

Acts 13:1-12 - Godoy

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Preacher: Dan Godoy

[0:00] Good morning. It's a joy to greet you all in the name of our risen Lord. A joy to see old friends and new friends, visitors, welcome.

! And especially if you're visiting, we are preaching through the book of Acts. So a series from the end of the book of Acts. And we are getting close to the midpoint this week, chapter 13. And chapter 13 marks some key shifts in this book because starting in chapter 13, the Apostle Paul becomes the main character.

He's on the center stage for the rest of the book. And starting here in Acts 13, the movement really shifts toward the expansion of the gospel into Gentile territory and into the Greek-speaking world. So it's an important moment in our text, in the literature, an important moment theologically, and an important moment for us as a church as we listen to the Spirit speak.

[1:02] So let me invite you to pray with me once more as we open this text. Father, we pray that you would speak by your Spirit to us as you've gathered us around your Word.

And we pray that you would help us to catch a vision for what you want us to do as witnesses to your gospel in this world, as we're gathered by your Spirit and sent out into the world.

So give us ears to hear, help us to obey, through Christ our Lord. Amen. In 1806, a group of five college students gathered in a field to talk about theology and pray.

This sounds like a college student thing to do, doesn't it? And while they were out in this field praying, a thunderstorm came up, and rain came down in sheets, and thunder crashed, lightning flashed.

And the students took cover under a haystack nearby, and they continued to pray. And when the storm ended and the clouds parted, these students had resolved themselves to go to the other side of the world, to Asia, with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

[2:23] And they did just that. And American missions efforts were shaped by that event. In fact, scholars today trace that moment, that haystack prayer meeting, as it is called, to several streams of American missionary effort in the centuries since.

You can look it up online, the haystack prayer meeting of Massachusetts. Maybe you've heard stories something like this, of people catching a vision for the gospel going to the ends of the earth and going out on mission.

We live in Wheaton. There are lots of stories like this around Wheaton. And some of you grew up on the mission field, or know missionaries, or are missionaries. In fact, maybe that's all of us. Our church has a small but treasured role in the sending of the gospel to the nations, and we rejoice in that.

But have you ever wondered why we do this? I mean, why do we spend our means, and for some of you, your lives, engaged in the mission of the gospel to the nations?

What is it in our imaginations that compels us to that task? I want to suggest that part of the answer to that question is in our text this morning, in Acts chapter 13.

[3:39] Acts 13 tells about the beginning of the archetype Christian missions event, the first missions trip. Saul and Barnabas going out with the gospel of Christ.

And I want to suggest that this text is more than just a retelling of an important moment in church history, though it is that. But this text is an invitation to the church to imagine how we might participate in this same mission that the apostles set off on in these early years of the church.

So I want to invite you, as we read this text and talk about it this morning, to imagine how you might participate in the sending of the gospel.

Our passage divides neatly into two main narratives. The first three verses, as the church at Antioch sends out Saul, Barnabas, and John Mark. And then verses 4 through 12, as we see the apostles

landing on the island of Cyprus.

So we'll talk first about the launch from Antioch and the landing on Cyprus. And then after we talk about that, I want to spend a few minutes imagining how we might participate in this story.

[4:56] So let's look at the first section, the launch, and let's find our place in the narrative. If you remember, if you've been with us the last few weeks, back in Acts chapter 11, Saul and Barnabas have been sent out by the church at Antioch, there in the north, back to Jerusalem with money for famine relief, because there's a famine in Judea.

And so the apostles go there with the money and complete that mission. And we read the story of Peter in prison and the death of Herod Agrippa last week, sort of this interlude. And then at the very end of chapter 12, Saul and Barnabas return from Jerusalem back to Antioch.

And with that sort of narrative closure, Luke really draws the curtain in a way on the Jerusalem story. Because from here on out, Antioch becomes sort of the center and the crossroads and the launching ground of the Christian mission.

So we move from Jerusalem to Antioch. Now, in this short little narrative, the launch, we might be tempted to skip over the brief little story.

