

Gospel Triumph: The Missionary God – Acts 13:1-12

While the Bible doesn't tell us what happened to all of the 12 Apostles, there are sources outside of the Bible that give us some insight into the lives of many of them after the death and resurrection of Jesus. One of the most interesting to me is Thomas, most often known as doubting Thomas.

A third century church historian mentions that Thomas traveled East all the way to India and established churches in the eastern part of the country. This is stated in several other early European sources as well, but there are regions in India where the churches there trace their beginnings back to Thomas. A dear friend of ours in Virginia grew up in India in a Christian family and she mentioned this tradition in the Indian church to us as well.

Why do I bring this up? Followers of Jesus have always had an impulse to be on the move with the gospel. From the earliest days, Christians have felt the need to take the message of the gospel to areas where people haven't heard. This is because of Jesus's commands in the Great Commission, but Jesus gave those commands because this is the very heart of God. God goes after the 1 lost sheep. Jesus came to seek and save that which was lost. The heart of God is a missionary heart, not to conquer with the sword, but to proclaim the good news of grace and forgiveness to people in desperate need.

It's been 2 months since we've been in the book of Acts, but we are entering the last major section of the book, chapters 13-28. Remember the outline from Acts 1:8? Witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea & Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. In these chapters the gospel will advance and triumph from Antioch to Rome itself with the full expectation that further movement is on the horizon. So, let's let these first few verses in chapter 13 reorient us to this book. Today we will see **4 Acts of the Missionary God who Seeks the Lost.**

1. He Sets Apart Servants through His Church (vv. 1-3)

Let's start with verse 1. This section of Acts begins in Antioch but this isn't the first time we have encountered the church in Antioch. Let me show you a little map of where Antioch is located.

The church here began in Acts 11:19 and I'm going to read verses 19-26 to remind you of the origin of the church here. As this mostly Gentile church grew numerically and strengthened spiritually, they were able to send financial help to the churches in Judea. Look at 11:29-30.

At the end of chapter 12 we find Saul and Barnabas returning to Antioch, which became their home base. Look at verse 25. And now as we get to 13:1 we find the leadership of the church in Antioch mentioned by name. This is a diverse group, not just Jews, but they are unified in leadership and purpose. Look at verse 2.

When verse 2 says "they" were praying and fasting, it's most likely referring to the entire church and not just the leadership. This is most likely a corporate worship service. As they are praying and fasting the Spirit gives direction to them to commission Barnabas and Saul for a specific work. What did this direction from the Spirit look like? Did the Spirit audibly speak? Give a sense of conviction? Simply direct the conversation? We don't exactly know but this isn't something new.

When Saul was converted in Acts 9 God already had plans for him. Listen to 9:15. Barnabas no doubt understood this and the other leadership of the church at Antioch as well. The Spirit was not inspiring some new mission or understanding here. He was confirming what God had already revealed and motivating to put God's plans in action. Which they do. Look at verse 3.

The laying on of hands indicates an official commissioning for ministry. This begins what we call the 1st missionary journey of Paul. This first journey will take up all of Acts 13-14 and cover 3 years, AD 46-49. It's important that you see how this journey ended in Acts 14:24-28. They went back to the church and reported to the church that had commissioned and sent them.

Here's the major point I want you to see from 13:1-3 and then how this missionary trip ends. The Spirit sets apart, but He does this through the local church, not apart from the local church. It's fairly common for people to "feel called" to some ministry endeavor and to launch out on their own to try and make it happen. They bypass the help, wisdom, and support that come through the

local church. God wants us involved in His mission, but He wants to send out people who have the character for ministry and the competence for ministry. The church is vital to assessing character and competence.

Now, what's beautiful about the setting apart of Barnabas and Saul is that the church was positioning itself to be led by the Spirit toward further ministry opportunities. They were praying and fasting. They were worshipping God. They were being taught and growing and already engaged in ministry. The Spirit ultimately sets apart for ministry, but each local church needs to be positioned for further ministry opportunities. If we, as a church, aren't actively praying for God to move in us and use us to further the gospel, why would we expect to be the center of a revival downriver? But the church in Antioch was ready for God's initiating and they laid hands on Barnabas and Saul and sent them off. Now let's turn to our second act of the missionary God.

2. He Sends His Spokesmen (vv. 4-5)

Verses 1-3 focus on the local church and the commissioning of God's men for ministry. Now in verses 4-5 they are actually sent and you can see that even though verse 3 says the church sent them, look who sends them and where they go in verse 4. Let me show you a map again to get your bearings.

Seleucia is simply a port city about 25 miles from Antioch. From there they took a ship over to the island of Cyprus. Why did they go to Cyprus? Well, it could be because this was Barnabas's home. Listen to Acts 4:36. We don't exactly know why they chose Cyprus but this is the first time in Acts that an official, local church led missionary endeavor into a Gentile region has taken place. Up until now the Gospel has spread through scattering during persecution. Now the church intentionally targets an area and goes.

