

The Offense of the Gospel

By Dan & Brenda Cathcart

The video version of this teaching is at: https://youtu.be/2_fS6SqNi8U

The Scripture Reading is: Acts 13:1-52

When Paul was in Jerusalem, he received endorsement of his gospel message that the Gentiles did not need to convert to Judaism in order to receive salvation. Further, Peter, John and James confirmed that Paul was specifically sent to the Gentiles while the other twelve apostles would concentrate on their fellow Jews. Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch, the city which would become their base of operations to reach the Gentiles with the gospel. The prophets and teachers in Antioch, sought God's direction and were led to send out Barnabas and Paul.

Acts 13:1-3 NKJV 1 Now in the church that was at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. 2 As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, "Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." 3 Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away.

This journey to which Barnabas and Paul were sent out on was the formal start of Paul's mission to the Gentiles. From the very first, this mission would be opposed by Jews, believing and unbelieving, who found Paul's message offensive. Nevertheless, Paul will spend the rest of his life on this mission. Luke, Paul's close companion during much of this time, now focuses most of his chronology of the Acts of the Apostles on this mission to the Gentiles.

When Paul began his mission, he didn't undertake it without guidance from his fellow leaders as well as that of the Holy Spirit. He and Barnabas were both commissioned and sent out on this journey by his fellow prophets and teachers. Paul and Barnabas took at least one other person on this journey, the young man John Mark. They set out for the island of Cyprus where there was a large community of Jews many of whom were already believers in Yeshua. Some of those believers were among those who had come to Antioch to share the good news of Yeshua.

Acts 11:20 NKJV 20 But some of them were men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists, preaching the Lord Jesus.

Perhaps those Jews from Cyprus thought that the message of salvation would be favorably received by the Gentile population of Cyprus. Paul and Barnabas may have already known some of the Jews living there through those they had met at Antioch. Upon arriving in the port city of Salamis, Paul immediately went to the Jewish synagogue in the city. This would be his practice whenever he entered a new city.

Acts 13:5 NKJV 5 And when they arrived in Salamis, they preached the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. They also had John as their assistant.

They journeyed across the island until they reached the capital city of Paphos where they continued to preach the good news. The Roman proconsul Sergius Paulus heard about the message that Paul and Barnabas were teaching and wanted to know more.

Acts 13:6-7 NKJV 6 Now when they had gone through the island to Paphos, they found a certain sorcerer, a false prophet, a Jew whose name was Bar-Jesus, 7 who was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, an intelligent man. This man called for Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God.

The Jew Bar-Jesus appears to be an advisor to the proconsul. Rulers frequently surrounded themselves with advisors whom the leader thought could divine the will of the gods. We see this pattern with Nebuchadnezzar who had his court of wise men and magicians. Bar-Jesus probably claimed to be a prophet. Luke describes him as a sorcerer whose Hebrew name was translated to the Greek name Elymas.

Acts 13:8 NKJV 8 But Elymas the sorcerer (for so his name is translated) withstood them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith.

The meaning of the Greek name Elymas is unknown; however, his Hebrew patronymic of Bar-Jesus ironically means son of Yeshua or son of salvation. This Jewish false prophet, "son of salvation," stood in the way of the spread of the gospel message of salvation going to the Gentiles! But Paul, under the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit, was more than capable of dealing with this false prophet.

Acts 13:9-11 NKJV 9 Then Saul, who also is called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him 10 and said, "O full of all deceit and all fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease perverting the straight ways of the Lord? 11 "And now, indeed, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you shall be blind, not seeing the sun for a time." And immediately a dark mist fell on him, and he went around seeking someone to lead him by the hand.

It is as Paul faces this Jewish false prophet with the Greek name that he is first called Paul instead of Saul. From now on through the book of Acts, Luke will refer to Saul as Paul. It seems that the battle between the Jewish spread of the gospel to the Gentiles and the opposition to the message will be played out in the Gentile world.

The false prophet Elymas Bar-Jesus rejected the gospel message and stood in the way of the Gentile proconsul Sergius Paulus hearing and receiving the gospel. Paul rebukes him for perverting the straight ways of the Lord. Elymas the sorcerer, blinded by the hand of the Lord, went around seeking someone to lead him.

In contrast to Elymas leading the proconsul on a crooked path, the prophet Jeremiah refers to the Salvation of Israel leading Israel in the straight ways of the Lord.

Jeremiah 31:9 NKJV 9 They shall come with weeping, And with supplications I will lead them. I will cause them to walk by the rivers of waters, In a straight way in which they shall not stumble; For I am a Father to Israel, And Ephraim is My firstborn.

