

# The 1<sup>st</sup> Journey Begins (Set Apart and Sent Off)

Acts 12:24-13:12 on May 2, 2021

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*Please read Acts 12:24-13:12 before going further in this transcript.*

Have you ever wondered where the idea of MISSIONS came from in the first place? Was missions just an excuse that someone came up with, so that they could travel to exotic places? Where did this idea of missions come from? Well... I'm glad you asked! The idea of missions flows right out of the Jesus' Great Commission mandate in Matthew 28:19, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations...." The idea of missions is also directly linked to Jesus' prophetic words in Acts 1:8, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." In fulfillment of the Great Commission mandate, in fulfillment of Jesus' prophetic words, the local church in Antioch was prompted to start sending people out, to faraway places. But WHAT actually PROMPTED them to get going? Or, perhaps we should ask, WHO PROMPTED them to head out on the very first missionary journey? Acts 1:8 gives us a hint, "...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you...."

Please turn/click in your Bible to Acts 12:24. This is right where we left off last Sunday, right after King Herod Agrippa I was eaten by worms and died. Acts 12:24 tells us, "But the word of God continued to spread and flourish."<sup>1</sup> The gospel is UNSTOPPABLE!<sup>2</sup> Whatever obstacle it faces, whatever opportunity is placed before it, the Good News about Jesus Christ presses on. It continues to spread and flourish. Acts 12:25 says, "When Barnabas and Saul had finished their mission, they returned from Jerusalem, taking with them John, also called Mark."<sup>3</sup> (*From Jerusalem back to Antioch.*) Verse 25 can actually be a little confusing; this mission is NOT referring to a

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<sup>1</sup> This progress report is one of many that we find scattered throughout Acts. Others include Acts 2:41, 47; 4:4; 5:14; 6:7; 9:31; 16:5; 19:20; and 28:31. It's worth noting that each of these various progress reports comes at different seasons in the life of the church. Some right after administrative changes, some during times of peace, and some after times of intense persecution. One progress report comes right after a significant theological decision and a sharp disagreement between two key leaders in the church. Another report came after a significant number of people turned from practicing sorcery. And the final report comes right at the very end of Acts. When we get to the end of Acts, Acts 28:31 reveals that the Apostle Paul is still proclaiming the Kingdom of God and teaching people about Jesus with all boldness!

<sup>2</sup> See Acts 5:39.

<sup>3</sup> **John Mark** lived a remarkably interesting life. Back in 12:12 we learn that the church met at his mom's house. Can you imagine the sermons he likely heard 1<sup>st</sup>-hand from various Apostles and such? Now in 12:25 we learn that John-Mark returned with Barnabas and Saul from Jerusalem back to Antioch. Then in 13:5 we learn that John-Mark went along with Barnabas and Saul as their helper. However, in 13:13 John leaves the 1<sup>st</sup> Missionary Journey early, to return to Jerusalem. We're not really told why, but we do later find out the Saul was NOT happy about it. In fact, in Acts 15:38 Saul doesn't want to risk working with John-Mark again because he deserted them on the 1<sup>st</sup> Missionary Journey.

There's a lot more we could talk about here, but for now let's recognize, one's spiritual growth and maturity is almost never steady and seamless; it sometimes comes with fits and starts. From what we can piece together, although John-Mark was NOT an apostle himself, he had first-name relationships with many, if not all, of them. He knew everyone from the Apostles Peter, James, and John to Barnabas and the Apostle Paul. John-Mark's ultimate spiritual legacy was to leave us with the Gospel According to Mark. This Gospel is not only one of the four gospels in the Bible, but it is considered by many scholars to have priority among the synoptics, meaning it likely led the way in the formation of both Matthew and Luke's Gospels. What all of this is driving at, is that whatever struggles and shortfalls John-Mark may have had in his early years of following Jesus, he eventually matured to the point where God used him mightily. Therefore, we shouldn't despise our own small beginnings, nor those of someone else. (See Zechariah 4:10 and also 4:6.)

mission's trip, but rather to the mission of bringing famine relief to the believers living in Jerusalem. We learned about this back at the end of Acts 11. Acts 11:29-30 told us, "The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea. This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul." Now, at the end of Acts 12, we're reading the confirmation that this benevolence gift had been delivered successfully. Helping one another through Benevolence Funds, is one of the marks of an Authentic Christian Church.<sup>4</sup> We learned this from the Antioch Church, where believers in Jesus were first called "Christians."

