of Israel's history, arguably. He doesn't get into the details. He just says, "The God of this people Israel chose our fathers," Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, "and made them great during their stay in the land of Egypt." Made them numerous, in other words. Then Paul gives us a timeline. "All this took about 450 years. He gave them judges until Samuel the prophet." He runs down the history and he centers that history on Jesus the Christ. So in verse 26, you can see Paul basically narrow the trajectory of his history telling on Christ.

So verse 26, "Brothers, sons of the family of Abraham, and those among you who fear God, to us has been sent the message of this salvation. For those who live in Jerusalem and their rulers, because they did not recognize him nor understand the utterances of the prophets, which are read every Sabbath, fulfilled them by condemning him. And though they found in him no guilt worthy of death, they asked Pilate to have him executed. And when they had carried out all that was written of him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb. But God raised him from the dead, and for many days he appeared to those who had come up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are now his witnesses to the people. And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus, as also it is written in the second Psalm, 'You are my Son, today I have begotten you.'"

So this is now narrowed Christologically. That narrowing actually began in verse 22. If you look at 13:22, Saul the son of Kish was removed. God raised up David to be their king, a man after God's own heart. Verse 23, "God has brought from this man's offspring to Israel a Savior, Jesus, as he promised." John proclaimed a baptism of repentance (verse 24). Verse 25, John finished his course, said, "One after me is coming, the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to untie." That's where the narrowing begins. It continues in earnest starting in verse 26. So Psalm 110 is cited. Psalm 16 is cited. Verse 35, "Therefore he says also in another psalm, 'You will not let your Holy One see corruption.'" And of course, you also have Isaiah 55:3. "I will give you the holy and sure blessings of David." So at this point, the history is Christological for Paul.

Look at verse 36. “For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep and was laid with his fathers and saw corruption, but he whom God raised up did not see corruption. Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the Law of Moses. Beware, therefore, lest what is said in the Prophets should come about: ‘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.’” And that ends Paul’s sermon. Of course, you’ll notice that Paul is called Paul at the moment that he blinds the magician Elymas, Bar-Jesus. It actually says in that context, “but Saul, who was also called Paul.” And that’s where the transition in Luke’s narrative takes place.

Some historical facts. At this juncture, the first missionary journey starts sometime in AD 46 or 47. I lean towards a date of 46. Sometime during this period in the 40s, the mid to the late 40s, the first document of the New Testament is written. We’re dealing with the early church as a whole, so the first document of the church that is written is actually the letter of James. So James is actually, chronologically speaking, the first New Testament letter. That’s been written and sent to believers who are scattered largely within the Levant, within Palestine. You’ll notice the opening, if you go to James 1. Let’s do that very quickly and then come back to Acts. In the letter of James, it says in the first verse, “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.” To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion. So James is writing to Jewish folks largely.

But here, back to Acts 13, the history of Israel is funneled through a Christological lens. Verse 42 on Acts 13, “The people begged that these things might be told them the next Sabbath. After the meeting of the synagogue broke up, many Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who, as they spoke with them, urged them to continue in the grace of God.” And let me summarize the rest of it. Verses 44 to 52 of Acts 13. The whole city pretty much gathers the next Sabbath to hear the word of the Lord. That means Gentile God-fearers went and they told their friends and their family about this message that they heard in the synagogue, which was off the beaten track of what they were normally used to hearing, which is why the whole city gathers. But what happens is the Jews see the crowds (verse 45) and they are filled with jealousy. And where they agreed with Paul the prior week, now they begin to contradict him and they begin to abuse him. So Paul and Barnabas speak out and say, “It was necessary that gospel come to you first. But you thrust it aside, therefore judging yourselves unworthy of eternal life. We’re turning to the Gentiles.”

And the Gentiles were overjoyed at hearing this, and many of them believed. Interesting statement by Luke in verse 48, the last clause there. “And as many as were appointed to eternal life believed. The word of the Lord is spreading throughout the whole region.” Verse 50, “But the Jews incited the devout women of high standing and the leading men of the city.” So the Jews, having had a prior relationship with Gentile God-fearers, men and women, were able to stir up public opinion against them in Pisidian Antioch, Antioch in Pisidia. They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and they drove them out of that city, out of their district. What these two men do, verse 51, is they shake the dust off their feet and they go to Iconium. “And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.”

Now, this is the region of Phrygia, but there’s a lot of contiguous overlap. This is the Phrygio-Galatian district or province because these provinces tended to sort of overlap. There’s a direct proof of this in the text. I’ll have you, if you would come with me to Acts 18:23, a very quick look at that particular

verse, and then back to Acts 14. But look at verse 23 of Acts 18. “After spending some time there, he departed and went from one place to the next through the region (note the singular) of Galatia and Phrygia.” Most scholars who read that in the Greek would translate it this way, and I quote, the “Phrygio-Galatian region.” Strengthening all the disciples.