Isaiah says that the servant of the LORD will lead the blind and make their paths straight.

Isaiah 42:16 NKJV 16 I will bring the blind by a way they did not know; I will lead them in paths they have not known. I will make darkness light before them, And crooked places straight. These things I will do for them, And not forsake them.

The proconsul saw what the Lord had done to his advisor who was supposed to know the will of the gods and heard the teaching of the gospel message. As a result, he believed.

Acts 13:12 NKJV 12 Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had been done, being astonished at the teaching of the Lord.

After spending some time in Paphos, Paul and Barnabas sail to Asia Minor where they will head inland to the city of Pisidian Antioch. This journey was over hard terrain and through wilderness areas where bandits laid in wait for travelers. Why would Paul choose this as his next destination? It may be because Sergius Paulus had relatives in the area. First Fruits of Zion in Chronicles of the Apostles explain:

The wealthy family of Sergius Paulus owned property in Galatia at Pisidian Antioch. Perhaps Sergius Paulus asked the apostles to travel to that city and present their message in the synagogues there. He may have been able to provide them with letters of recommendation to the community, and he may have provided them with money for travel expenses.ⁱ

Paul and Barnabas' arrival is greeted with joy from the Jews in the city. Since it was such an isolated city, perhaps they didn't get many Jewish visitors. As was Paul's custom, on the Sabbath, he went to the synagogue.

Acts 13:14-15 NKJV 14 But when they departed from Perga, they came to Antioch in Pisidia, and went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day and sat down. 15 And after the reading of the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent to them, saying, "Men and brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say on."

Paul and Barnabas were invited to address the people. In the typical synagogue service, after the reading of the Torah and the haftarah portions, an elder would be invited to give a drash or sermon on the readings of the week. Paul and Barnabas may have had letters of introduction from Sergius Paulus to his family and other leaders in Pisidian Antioch. Paul may, also, have been known as a disciple of Gamliel. However the leaders of the synagogue had heard about Paul, they invited him to speak, and Paul accepted their offer. Paul, specifically, addresses both Jew and God-fearer.

Acts 13:16 NKJV 16 Then Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand said, "Men of Israel, and you who fear God, listen:

Paul proceeded to summarize how God chose and nurtured Israel making them into a nation. He explained that David was God's choice for king and promised that a savior would come from David's line. Paul explained how that promise was fulfilled beginning with the announcement of John the Baptist.

Acts 13:23-25 NKJV 23 "From this man's seed, according to the promise, God raised up for Israel a Savior--Jesus-- 24 "after John had first preached, before His coming, the baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. 25 "And as John was finishing his course, he said, 'Who do you think I am? I am not He. But behold, there comes One after me, the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to loose.'

As Paul gets ready to reveal that Yeshua was the promised seed of David and the one John announced as savior, he directly addresses his listeners.

Acts 13:26 NKJV 26 "Men and brethren, sons of the family of Abraham, and those among you who fear God, to you the word of this salvation has been sent.

Paul singled out three groups of people who were in the synagogue listening to him. First Fruits of Zion in Chronicles of the Apostles explains the identity of each group:

"Brethren" referred to his fellow Jews. "Sons of Abraham" referred to proselytes. (Proselytes received the patronymic "son of Abraham" at the time of their conversion.) "You who fear God" referred to the God-fearing Gentiles present that day in the synagogue. The God-fearing Gentiles were not

accustomed to being acknowledged in such addresses, and they had never been included in the promises of Messianic redemption or covenant privilege.ⁱⁱ

Paul went on to explain how Yeshua suffered and died but that God resurrected him from the dead fulfilling His promise to David.

Acts 13:35-37 NKJV 35 "Therefore He also says in another Psalm: 'You will not allow Your Holy One to see corruption.' 36 "For David, after he had served his own generation by the will of God, fell asleep, was buried with his fathers, and saw corruption; 37 "but He whom God raised up saw no corruption.

Paul concludes that because of Yeshua's death and resurrection, forgiveness of sins is available to everyone who believes.

Acts 13:38-39 NKJV 38 "Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins; 39 "and by Him everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses.

Paul understands the role of the suffering servant of the LORD described by Isaiah. First, the suffering servant would suffer for the transgressions of God's people.

Isaiah 53:8 NKJV 8 He was taken from prison and from judgment, And who will declare His generation? For He was cut off from the land of the living; For the transgressions of My people He was stricken.

Second, the suffering servant would justify many.