Today, the Antioch Church will teach us yet another mark of an Authentic Christian Church: **SENDING OUT** missionaries. It gets confusing sometimes when we talk about Christian mission. Christian "mission" can mean just about anything that is done in the name of Christ. Christian "missionS" however, means something much more specific: "Missions is a formal partnership in the gospel, between the local church as senders and supporters, and those who have been identified as called and gifted by God, for the purpose of global disciple-making."<sup>5</sup> Therefore, missions is a distinct, focused, intentional plan for sending out "missionaries." Those whom we call "Global Partners." Acts 13:1 starts out, "Now in the church at Antioch...." "The church at Antioch" refers to a local church AT a specific geographical location. What we're witnessing at this point in church history, in verse 1, is a shift in the book of Acts, from a focus on the Mother Church AT Jerusalem, to a focus on the church plant AT Antioch.<sup>6 7 8</sup> The church AT Antioch becomes a kind of northern outpost for mission's work. In fact, Saul, also called Paul, launches all of his first three missionary journeys, from this one same local church in Antioch. In other words, the church at Antioch, became the first official missions sending church in the HISTORY of missions; but it will most certainly NOT be the last local church to send out missionaries.

We find a list of five key leaders in the Antioch Church in Acts 13:1, "Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen<sup>9</sup> (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul."<sup>10</sup> We already know quite a bit about **Barnabas** as the "son of encouragement." He has a prominent role not only in the local church, but will soon also have a key role on the mission field. **Simeon called Niger** either had a noticeably dark complexion or

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<sup>4</sup> We talked about this on April 11, 2021 in the sermon, "Authentic Christianity." <https://efcbemidji.org/sermon/authentic-christianity/>

<sup>5</sup> Global Connections Missions Policy of E-Free Bemidji as of 2/8/2021.

<sup>6</sup> See Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 434.

<sup>7</sup> When we turn the page to Acts 13, we turn to what is really the 2nd half of the book of Acts. Acts 13-28 will guide us through the three significant missionary journeys of Saul/Paul.

<sup>8</sup> At this stage in history, "The church is becoming more organized and intentional about outreach;" and the fact is, "many centers of activity are emerging. The scope of the task requires this." Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, pp. 436-437.

<sup>9</sup> "MAN uh en" Severance, W. M., & Eddinger, T. (1997). In *That's easy for you to say: your quick guide to pronouncing Bible names* (p. 109). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

<sup>10</sup> "The names of these leaders suggest significant ethnic and sociocultural diversity." *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2245 footnote on Acts 13:1.

he may have been of African descent.<sup>11</sup> The fact that he was called “Niger,” which is the Latin word for “black,” could indicate either one of these.<sup>12</sup> This is a helpful reminder that the Early Church was made up of all kinds of different people from varying backgrounds. The name “**Lucius of Cyrene**” also points to this interesting mix of leaders. Back in Acts 11:20, we learned that some of the first believers to come to Antioch and share the gospel were from Cyrene. Cyrene was located way over in northern Africa. It seems that Lucius may have traveled from Cyrene to Antioch, in order to share the gospel; he then remained in Antioch, to help lead the local church. Then we come to **Manaen**. Luke, the author of Acts, give us an intriguing little nugget of information about him: he’d been brought up with Herod the tetrarch; as in Herod Antipas. The very same Herod Antipas who had had John the Baptist beheaded and who had overseen one of Jesus’ mock trials. Manaen was either Herod’s foster brother or an awfully close friend, close enough that Luke felt compelled to tell us about it.<sup>13</sup> Manaen “would have had high social standing through this connection.”<sup>14</sup>

**Saul** comes last in this list.<sup>15</sup> Or, are we supposed to call him Paul? Acts 13:9 says that Saul was also called Paul. (Simeon was called Niger, and John was also called Mark! Can’t anyone just have one name!?) There’s a good explanation for his two names though. His name Saul was connected with his Jewish heritage. His name Paul was connected with his Gentile ministry.<sup>16</sup> In other words, not only was he multi-lingual, he was also multi-cultural.<sup>17</sup> <sup>18</sup> The important thing for us to know as we journey through Acts, is that Saul and Paul are referring to the very SAME person; he goes by BOTH of these names his entire life. However, AFTER this trip to Cyprus, the book of Acts will almost exclusively refer to him as Paul.<sup>19</sup>

Acts 13:2-3 goes on “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.”<sup>20</sup> So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.” Barnabas and Saul have a formal partnership with the local church in

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<sup>11</sup> *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2245 footnote on Acts 13:1.