But I think Luke offers details that we are meant to pay attention to. Four details. Look with me at four details in the first three verses. Number one, the church at Antioch was committed to the ministry of God's word.

[6:27] I want to suggest Luke offers these details to give the context for how the launch of the apostolic mission goes forth. So the church at Antioch was committed to the ministry of God's word.

Look at verse one. Now, there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers. The implication is that the prophets are prophesying and the teachers are teaching. This church has sort of built their center of gravity around the teaching and prophesying of these leaders.

In the early church, the teachers would have been responsible for the facts and theology of the gospel. The early church didn't have the writings that we call the New Testament. And so it was the responsibility of the teachers to guard and pass on doctrine and teaching.

The prophets, on the other hand, were the mouthpiece for God. We saw prophecy in action back in chapter 11 when Agabus stood up and prophesied a famine that would take place in Judea.

And in our text this morning in verse two, when the Holy Spirit speaks, I think that's by the mouth of these prophets. So the prophets and teachers are administering the word of God to his people.

[7:41] And the church there is centered on that activity. They're committed to the ministry of the word. And I think Luke offers that suggestion that this is the context for the sending of the gospel.

And we might apply this to our own church for a moment. It is the conviction of the elders. We share this conviction that the center of gravity of church life for us should be the ministry of the word.

And so that's why we spend most of our service reading the scriptures, reciting the scriptures, and preaching. And in our home groups, we're studying the scriptures.

And in most of the areas of our church life, this is what we're doing. And it's our prayer that out of that commitment to God's word, hearts will be stirred up for outward-oriented mission, as we see at Antioch.

Okay, detail number two. The church at Antioch featured an unusual variety of people. Did you catch that in the second half of verse one?

[8:46] Luke lists this list of leaders and offers some interesting details about them. Barnabas, we know him already, but you might remember from chapter five, Barnabas is from Cyprus.

So he's from out of town. He's not from around Antioch or Jerusalem. Simeon, who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene. Most scholars think that these two men likely came from Cyrene, which is a place in North Africa.

And at least in the case of Simeon, his features or his hair or his skin color were dark enough that he took the name Niger. He may have been a black man or very dark hair.

The usage indicates both of those. But these men are international men. Barnabas, Simeon, Niger. And they're bringing to Antioch perspectives from around the world.

The next name, Manan, is an interesting one. Manan was a lifelong friend, could be translated foster brother, of Herod the Tetrarch.

[9:52] Okay, Herod the Tetrarch is the guy from the Gospels who stole his brother's wife and beheaded John the Baptist at a party and mocked Jesus before his crucifixion.

And Manan grew up with that guy. He grew up in his court, which means he has access to wealth and power and social standing that most people don't have.

He brings a very interesting perspective to the church at Antioch. And then, of course, Saul. Saul, the most influential, impactful public intellectual in history, arguably.

We have the whole rest of the book to meet the Apostle Paul, so we'll learn a lot about him. But Saul is a man of unbounded zeal for the God of Israel. We saw that in his persecution of the church. And after he meets the resurrected Messiah, he is a man of unbounded zeal for the gospel of Jesus Christ. And he comes from Tarsus, which is no backwater town in the Roman Empire.

[11:00] It's a center of philosophy and learning and imperial pride. And Saul brings that perspective to the church at Antioch. This is an extraordinary assortment of individuals.

And I think Luke wants us to see that that unusual variety of people contributes to the launch of the apostolic mission from Antioch. See, our natural tendency is to form communities with people who are mostly like us.

Look like us. Dress like us. Talk like us. But one of the amazing things about the church is the way the Holy Spirit cuts across those normal divisions of social status or national origin and crams people together in one spot, gathered around his word, gathered by his spirit.

So let's run a little experiment here. I want you to raise your hand if you spent more than, let's say, three months in the last 10 years living somewhere outside this country.

Okay, raise your hand. More than three months in the last 10 years. Okay, not me. I haven't done this. But look around. There's a lot. I would guess 10% of the people in this room have spent a significant life experience outside this country.

[12:22] Is that normal? I have no idea. I'm guessing not. But what does that mean for us as a church?