Notice the pattern that they set in verse 5. The gospel is moving to Gentiles, but Jews are certainly not excluded. In fact, Saul and Barnabas go to Jews first and some come to Christ. But, as we will see, many continue to reject and now God's people, the church, is made up of both Jews and Gentiles. As they go, they are always proclaiming the Word of God. They are God's spokesmen, and this is the

heart of ministry, and we will see this repeated over and over throughout the rest of Acts. But we'll also see great opposition again and again and God overcoming that opposition and this is our third act of the missionary God.

3. He Subdues the Opposition (vv. 6-11)

You can see in verse 6 that they make their way through the entire island and to the western edge to a city called Paphos. From a Bible study perspective that's a lot of preaching in synagogues and sharing the gospel and we don't get any stories from it. Why? Well, Luke is selective in which stories he shares because he wants to make a point with each one. When Barnabas and Saul arrive at Paphos they meet an unusual character who Luke tells us about to emphasize God's victory over opposition to the Gospel. Look at the rest of verse 6.

This Bar-Jesus is a Jewish false prophet. We've already seen that Barnabas and Saul were included in a group of prophets and teachers in Antioch and so Luke wants us to view this man in contrast to them. He's a false prophet and a magician. Look at verse 7 for more information on him.

The proconsul would have been the highest Roman official on the island of Cyprus. He's clearly an important political figure. He's open-minded and intelligent and had heard of Barnabas and Saul, probably because their teaching had made an impact on the island. He wants to talk with them and hear what they are teaching. Look at how Bar-Jesus responds in verse 8. Elymas is the same figure of verses 6-7 and verse 7 says he is with Sergius Paulus. It was common for Roman officials to keep a "scientific advisor" who could read the stars and was familiar with the occult. This was Bar-Jesus's role and he's no doubt afraid he will lose his job if Sergius converts to Christianity. So he tries to put a stop to it.

Look at verse 9. The Spirit doesn't just commission and send, the Spirit now strengthens Saul to directly confront opposition to the Gospel. Notice that this is where we get the name change to Paul. Why? In simplest terms, Paul was a more Greek name and would have been less of a hindrance in ministering to Gentiles. But Paul gives it to him straight. Look at verses 10-11.

Now, the judgment enacted on this magician is not permanent and the description in verse 11 actually sounds a lot like what happened to Saul in Acts 9 at his conversion. We don't know if Bar-Jesus repented but there's certainly a chance he did.

The entire point of this little story is twofold. The Spirit equips God's servants to face opposition, and God always overcomes opposition to the advancement of His Word. That's not to say His servants won't suffer. We'll see as soon as Acts 14 that Paul will be stoned for preaching the gospel. But God's power and control over every situation and every opposition are the story here. Now, what's amazing about this is that the proconsul, Sergius, watched this confrontation and saw the magician lose his sight. He was amazed by it, but that miracle is not what ultimately brings Him to faith. This is our last act.

4. He Saves through His Word (v. 12)

Look at verse 12. He saw what occurred, but the real explanation is that he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord. The teaching was confirmed by the sign, but the faith of this man was not in the miracle itself.

Keep in mind that the book of Acts is a transitional time in the life of the church. We do have miracles that authentic the message of the Gospel as the Gospel moves into new regions. But, these miracles seem to be relatively few and far between. Luke tells us that Barnabas and Saul worked their way across Cyprus preaching the Gospel, which must have taken months. We only have one miracle story. That doesn't mean other miracles and signs didn't happen, but Luke's attention is on the preaching and teaching of the Gospel and not the signs and wonders. Faith comes through hearing and hearing through the Word of God.

The overall message of Acts is that the work of God is advanced in the world by Spirit-filled messengers who proclaim the gospel faithfully and boldly. – David Peterson

Are we those Spirit-filled messengers, committed to the local church and committed to prayer and clearly understanding the message of the gospel so that we can communicate it to others as God brings us opportunities? God acted

through the Apostles in the early church, and He continues to act through His people today. He's a missionary God. Let's position ourselves to be ready for Him to act in us and through us. Let's pray.

Sermon Reflection Questions – 6/1/25

- What do you think we mean by “The Missionary God”?
- What are some ways the Bible teaches us about God’s missionary heart?
- How do verses 1-3 show both the involvement of the Spirit and the church?
- Why is the local church important for sending out missionaries?
- Pastor Nathan mentioned that the church helps to identify both character and competence in servants of Christ. How does the church do this and what does he mean by character and competence?
- How did the church at Antioch prepare itself for sending out Barnabas and Saul?
- What can our church do to be ready for the Spirit to use us for outreach ministry?
- Of all that happened on Cyprus for Barnabas and Saul, why does Luke only record the story of Sergius Paulus and the Magician Bar-Jesus?
- How does God prepare His servants to face opposition?

- What does verse 12 teach us about the relationship between miracles and the spread of the Gospel?
- What are some ways that it's helpful for us to think of God as a Missionary God?