<sup>12</sup> *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1850 footnote on Acts 13:1.

<sup>13</sup> *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1851 footnote on Acts 13:1.

<sup>14</sup> Darrell L. Bock further notes that the Greek here can indicate either someone who eats together or nurses together or someone who serves as a companion or advisor to royalty. *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 439.

<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, the names may be listed in order of importance, indicating that Barnabas, not Saul is the primary leader at the time.

<sup>16</sup> *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1851 footnote on Acts 13:9.

<sup>17</sup> See Acts 22:2. My sincere thanks go out to Bruce Privratsky for pointing out this distinction to me.

<sup>18</sup> Darrell L. Bock cites Bruce, similarly John Mark is sometimes called John (a Jewish name, Acts 13:5), sometimes called Mark (a Roman name, Acts 15:39), and sometimes “John, also called Mark” (Acts 12:12). *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 434.

<sup>19</sup> We’ll also begin to notice that his name is listed BEFORE that of Barnabas, as Paul takes the lead role in their missionary endeavors. See helpful discussion in *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1851 footnote on Acts 13:9. At this point, I can’t help but think about all of the many different names used for the characters in the Lord of the Rings series.

<sup>20</sup> “The message likely came through one of the prophets in the church.” *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2245 footnote on Acts 13:2.

Antioch. They are officially SET APART<sup>21</sup> and SENT OFF as the very first missionaries in church history.<sup>22</sup> Let's make sure to point out here, that Barnabas and Saul had significant ministry roles in the local church in Antioch. When the Holy Spirit set them apart, and sent them off, the local church may very well have had mixed feelings. On the one hand, they were likely EXCITED to partner in world missions, on the other hand, they were probably SADDENED to lose two such high-quality Christian leaders from their midst. Nonetheless, as one author puts it, "Here is a church that has seen the need to reach out to the world... Their heart has become wedded to God's calling..."<sup>23</sup> When Acts 13:3 says that they "sent them off," the Greek word has the connotation of "letting them go."<sup>24</sup> In other words, it wasn't just that the local church "SENT them off," but also that they "let go of them;" they released them from the church, so that they could focus on this new ministry calling.

The church commissioned them by placing their hands on them and sending them off; but Acts 13:4 makes it clear "The two of them, [were] sent on their way BY THE HOLY SPIRIT..." One author says it this way: "Paul's first missionary journey did NOT result from a planning session, but from the Spirit's initiative..."<sup>25</sup> Brother or Sister in Christ, our God is a sending God. At the beginning of this message, I asked if you've ever wondered WHERE the idea of missions came from. WHO actually PROMPTED the idea of missions in the local church?<sup>26</sup> We now have our answer; our God is a sending God. He is the one who prompted them. God's Spirit was the catalyst who convinced the church in Antioch, to send Barnabas and Saul on the very 1<sup>st</sup> missionary journey. I really appreciate the way Pastor Kevin DeYoung lays it out: The Heavenly Father sent His Son Jesus Christ to earth, then the Father & Son together sent the Holy Spirit, now the Holy Spirit sends missionaries.

Once again, we see the same Holy Spirit at work, the Holy Spirit whom Jesus promised back in Acts 1:8. The Spirit not only EMPOWERS believers for gospel ministry, but He also SETS APART and SENDS OFF missionaries.<sup>27</sup> (Perhaps He's even setting apart someone reading this sermon transcript; someone young, middle-aged, or older...) Let's notice that this particular missionary call, was not for

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<sup>21</sup> Set apart = ἀφορίζω "② to select one person out of a group for a purpose, set apart, appoint." Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed., p. 158). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>22</sup> Technically speaking, Saul received his initial call to missions ~10 years earlier; WAY back in Acts 9, after meeting Jesus and being blinded on the road to Damascus. In Acts 9:15 the Lord says, "...This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles..." See a timeline of Paul's life on pp. 1844-1845 of *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011.