Isaiah 53:11 NKJV 11 He shall see the labor of His soul, and be satisfied. By His knowledge My righteous Servant shall justify many, For He shall bear their iniquities.

Paul concludes with a warning not to doubt the work of God from the prophet Habakkuk.

Acts 13:40-41 NKJV 40 "Beware therefore, lest what has been spoken in the prophets come upon you: 41 "Behold, you despisers, Marvel and perish! For I work a work in your days, A work which you will by no means believe, Though one were to declare it to you."

Paul's listeners in the synagogue were all intrigued by his message and wanted to hear more. He and Barnabas were invited to speak again on the next Sabbath. When the next Sabbath arrived, Luke tells us the whole city arrived to hear what Paul and Barnabas had to share.

Acts 13:44 NKJV 44 On the next Sabbath almost the whole city came together to hear the word of God.

It seems that all the God-fearers who were present, those whom Paul had told that salvation was open to them, invited everyone they knew to come to hear the word of God. The Jews, who had been open to hearing Paul's message, now refused to even listen. It seems that they thought that the Jews' status as a select people chosen by God was threatened by all the Gentiles flocking to hear the word of God. They were offended at all the Gentiles who had arrived at their synagogue!

Acts 13:45 NKJV 45 But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy; and contradicting and blaspheming, they opposed the things spoken by Paul.

Like Elymas the false prophet, they were full of deceit and fraud and perverted the straight ways of the Lord! They were not willing to marvel at God's work of bringing in the Gentiles. Paul addressed the Jews gathered at the synagogue with boldness.

Acts 13:46-47 NKJV 46 Then Paul and Barnabas grew bold and said, "It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles. 47 "For so the Lord has commanded us: 'I have set you as a light to the Gentiles, That you should be for salvation to the ends of the earth.'"

Once again, Paul is referencing back to Isaiah's words that the servant of the LORD would be a light to the Gentiles and would bring salvation to the entire world.

Isaiah 49:6 NKJV 6 Indeed He says, 'It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant To raise up the tribes of Jacob, And to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also give You as a light to the Gentiles, That You should be My salvation to the ends of the earth.'"

The Gentiles received this word of salvation with gladness and joy. The word spread throughout the region! But the Jews, filled with hatred and envy, plotted against Paul and Barnabas.

Acts 13:50 NKJV 50 But the Jews stirred up the devout and prominent women and the chief men of the city, raised up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region.

This is not the last time that Paul will face rejection by the Jews because he declares that salvation is for the Gentile as well as the Jew. When Paul comes to Jerusalem later in his ministry, he is denounced by a group of Jews from Asia to the west of Galatia. Paul addresses a crowd on the stairs of the Roman guardhouse. The Jewish people were willing to hear Paul until he declared that Yeshua sent him to the Gentiles.

Acts 22:21-22 NKJV 21 "Then He (*Yeshua*) said to me, 'Depart, for I will send you far from here to the Gentiles.'" 22 And they listened to him until this word, and then they raised their voices and said, "Away with such a fellow from the earth, for he is not fit to live!"

Paul will be arrested at that time and, while in prison, will write to the assembly of Ephesus in Asia, that he is in chains for declaring that the gospel of salvation is for Gentiles as well as for the Jews.

Ephesians 3:1, 5-7 NKJV 1 For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles-- 5 which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets: 6 that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel 7 of which I became a minister according to the gift of the grace of God given to me by the effective working of His power.

We learned in our last teaching, "Defending the Gospel of Salvation," that the Jewish believers in Messiah Yeshua had difficulty accepting the Gentiles as full members of the community unless they converted to Judaism and were circumcised. The Jewish non-believers could not even grasp the possibility of Gentile inclusion. If the gospel of salvation included the Gentiles, they wanted nothing to do with it! Throughout Paul's life, he will adhere to preaching his gospel, first, to the Jews and, then, to the Gentiles. His prayer was that all Israel would receive the gospel message and be saved.

Our prayer today is that the gospel message will be received with joy and gladness by both the Jew and the Gentile.

Study Questions:

1. How does Paul seek guidance from others? Why is this important?
2. What significance, if any, is there to Saul's name being changed to Paul at this point in Luke's narrative?
3. What is the importance of Paul's encounter with Elymas Bar-Jesus?
4. How does Paul preach the gospel message from the Torah and the prophets? What can we learn from Paul's approach to the gospel?
5. Why does Luke focus on Paul's mission to the Gentiles in the book of Acts rather than the others apostles' mission to the Jews?
6. What new insight did you gain from this teaching? How do you respond to this new insight? How will you realign your life based on this new understanding?

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