Now back to Acts 14. So these two gentlemen, Paul and Barnabas, are driven into Iconium, which is a city within the southern part of Galatia. As a quick aside, when reconstructing the background to the letter to the Galatians, scholars used to hold to what was called a North Galatian view. That is, they thought that Paul evangelized areas in the northern part of the Galatian province, which was also part of the province of Phrygia. They were kind of locked together. But archaeological information that came to light in the late 19th century by Sir William Ramsey, I believe, of Oxford University, he traveled that area and he uncovered enough information to make the case for Southern Galatia. And of course, when you look at these geographical locations that Paul and Barnabas visit during the first missionary journey, they go to Pisidian Antioch (we just read about that), then they go to Iconium, and then they’re going to go to Lystra, and then to Derbe. When you look at those four locations as narrated in the Book of Acts, they are in Southern Galatia, not Northern. So most scholars, late 20th, early 21st century, hold to the Southern Galatian theory, although you still have a few holdouts for the Northern Galatian theory.

So 14:1, they are at Iconium. They go into the Jewish synagogue. A great number of Jews and Greeks believed after the word of the Lord is given. “Unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers.” But Paul and Barnabas remained there for a long time. They speak for the Lord, and signs and wonders are done by their hands. But the city of Iconium is divided. Some side with the Jews and some side with the apostles. But there was an attempt subsequently made by both Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to mistreat them and to stone them. And Paul and Barnabas learned of it, and they fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia. That term Lycaonia, that’s another province. That’s another region. Like I said, they all link up. It’s difficult to determine the actual boundaries. Lycaonia is basically sort of a sub-province or sub-region within Galatia and Phrygia. Different designations, but there’s a lot of overlap.

Anyway, Paul and Barnabas flee to Lystra and Derbe and to the surrounding country, and they continued to preach the gospel. And it just so happens that at Lystra, they heal a cripple. So verses 8 through 18, there’s a guy who’s crippled from birth. He’s never walked. Paul is speaking. This cripple is there. Paul looks at him and tells him to stand on his feet, and he gets up and he starts walking. Well, apparently, at Lystra, there was the worship of Zeus and Hermes, Greek gods. In the former case, Zeus was the god of thunder. In the latter case, Hermes the messenger god, sent around by Zeus, had winged sandals, and he moved swiftly from one place to another, according to Greek mythology. So they think that Paul and Barnabas are Zeus and Hermes. They called Barnabas, Zeus and they called Paul, Hermes because he was the chief speaker in line with this messenger of the gods idea. And these people seek to offer sacrifices to Paul and Barnabas, and Paul and Barnabas barely restrained these people from doing such a thing.

Well, verse 19 of Acts 14, Jews came from Antioch and Iconium. They persuade the crowds that Paul and Barnabas are not what they seem. And they stone Paul. They drag him out of the city, assuming his death. The disciples gather around him. He gets up and enters the city. He’s probably bruised and bloody. On the next day, he goes to Derbe. They preach the gospel to that city. They make many disciples (verse 21). They go back to Lystra, and then they go back to Iconium, and then they go back to

Antioch. They basically retrace their steps. That is to say, they're strengthening the disciples in all of these cities in Southern Galatia. They encourage them to continue in the faith and they state that we enter the kingdom of God through many trials, many tribulations. They appointed elders in every church because they hadn't had a chance to appoint elders because they were driven from one city to the next. This is their first missionary journey. And with prayer and fasting, they committed these elders to the Lord.

They passed through Pisidia (Pisidia in Antioch, that is). They came to Pamphylia. That's where they first landed. And when they spoke the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia. From there, they sailed to Antioch where they had begun their ministry. Luke says, "Where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had fulfilled (verse 26). 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. And they remained no little time with the disciples." So they come back from their first missionary journey, in other words. They retrace their steps. And when they get back home to their home base in Antioch of Syria, they recount everything that has happened. By most estimations, this first missionary journey lasted anywhere from 15 to 18 months. Right now, what has been composed in terms of New Testament documentation is the letter of James, arguably. But you still have quite a bit of oral tradition about the words and the works of the Lord Jesus Christ circulating amongst the early church, with the center point, the core, the central place of that tradition being Jerusalem. So in the next segment, we're going to pick up in Acts 15. We're going to deal with the Jerusalem council and what was actually addressed as a result of that council meeting.