<sup>23</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 440.

<sup>24</sup> The Greek word ἀπολύω can be defined as "③ to permit or cause someone to leave a particular location let go, send away, dismiss." Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed., p. 117). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>25</sup> This does NOT mean that planning can't be connected with our worship and fasting. *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1851 footnote on Acts 13:2.

<sup>26</sup> Kevin DeYoung helps to clarify that godly, biblical missions work is not about imperialism or some human agenda or human enterprise, it's a move of the Holy Spirit. Kevin DeYoung and Chris Ranson, Sermon on "A Righteous Rebuke" from Acts 13:1-12. <http://www.avisualguide.com/sermons/page/2/>

<sup>27</sup> Zechariah 4:6, "... 'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the LORD Almighty."

EVERYONE in the church, but only for certain people whom God set apart. In other words, every single believer in Antioch was called to do the same thing: make disciples. BUT, only certain believers were SET APART and SENT OFF as official missionaries of the church. There were five wonderfully godly leaders from the Antioch Church listed in Acts 13:1, but the Holy Spirit only sets apart 2 of them, for this particular missions work. The rest, were left back at the church, to continue leading the flourishing ministry there. We should also notice, that Barnabas and Saul weren't simply the only two who were WILLING to go, they were actually WELL-PREPARED to go. One of the key missions roles for the local church, is the role of "affirming the right people and then helping to get the right people WHERE they need to go."<sup>28</sup> (It would be our absolute privilege to help anyone from our church discern this calling; just let our Global Connections Team know.)

Speaking of WHERE they need to go, take a look at the **MAP**<sup>29</sup> on the last page of this transcript. The 1<sup>st</sup> Missionary Journey is described in Acts 13 and 14. Antioch is on the far right, on the east side of this map, the BLUE arrow. The island of Cyprus is on the bottom middle of the map, the ORANGE arrow. Pamphylia is on the far left, the west side of this map, the GREEN arrow. Up from there and then hooking to the right, we see Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. During this journey, they'll travel about 900 miles round trip. Much of that is over water but plenty of it is over land and on foot.<sup>30</sup> Today, we'll only get as far as Cyprus, but we'll cover the rest of this route over the next few Sundays. For now, let's focus on Paphos. Paphos is on the west end of the island of Cyprus. That's where today's story gets interesting....

Acts 13:6-7 says, "They traveled through the whole island until they came to Paphos. There they met a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus, who was an attendant of the proconsul, Sergius Paulus.<sup>31</sup> The proconsul, an intelligent man, sent for Barnabas and Saul because he wanted to hear the word of God." In Paphos, Barnabas and Saul meet two guys: a sorcerer and a government leader. Sergius Paulus was a government leader called a proconsul; he'd been assigned by Rome to govern Cyprus. Verse 7 describes him as "an intelligent man." This is a good reminder that the gospel message isn't just for simple-minded people who might believe anything; it is for intelligent people, who think deeply and consider the truth carefully.

Bar-Jesus was a Jewish sorcerer<sup>32</sup> who is also called Elymas.<sup>33</sup> (So here we go again with 2 different names for everybody!) In verse 10, Saul says that he's a "child of

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<sup>28</sup> Kevin DeYoung and Chris Ranson, Sermon on "A Righteous Rebuke" from Acts 13:1-12.

<http://www.avisualguide.com/sermons/page/2/>

<sup>29</sup> *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1851.

<sup>30</sup> Darrell L. Bock citing Schnabel, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 437.

<sup>31</sup> "SUHR jih uhs" Severance, W. M., & Eddinger, T. (1997). In *That's easy for you to say: your quick guide to pronouncing Bible names* (p. 143). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

<sup>32</sup> "Judaism of the first century was often syncretistic, with sorcerers like Bar-Jesus combining pagan and Jewish practices." *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2245 footnote on Acts 13:6.

the devil” and “an enemy of everything that is right.” He was full of all kinds of deceit and trickery, the kind of guy who never stopped perverting the right ways of the Lord.<sup>34</sup> Lest we think that Saul is just name calling here, he’s actually making a play on words. “Bar-Jesus” can be translated “son of Jesus.” So, Saul is calling him out, “Bar-Jesus” you are certainly NOT a “son of Jesus” you are a “child of the devil!” Mission’s work is far more than just intellectual teaching of biblical truths; it is also a spiritual battle with the devil.<sup>35</sup> Acts 13:8 goes on... “But Elymas the sorcerer (for that is what his name means) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith.” Now we aren’t told WHY Elymas opposed them, nor why he tried to turn Sergius away from the Christian faith.<sup>36</sup> But we are reminded that there will always be challenges on the mission field. This is another reason why we need to pray/pray/pray for our Global Partners. Saul tackles this challenge head-on! In Acts 13:11 he says, “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.”

