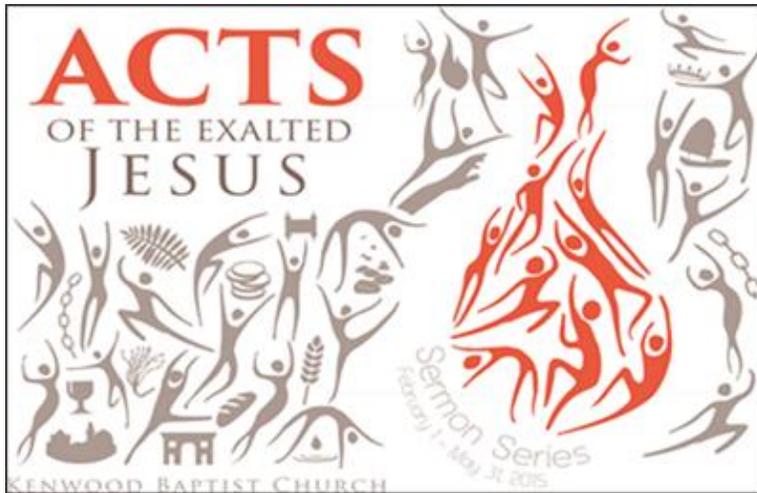


Jesus Converts the Governor
Acts of the Exalted Christ Sermon Series
Acts 13:1-15
Kenwood Baptist Church
Pastor David Palmer
April 26, 2015

TEXT: Acts 13:1-15

I have a message of encouragement, and it's a great privilege now to speak it. We return this Sunday to our spring series on the Book of Acts, and we want to pick up the narrative of the



Acts of the Exalted Jesus Christ. In this text we see a picture of a vibrant, flourishing church, the gathered church of Antioch. We see a thriving church in the beginning of this chapter, and then the narrative zooms in on a particular beginning of an adventure of following Jesus. First I want us to look briefly at this thriving, healthy church and some of its characteristics. We will then spend

most of our time looking at what it really means to take following Jesus seriously.

When you ride with someone, you trust that they know where they are going. I remember as a child looking over and asking my father, "How do you know where you're going?" It's a high-stakes question this morning: what will be involved with my life if I take seriously following Jesus Christ? What can I expect in serving Him with my whole life? We see a picture of that in the very beginning of the missionary journeys of the apostle Paul. So, we are going to look again at this picture of a vibrant church and then the very personal experience of what we can expect in following Jesus Christ.

We read that the Church of Antioch in Acts 13:1 was filled with prophets and teachers:

"Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul."

I have grown to love proper names, because to know people's proper names is a way of

honoring them. It is also a window into who they are. I love to hear the names of children, and I love to ask parents how they choose that name. I love to ask adults what the meaning of their name is, and it is so often the case that names are significant. They show family relationships; they show ethnic heritage; they show a sign perhaps of an event in that family when this person was born. The list of names in Acts 13:1 is not there by accident. God cares to include these names. Isn't it great that heaven has no memory limitations and every one of our names will be recorded? There will never be a message in heaven that says that it's filled; there's not enough storage room; we're going to have to consolidate; just abbreviate names.

No, the names are important, and these names are important. We read that there are prophets and teachers. We read that one of them, Barnabas, whom we've met before, is an Aramaic name: *Son of Exhortation* or *Encouragement*. We read that Simon is there, called *Niger*. Simon, or Simeon, is a Hebrew name, but this man has a nickname, and *Niger* is the Latin word for *dark skin*. So Simon is dark skinned, probably an African leader of the church in Antioch. *Niger* is the name for the modern countries of *Niger* and *Nigeria*. It is also the name of the country of *Sudan*, which comes from the Arabic expression for this whole region: *bilād as-sūdān*, meaning *the country of the dark skinned people*. In the Church of Antioch, we discover that there are people of different ethnic backgrounds, different skin colors, and different regions of the world. Lucius of Cyrene is a Roman name meaning *light-bearing*. We get the name Luke from this, but he is from Cyrene, North Africa. We read that Manaen is there, and his name is a Greek form of the spelling of the Hebrew name *Menahem*, which means *comforter*. We read about Manaen, that he is an upper class man. He grew up with Herod Antipas, so he went to the elite private schools of his day like Herod Antipas, who was raised in Rome and given the best of education the world had to offer. Lastly, we read that Saul was there. This is the last time that Luke will refer to him as Saul. From this time forward, we will hear him called by his Roman name, Paul, which means *little*. This 'little man' turns out to be an important man, but I want you to notice that the Church of Antioch is a diverse group with varied backgrounds, various socioeconomic levels, and various skin colors. I thought to myself, "This a little bit like Kenwood Baptist Church." This is a good thing. People who visit Kenwood often mention it. They say they like coming to church where not everyone is their age, where not everyone looks the same, risen from the same social status. We have a tendency in our fallenness to separate ourselves out into people just like ourselves, but that's not God's design. God's design is to include, as He promises in Joel 2:28-29 that in the end times:

"I will pour out My Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on My servants, both men and women, I will pour out My Spirit in those days."

This church at Antioch is thriving in its diversity; it's thriving in its worshiping life. Look at Acts 13:2:

"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.'"

Luke describes this in the construction of this verse. These phrases are independent and describe regular activities: that the Church of Antioch had a thriving worshiping life; that they regularly gathered to worship; and that fasting was a part of it. Fasting is a spiritual discipline that deepens our hunger for God. We have an opportunity to fast together soon as a church. I'm excited about our "Beans and Rice Week" at Kenwood Baptist Church. The "Beans and Rice Week" coming up is a very practical opportunity. We'll think: "We're going to do some good; will raise some money; we'll hold ourselves back in our appetites," but the reality is that the biggest transformation won't be the money that we raise and that we give to help children in our community or local outreach. The biggest transformation will be to deepen your hunger and mine for God. That is how fasting works. You deny yourself just to remind yourself on a personal, physical and soul level that it is God that you need the most. I encourage you and your family to embrace this, and I'm excited as a church to see what the Lord will do. They had a vibrant worshiping life, including fasting, and this thriving church also raised up dedicated workers for God. In Acts 13:2 we read that this church, in the context of worship, hears the Lord speak to them:

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

God has called Barnabas and Saul to a particular work, and the Holy Spirit says to set them apart for that work; move them to the side for a special use of God. This language, *to be set apart*, is very significant in Scripture. It is used in the Bible of the sanctuary. In Exodus 19:23, we read of Mount Sinai:

"The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai, for You Yourself warned us, saying, 'Set limits around the mountain and consecrate it.'"

Space can be set apart for God's unique use. This language is used of people in the Bible, of all of God's people. In Leviticus 20:26, the Lord says:

"You shall be holy to Me, for I the LORD am holy and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be Mine."

God's people are separated out, and this means that they are then reserved for God's special use in the world. To be holy or separate doesn't mean to be distant from others, but it means to be reserved for an exclusive use of God. It's an analogy of the marriage relationship where you are set apart from all the other people of your gender and you are bound in an exclusive relationship. You are reserved for the unique opportunities that this relationship will provide.

So it is in Scripture. It is also said of individuals, like Jeremiah. The Lord tells Jeremiah in Jeremiah 1:5:

"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations."

Barnabas and Saul hear that call, and notice that it is the church that hears it. A sign of a vibrant, flourishing church is not only its diversity in leadership, not only its vibrant worshiping life, but that it is a congregation that hears from God: "We believe that God is calling you to a specific work, and you are to dedicate yourself to that." It is thrilling and a sign of a flourishing church. Paul never forgot this call, this dedication. He mentions it in several of his letters. Later in his ministry, in Romans 1:1, he says of himself:

"Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, . . ."

He never forgot the call that the church heard pertaining to him. The church obeyed that call, and we read in Romans 13:3:

"So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off."

They laid their hands on this group, Barnabas and Saul, and we will see in a moment that John Mark was with them. They sent them off. We don't yet know the call; we are not told, but we see the call played out. We see that the call involves a dedicated missionary life, and we all learn in this example that discipleship is an eternal, lifelong adventure. Do you believe that? Do you believe that discipleship, following Jesus Christ, is not just for eternity; it is not just for conversion; but it is the beginning of a lifelong, and not just lifelong, because it is eternal lifelong, if that is even a valid expression. It is not just for this life, but it is eternal. It is an eternal, lifelong adventure.