Kids, it means this. It means after the service, back at the snack table, you can not only get a sugar hit, you can also ask someone, what's life like in Bulgaria, in Singapore?

How is the church going forward in Manila? How's the gospel being received? Can you imagine what the conversations were like at Antioch?

I'm sure they were really interesting. We have an unusual assortment of people here at Holy Covenant Church. They had an unusual assortment of people there in the church at Antioch.

And Luke suggests it's from that exceptional situation that the apostolic mission goes forth. Okay, detail number three. The church at Antioch was devoted to corporate worship and prayer.

[13:31] Notice what the disciples are doing throughout this short story in the first three verses. Worshiping, fasting, verse 2.

Verse 3, fasting and praying. This is liturgical language. In fact, the word in the Greek that Luke uses to describe what they're doing is the same word that gives us our word liturgy.

They're liturgizing before the Lord. Better translated, ministering or worshiping. This is temple language. The apostles are ministering before the Lord like priests in the new temple of the new covenant, the church.

I'm reminded of the story of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, in Luke chapter 1. You know the story. John the Baptist's father, Zechariah, is ministering in the temple before the Lord.

And it's in that moment of his temple ministry that God breaks the silence of the centuries to announce that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. And in the same way, these disciples are ministering before the Lord at Antioch.

[14:40] And it's in that moment that the Holy Spirit breaks in to announce the sending of the gospel to the nations. Now, if you were here last week, you might be hearing an echo.

Because last week we saw in Acts 12 that the disciples were gathered praying for Peter as he was in prison. And then God rescued Peter from prison.

He broke in and answered that prayer. And if you were here, Pastor Tad taught us about the power of prayer and urged us as a church to grow in prayer and in faith.

And if you were here last week, you might remember that Tad said I was scowling when he read a quote from a pastor who said, Prayer frees God up to act.

And Tad invited me to comment on that theological moment. And we talked about this at elder meeting on Thursday and had some good laughs and a lot of good discussion. So I will accept that invitation to speak briefly to that comment.

[15:45] And here's what I have to say. I agree with everything Tad said. We should grow in prayer as a church. We must. Follow this example.

Grow in faith. Grow in conviction that God hears and answers the prayers of his people. Let us do that. I heard that some of the women got together on Thursday night for prayer.

And amen. Let us follow that example. I also say let's be careful with our language so that we don't misunderstand God as being someone who is dependent ultimately or ultimately dependent on his creatures.

God is not dependent on his creatures. His will is not ultimately dependent on his creatures. Or he would not be the sovereign God that we confess him to be. But God may ordain that his purposes are woven together with the obedience of his creatures in prayer.

Which is an amazing and mysterious thing. And so let us uphold the sovereignty of God in reverence and awe. So that we can approach him as a good and powerful and gracious father who can answer prayer.

[17:01] So let us grow in prayer and in faith in imitation of these disciples. Jesus taught his disciples in Luke chapter 10 saying pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest.

Strive with God in prayer that he would send out laborers into his harvest. And I think that's what the disciples at Antioch are doing.

That's what those college students in that field in Massachusetts under the haystack were doing. And that's what we should do. Detail number four from these first three verses.

The disciples have a mature theology of going and sending to the nations. Now I'm going to read between the lines for a minute and make an argument from silence.

But I hope you'll hang with me. And I hope you'll agree that it's a very loud silence. Notice what Luke doesn't record. In verse 2 about the Holy Spirit's commands of the disciples.

[18:08] Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them. But he doesn't record what the work is. The Spirit doesn't explain what they're supposed to do next.

The disciples seem to just know. So we might ask how did they know? How did they know they were supposed to go anywhere in response to this command?

Why not set up an institution and invite people from around the world to come study at their school? How did they know? What was it in their imaginations that compelled them to get on a boat and go to Cyprus?

Remember the Apostle Paul and maybe some of these other teachers probably had the whole Old Testament memorized. I want to suggest that these disciples were so saturated in the story of God's salvation going to the nations that they knew exactly what they were supposed to do.