There are at least two mercies to this judgment. First of all...

- 1) It was only temporary, Elymas was only blind “for a time.” Second of all...
- 2) It not only demonstrated that God’s power is greater than any magic, but it also gave Elymas an opportunity to see his need for God.<sup>37</sup> One can’t help but wonder whether Saul thought back to his own blindness, back in Acts 9, back when Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus.<sup>38</sup> Saul was also blind for a time and needed to be led by the hand. Saul was keenly aware from his own life experience, what it was like to be spiritually blind and hardhearted toward God. Certainly when he announced this judgment on Elymas, Saul understood that it may very well be just what Elymas needed, to lead him to repentance and salvation. Acts 13:12 ends this way, “When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was AMAZED at the teaching about the Lord.” Sergius was convinced not just by the MIRACLE, but by the MESSAGE. What convinced him was the substance of the teaching from God’s Word; teaching that was further corroborated by God’s power overcoming the magical powers of this world. Notice how Luke records it verse 12: when the proconsul saw what happened to Elymas, he BELIEVED, but what AMAZED him was the teaching about the Lord. Bringing a clear message about Christ should be a distinguishing mark for any Christian missionary. It’s great to dig wells, to bring food, to teach ESL, and to love our neighbors in SO many other ways, but in order to deem something, as genuine

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<sup>33</sup> “EL ih mass” Severance, W. M., & Eddinger, T. (1997). In *That’s easy for you to say: your quick guide to pronouncing Bible names* (p. 63). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

<sup>34</sup> “Elymas” is “A Semitic name meaning ‘sorcerer’ or ‘magician’ or ‘wise man.’” *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1851 footnote on Acts 13:8.

<sup>35</sup> In this regard, missions and local evangelism are much the same. 2 Corinthians 4:4 says, “The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.”

<sup>36</sup> Darrell L. Bock suggests that Elymas may have feared that the Christian faith might impact his own position as Sergius’ attendant.

<sup>37</sup> Compare this with Zechariah in Luke 1:8-22 and 57-64.

<sup>38</sup> See Acts 9:1-20. Also consider Acts 8:9-24 where Peter exercises authority over Simon the Sorcerer.

missions work, the message of Jesus needs to be proclaimed clearly and consistently. Christian missions work is about speaking Christ, particularly to those without access to the gospel.<sup>39</sup>

As we wrap up, there may be some of us who are wondering, do we **STILL** need missionaries today? At this time in history, hasn't the whole world pretty much already been reached with the gospel? Haven't we **SENT OFF** enough people on journeys around the world? Are there really **THAT** many people left, who actually **NEED** a missionary to come to their town and tell them about Jesus? These are all fair questions; but if you're wondering about these kinds of questions, I'm going to respond with a question. It's a fairly **BLUNT** question: how can we **NOT** see, the incredibly glaring need, for more missionaries in our world today? Just look around. Even after all of this time, even after all of the advances in technology and advances in culture and language study, even after all of the vast wealth, with which God has entrusted His people, **SO** many have **STILL** not heard the Good News about Jesus! One author summarizes it this way: "God loves churches that look beyond their own needs. One wonders where the church today would be, if Antioch had not been led to look beyond its own community and city limits to do evangelism... We build churches not just to go [into] for worship but also to [go out of for witness]."<sup>40</sup>

**Do we still need missionaries today? YES, ABSOLUTELY!** Now, as much as ever. Just as the Holy Spirit set apart and sent off missionaries from the church at Antioch, he is setting apart and sending off Global Partners from E-Free Bemidji. God is still prompting men and women, to take the gospel to the ends of the earth. The work is **NOT** yet finished!

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<sup>39</sup> Christian missions work is about overcoming barriers to the gospel, barriers like geography, language, culture, and false teaching.

<sup>40</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 440.