What will these people find out, committing to follow Jesus Christ? They moved down to the



coast from Antioch, nine miles to the coast, to Seleucia, and they set sail for the island of Cyprus. We can imagine that as they journeyed to Cyprus, all kinds of thoughts filled their minds. For Barnabas, this journey is nothing new. He was used to traveling the triangle between Antioch, Jerusalem, and Cyprus, as Cyprus was his hometown, his native land. Going there may have been his idea, for John Mark, the young companion, his feelings must have been quite

different. He grew up in Jerusalem, now tasted the cosmopolitan atmosphere of Antioch, and this was a fresh, new voyage. He was traveling with Barnabas, who knew Cyprus well, but this

was a place he had never been to before. How would he cope with it? It was a long way from home. Would he be useful to his seniors, or would he somehow get in the way? Would he feel homesick? Paul, too, had questions on the journey. This was probably Paul's first night in the open sea. His previous sailings had been around the Mediterranean coast, and now he is out in open water and it is dark at night. He was doing this, though, by obedience to Jesus' call. He had preached the Gospel to the nations before, but Cyprus gave him a chance for completely new ground. So, these three men were in a boat, moving towards the island of Cyprus, each with different expectations, but joined in a single commitment that Christ had set them apart for this work. They went out of obedience. We, as a congregation, need a fresh hearing of Jesus Christ's call for us to go out in His name. We need to hear Him, because He is speaking this to us. Church leadership is hearing this, and we need to step out. Maybe for us it's a lot closer than Cyprus; maybe it's just a couple of blocks over; maybe it's obeying God to be part of a short-term mission; or maybe it's obeying God to get involved in a ministry area that terrifies you, and yet you go out of obedience to Him. What did they find on this first trip?

They find what they will find throughout their entire service to Jesus, and it's the same things that you and I will find. If we embrace following Jesus, what will we discover? It is what they discover on this first trip. It's all there in miniature. The first thing they discover is that lives around them are a wreck, and they discover in these wrecked lives that ***there is spiritual opposition which Jesus overcomes***. They make it across Cyprus, and they meet this man who is just a mess: Bar-Jesus. The best thing about him is his name, *Son of Jesus*. The name Jesus means *Joshua*, so it is a common name. This is no relationship to our Lord Jesus, but this man has a great name. Everything else about him, however, is a disaster. Strike one: though he is ethnically part of God's people, Luke tells us he is a sorcerer. Strike two: he is a false prophet, and so he is speaking ill-truths. Strike three: as we discover his practicing behavior, he is opposed to the spreading of the Christian Gospel. So this man is a mess. He is the attendant of the proconsul Sergius Paulus, and as Barnabas and Saul go to try to speak the Word of Christ, Elymas, which is the Aramaic version of his name, probably from the Aramaic word which means *dreamer*, this sorcerer, dreamer is opposed to them, and he is trying to distract the Roman governor from hearing the Gospel. We get a great window into Paul here. He was a zealous man before knowing Christ. He was dragging people from their homes. He was filled with zeal, and then Christ encounters him on the road to Damascus and calls him into service. He remains a zealous man. He's just zealous for the right reasons now, and Elymas gets in the way. I love this. There is no subtlety to Paul's communication. He reaches his point of intolerance, and he turns to Elymas in Acts 13:10, and he says:

“You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord?”

Then he says in Acts 13:11:

“Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind for a time, not even able to see the light of the sun.”

Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he groped about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand. I wonder if Saul had shared anything of his own experience. Saul was struck blind and had to be led by the hand, himself. Jesus silences this spiritual opposition, and so, at times, we can expect opposition to the spreading of the Word of Christ. Don't be surprised when people are opposed to it, or people try to distract others from hearing it. Jesus overcomes this.