To show you what I mean, I'm going to give you a very brief biblical theology of going and sending. Okay, so if you're taking notes, we're on the first point of the sermon, the fourth sub point, and now here's four points.

[19:19] But we'll do this quickly. Four flashbulb memories in the story of God's people. Number one, God's covenant with Abraham, Genesis 12. God speaks to Abraham and says, I will make of you a great nation.

You know these promises. I will bless those who bless you. I will curse him who dishonors you. All the families of the earth, the Gentiles, the nations, will be blessed through you.

But do you remember the first word of that command, of that promise? Go. Go from your country and your kindred.

Go to the land that I will show you. God's great plan to bring blessing to the nations begins with a command to go. Flashbulb memory number two from the Old Testament.

The word of the Lord comes to Jonah. Arise, go to Nineveh. And you remember the story. Jonah doesn't want to go to Nineveh because he doesn't want the pagans in Nineveh to repent and hear of God's salvation.

[20:23] And then there's the whole thing with the fish. But God's word comes to Noah again and to Jonah. And Jonah does go. And the Gentiles hear and believe and repent. He goes.

Number three. Isaiah speaks hope that Yahweh will raise up a suffering servant who will preach even to the nations.

A suffering servant like Jesus, yes. But also like the Apostle Paul. Yahweh speaks to this suffering servant through the mouth of Isaiah, saying, It is too small a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel.

I will make you as a light for the nations that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth. The suffering servant will go to the Gentiles, to the nations.

Paul, the Apostle, the suffering servant, the suffering servant, the suffering servant passages of Isaiah all the time in his letters and in his speeches.

[21:31] In fact, we'll see one next week in our passage in the rest of Acts chapter 13. Come back for that. But Paul sees his traveling and his preaching, his suffering, the beatings.

He sees all of that as the embodiment of Isaiah's suffering servant. That's embedded in his imagination as he's traced out the story of God's salvation.

Okay, fourth and finally, in this little biblical theology of going and sending. Acts chapter 1, the disciples had come together and Jesus said to them, You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and in Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

What I'm trying to say is that the Bible, from beginning to end, contains this story of God's blessing going to the nations as his people go forward with good news.

In fact, there's one theologian who says that this story of God's mission is the hermeneutical key, the interpretive key for understanding the entire Bible, which is a very big claim and you can take or leave it.

[22:41] But my point is that it's a massive biblical theme and one that I think is ringing in the disciples' ears as the Holy Spirit says, Set them aside for the work to which I have called them.

They know what they're supposed to do. They have a mature theology of going and sending, and this detail taken together with the other three, Luke suggests, creates the context for the launch of this first apostolic mission.

Now, before we go on in the text, brothers and sisters, I want to ask you a question. Do you imagine Holy Covenant Church as a place from which the gospel goes out?

Do you imagine Holy Covenant Church as a launching place for the gospel? When we see the details of our church, the unusual variety of people, our commitment to the ministry of the word, to worship and prayer, a biblical theology of sending, the story of God's gospel going to the nations, when we see all of this, do we imagine ourselves as part of that story?

If you go to our church website, you won't find much. But one thing you will find is our doctrinal statement.

[24:01] It's on the About page. Scroll to the bottom. I had to look for it this week. And I'm going to read you a passage from our doctrinal statement, which says this, That's what we believe the church is.

That's what we believe we are. Every week at the very end of our service, the preacher comes back up to give a benediction. And right after the benediction, there are a few more words said.

And children, I'm going to have you help me. What are the three words that the preacher says right after the benediction? Say it out loud. Go in peace. Okay?

It's not just class dismissed. Go get snacks. Those words are an exclamation point on our liturgy. We're gathered by the Spirit around the Word.

We're fed in the preaching, and we're fed at the table, and then we go out into the world with the gospel to give witness to Jesus. That's the entire shape of what we do as a gathered community.

[25:30] So do we imagine HCC as a launching place for the gospel? We'll come back to that question once more at the end. But let's look briefly at the second story, the landing on Cyprus.

And I want to suggest that in this second story, Luke reveals Paul's playbook for his mission to the Gentiles. So in this story, Saul and Barnabas and John Mark, who is with them, land on the island of Cyprus at Salamis, which is at the east end of the island.

And they walk kind of across the island, preaching in various places, and then come to the west end of the island where most of this story takes place. And there they meet a Roman official named Sergius Paulus, a magician named Eleazar.

And there's some conflict here, and then Sergius Paulus believes, and they leave the island. But Luke, I think, in the details of this story, the way he tells the story, wants to reveal Paul's playbook, what he will do everywhere he goes in his ministry to the Gentiles.

So look with me at the four points of Paul's playbook. First, bring the gospel to the Jews. Look at verse five. When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God.

[26:56] Where? In the synagogues of the Jews. Now, Paul is the apostle to the Gentiles, who will call himself that. But this is his habit everywhere he goes. In Thessalonica, in Iconium, in Berea, in Athens, in Corinth.

Everywhere he goes, he begins in the synagogues of the Jews. So why does he do that? I want to suggest it might be strategy. You're landing in a foreign place, get a foothold among people who are also waiting for the hope of Israel.

Maybe it's strategic and pragmatic. But I think more than that, Paul's theology demands it. Years later, Paul writes to the Romans, saying this, he says, Paul understands that the new covenant promises in Christ cannot be unhitched from the old covenant promises to Israel.

And so he begins with God's old covenant people, the Jews, by preaching in their synagogues. The gospel goes to the Jews first. He will do this everywhere he goes.

But what if they reject it? Well, Paul's playbook anticipates that. And so second, he takes the gospel to the Gentiles. In this story, as it unfolds, Luke doesn't tell us of any of the Jewish people responding positively to the gospel.

[28:36] The only character in the story who responds to the gospel is a Roman, a Gentile, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence, a seeker of the truth.

I think Luke is trying to show us in story form, one of Paul's key theological convictions, as he says in the book of Romans, I'm not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first, and then to the Greek.

If the Jews thrust aside the gospel, and sometimes they will, then it goes to the Gentiles, and they will receive it. There's more to say about this in future weeks.

It's a major theme in the book of Acts. In fact, we'll see it again in our text next week. So I will leave it to my colleagues to say more about that. Paul's playbook number three, stand firm against the devil in the strength of the Holy Spirit.

The strangest part about this story is this little encounter with the magician, Elemas. He has all these names, and it's confusing really what he's doing and what happens.

[29:44] And what I want to say is that Luke is trying to show us that this is not merely human conflict, but that as the gospel goes forward, it will be met with spiritual opposition, just like what happens here on the island of Cyprus.

Notice the way Luke charges this little story with the evil spiritual presence surrounding Elemas. He's a false prophet, which means he's a mouthpiece, but not for God.

He's a mouthpiece for evil spiritual powers. His name is Bar-Jesus, Son of Jesus. Even in name, he's like an anti-type of the true Messiah.

And he obstructs another man from seeing the truth. He's trying to keep Sergius Paulus from hearing the truth, like a worm tongue in the ruler's house.

And Saul stands and opposes this man. And notice that it's in the moment of his standing in opposition, verse nine, that the narrator bothers to tell us that the man who up to this point he has called Saul was also called Paul.

[31:02] Paul had two names. Saul was his Hebrew name, the name of a king, a strong, proud name. Paul is a Latin name that means small, diminutive, unimpressive, just like everything we know about Paul from his letters.

Just like everything we hear him say about his ministry. Do you remember what he says to the Corinthian church? I came to you in weakness, a jar of clay. When I'm weak, then I'm strong. Paul sees his entire ministry as coming not from the strength of his personal name, but in weakness. Paul. And that's how he stands against this evil, the evil forces surrounding Elemas, filled with the Holy Spirit, verse nine, not in his own strength, but in the power of the Holy Spirit. He prophesies as a mouthpiece for the true God, a word of judgment. 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 for a time. It's an oracle of judgment against the evil forces that have opposed the gospel.