Secondly, they find that ***Jesus creates spiritual openness and response where we might expect resistance***. They end up with an audience with none less than the highest government official of Cyprus. They end up not only with an audience of the highest government official, Sergius Paulus, but when Sergius Paulus hears the power of the teaching about Jesus Christ, Jesus converts the governor on the first trip. I don't know what you would put out as any kind of criteria of success from this first trip, but I think converting the governor has to seem like a good beginning. “We decided to have an evangelistic outreach service and the governor became a Christian.” I would think that there would be an uptick in the prayer life of the community after that. Luke doesn't tell us about anyone else, but the governor believes. This is astonishing. You can go to New York and see the best inscription of Sergius Paulus preserved. It is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, but all that is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art is the inscription that says he was governor in A.D. 46 to 48, so we know the time of this journey. What is infinitely more exciting than this inscription is that this man is in eternity this morning because of Saul and Barnabas' obedience to Jesus Christ in reaching out. Do you believe that Jesus is moving you and us to be bolder with reaching out? Expect opposition; don't be surprised, but believe that Jesus creates opportunities and not only opportunities, but that Jesus is the One who opens the heart of the governor. Conversion should be our highest joy.

Charles Spurgeon was a man that God used to win tens of thousands of people to Himself, but he always remembered the first person who believed through his ministry and the joy he felt. He said:

“How my heart leapt for joy when I heard the tidings of my first convert. I could never be satisfied with a full congregation and the kind expression of friends. I longed to hear that hearts had been broken, that tears had been streaming from eyes of people repenting from their sins. How did I rejoice, as one that finds great spoil in war, over one poor laborer's wife who confessed that she felt the guilt of sin, and had found the Savior under my sermon on Sunday. I have the cottage in which she lived in my eye now; I remember her being received

into the church, and her dying, and her going home to heaven. She was the first seal to my ministry, a very precious one indeed. No mother was ever more full of happiness at the sight of her firstborn son.”

Conversion of lives, one by one, family by family. Jesus calls us to follow Him as He seeks the lost and the searching around us.

Thirdly, they discover that in following Jesus ***the scale of opportunity and need is overwhelming***. If you take seriously the needs around us, like 11,000 children within three miles of where we’re sitting, that’s overwhelming, the needs of our city, our region. We were asked recently if our church could adopt and be the mission outpost for almost-unreached people groups that are migrating to Cincinnati. My heart trembles with the thought of that, and I want us as a church to say: “Yes, we can do that.” When you see the opportunity, then you need Jesus to breathe courage into you. That is what they find. After they leave Cyprus, they move on North and they sail to Perga in Pamphylia, Luke tells us. He gives us the detail that John Mark left them there to return to Jerusalem.

This scene has stayed with me. This is a picture of where they landed. They move from Cyprus and they landed in Attalia. They reach the shore, and in the bottom of this picture, on the right hand side, you see skyscraper apartment towers. In the middle of the picture, you can barely see the oil refinery tanks. They landed, and you can see the towering, snow-covered Taurus mountains hanging over them, and beyond those mountains, thousands of unreached cities. When John Mark



saw those mountains, he panicked, and he said: “I need to see my mom,” and he went home. But when Barnabas and Paul saw those mountains, Jesus breathed courage into them. You don't walk over mountains like that unless Jesus has breathed courage into you. That’s not a natural decision, but Jesus breathed courage into them, and they go over those mountains and proclaim the Word of Christ, city to city, synagogue to synagogue, and into unreached peoples.

As Luke unfolds the story of this first journey, the last portion of Acts 13 gives us the sermon that was preached as a sample. Christ is proclaimed; people respond; the whole city gathers to hear the Word of the Lord. Luke tells us in Acts 13:49:

“The word of the Lord spread through the whole region.”

Fourthly, Barnabas and Saul discover what you and I discover, that ***the hunger of the human soul is satisfied only by the Word of Christ***. What they find in this first missionary journey fills

them with joy. It is the outcome of a thriving, vibrant, healthy church, and what they discover is what is for you to discover. It is awaiting your discovery and mine: that Jesus is more powerful than anything that might oppose; that Jesus opens the hearts of people to believe; that Jesus will breathe into your heart fresh courage when you see mountains like these; and that He will show you in the end that the human heart is satisfied by the Word of Christ alone.

I want encourage you to join me and others to obey Christ in this way. We have very concrete ways of doing this in the next couple of weeks, but may we be such a vibrant congregation, discovering the truth and utter reliability of Jesus Christ, and joining Him on His mission in the world. Amen.