[32:34] And the man is struck blind, physical blindness, as judgment for the spiritual blindness that he would have willed on another man. Paul meets opposition like this everywhere that he goes and he sees it as spiritual opposition.

He writes later to the Ephesians, we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against spiritual forces of evil. So be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might.

And that's what Paul does everywhere he goes. Playbook number four, item number four, teach the word of the Lord. Notice the repeated emphasis in this passage, verse five, they proclaimed the word of God.

Verse seven, Sergius Paulus sought to hear the word of God. And verse 12, the pro-council believed when he saw what had occurred for he was astonished by the miracle, by the miracle of judgment.

No, he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord, which that miracle highlighted and pointed to. Paul sometimes works miracles, heals, heals, raises the dead, helps the poor, but always he comes back to the teaching that he has been sent out with.

[33:51] The teaching that the promises to Abraham and David have been realized in the resurrection of the Messiah and a new day of redemption has dawned and that's the message for which he's been sent and he will never stray from it.

The pro-council believes and the apostles leave the island and the story will continue. But this morning, we've seen the launch, we've seen the landing, and now I want to spend just a few minutes imagining together how we fit into this story.

I asked earlier, do you imagine Holy Covenant Church as a launching place for the gospel and maybe a pragmatic answer or the pragmatist might say, I don't know, we don't have a missions pastor, we don't have a missions board, or a big budget, or missions procedures and policies. We don't really know how to do missions. We're a young church and I suppose that's true. But I'll ask this question, so what? Like, so what?

I mean, what if this church, like that little church at Antioch, an unusual variety of people, commitment to the word of God, prayer and worship, what if this church has everything we need for going and sending to the nations?

[35:22] This year, for the first time, the elders set aside \$2,000 in our budget, in our outside organization's budget, and we don't know what it's for yet.

And that was on purpose. It's our intent and our prayer that God would raise up from this congregation those who want to go out with the gospel and that we might use that budget as a very small means of helping them in that work.

It's not a massive step, but it is a small way that we as a church might live inside this big story of God's gospel going to the ends of the earth.

But can you imagine anything bigger? Can you imagine getting together with friends to pray earnestly that God would send laborers into the harvest?

You don't have to do it in a big open field in a thunderstorm. You can do it in a home or a basement, but can you imagine doing that? Can you imagine finding another \$50 in your personal monthly budget to add support to one of our outside organizations or another missionary?

[36:39] Can you imagine hearing the Spirit say, set apart for me, Noah? Set apart for me, Neil?

Set apart for me, are you nervous now? Josh. I'll conclude with a story that I wasn't sure I was going to tell, but I'm going to go for it.

Three or four years ago, some of you know, if you're visiting, you may not know, I work full-time at an investment company here in town called First Trust.

That's my full-time job. And several years ago, I hired a young man who told me during his interview that he had a dream and a hope of one day going on the mission field to translate the Bible.

And he said that was some years off. He thought, and I hired him. And he was everything I could hope for in a young employee.

[37:47] Technically competent, a very hard worker, a good communicator, a good leader, somebody I could build. The kind of person I never want to lose. Late last year, he pulled me in a conference room and said, Dan, it's time for me to go.

It's time for me to go to translate the Bible. And I wanted to persuade him otherwise because I didn't want to lose him.

And so, earlier this year, he gave plenty of notice, did everything very well, and earlier this year, he had his last day, moved to Vancouver to study linguistics, and is now on that track to translate the Bible for people who don't have the Bible in their own language.

And I don't really remember why I'm telling you this story. I think because it's easy to talk about other people going, being sent, and when it intersects with your own life, and when there's cost to it, and conflicts with your own kingdom coming on earth, then the story is a little bit different.

So, I wrestle with this. Now you know. Maybe you do too, but maybe we all need to hear this call, hear the Spirit speak to us, saying, we're part of this story of God going, his gospel going to the nations.

[39 : 21] Our Lord Jesus, on the night of his resurrection, came and stood among his disciples and said, peace be with you, as the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.

And he breathed on them and said, receive the Holy Spirit. Let us hear the voice of our Lord. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.