

A LIGHT FOR THE GENTILES

Acts 13:1-52

Key Verse: 13:47

“For this is what the Lord has commanded us: ‘I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.’”

In the last passage we saw the Jerusalem church earnestly pray to God for Peter, who had been unjustly imprisoned. God answered their prayer by sending his angels. First, he sent his angel to rescue Peter from prison. Later, he sent his angel to put the evil King Herod to death. Through prayer, the early Christians overcame persecution. The word of God continued to increase and spread. Like them, we must pray continually. God answers our united prayer, even when we don't fully believe.

In chapter 13 the Antioch church obeys the Holy Spirit and sends out Barnabas and Saul as the first missionaries. They begin on Cyprus and then go to Pisidian Antioch. Many exciting events and interesting things happen during this journey. But in terms of gospel history, it is truly significant that God makes Barnabas and Saul a light for the Gentiles. May God help us to know what it means to be a light for the Gentiles, and how to live with this holy privilege through this study.

First, the Antioch church becomes a missionary sending church (1-3).

In chapter 13 we find the Antioch church has matured to the point of sending missionaries. How did this happen? In the first place, they studied the Bible diligently. Look at verse 1. “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.” Barnabas was a Levite from Cyprus who had been a pillar of the Jerusalem church. He knew how to see the work of God in others and embrace them. Simeon was called “Niger,” meaning “black.” Perhaps he was from Africa. Lucius of Cyrene may have been a pioneer who first shared the gospel with Greeks. His Latin name indicates Roman influence. Manaen had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch; he must have been a privileged person. Saul had been a Pharisee in Tarsus. This diverse group worked in one spirit to serve God as Bible teachers. It is because God is One, and the word of God is the universal truth for all men. As they taught the word of God, the Antioch church learned of God's universal love and his world mission purpose.

In the second place, they worshiped God. Look at verse 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.’” The Antioch church worshiped God. They came together to exalt God and express their love for him. No doubt, those who had special talents glorified God with them. Perhaps they had an orchestra and a chorus. Sometimes, we become duty bound. But a primary activity of the church is to worship God. The missionary sending endeavor was rooted in worship. May God help us worship him from our hearts.

In the third place, they sought God's direction. Their worship was accompanied by fasting. Fasting intensifies prayer in seeking God's guidance. They knew the church had to go somewhere. Through fasting prayer they humbly sought the will of God for the Antioch church. Then the Holy Spirit told them to set apart Barnabas and Saul.

In the fourth place, they obeyed God's direction. The Holy Spirit chose the top leaders, not boundary members, to be missionaries. It must have been hard to send Barnabas and Saul. How did they respond?

Look at verse 3. “So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.” They obeyed the Holy Spirit prayerfully and immediately. We must realize that God wants to send the best people for world mission and obey his guidance.

Thank God for sending John and Maria Peace to Ukraine as missionaries. They have been most fruitful in Chicago UBF. They love God and each other, and they served God sacrificially. They were blessed in every way. They had four beautiful children, a growing fellowship and good jobs. But they decided to go to Ukraine to obey the will of God. They decided to sacrifice their comfort and security. Surely, it was the answer to our prayer for Russia. God helped us send the best people as missionaries. May God help us continue to do so.

Second, the Holy Spirit raises Paul as the mission leader (4-14).

Look at verse 4. Barnabas and Saul, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, arrived at Salamis on the island of Cyprus. They proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues. Then they traveled through the whole island and came to Paphos. There Sergius Paulus, the proconsul, and an intelligent man, sent for them. He really wanted to hear the word of God. Though a man of position, he was a thirsty soul, longing for God. It was an open door for ministry. However, Elymas the sorcerer opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith.

What happened? Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, “You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right!” And, “Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind, and for a time you will be unable 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 (9-11). Paul rebuked the enemy with the Spirit of God. Paul stood absolutely on God’s side with gospel faith. God honored his faith and blinded Elymas. Thus, the proconsul was encouraged and believed the word of God.

Look closely at verse 13. It says, “From Paphos, Paul and his companions sailed to Perga in Pamphylia, where John left them to return to Jerusalem.” Until now, the mission team has been known as “Barnabas and Saul.” From now on it is known as “Paul and his companions,” or “Paul and Barnabas.” Leadership of the mission has transferred from Barnabas to Paul. Perhaps this led John to return to Jerusalem. He liked to follow cousin Barnabas. He might have been frightened by Paul’s fighting spirit. To the team, it was a painful event. Anyway, they went on and arrived in Pisidian Antioch—not to be confused with Syrian Antioch, their home church. We must know that missionary work is a spiritual battle with the devil. Leaders must stand on God’s side with gospel faith.

Third, Paul’s gospel message in Pisidian Antioch (15-41).

On the Sabbath Paul and Barnabas entered the synagogue and sat down. After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the synagogue rulers said, “Brothers, if you have a message of encouragement for the people, please speak.” Paul seized the opportunity. He stood up, motioned with his hand and began to speak. He had a keen sense of God’s history and a clear gospel message. We can find three main points.

In the first place, God sent the Savior of the world from the line of David. In verses 17-23, Paul summarizes the history of God’s work in Israel, culminating with his promise to David to send a Savior. Again and again, God intervened in Israel’s history to accomplish his purpose. Their situation in Egypt was very difficult; they were slaves. Yet God made them prosper. After delivering them with mighty

miracles, God led them for 40 years in the desert. The Israelites revealed all the depravity of fallen man. But the holy and righteous God endured the misconduct of over 600,000 men and their families. God revealed his divine nature. God described himself as follows, "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin" (Ex 34:6,7a). By God's grace, they conquered the promised land.

However, living in the promised land, their conduct may have been even worse. They always fell into sin and made God sorry. But God helped them. God gave them judges to deliver them from their enemies and bring them back to himself. Finally, they asked for a king to lead them. First he gave them Saul. Paul doesn't talk about the bad side of Saul, probably because he was named after Saul. He simply says that God removed him as king; it was because of his pride and disobedience.

Then God made David their king. David was a man after God's own heart. David wanted to please God in whatever he did. When a Philistine giant blasphemed God and his people, all the men of Israel trembled. But David burned with anger out of love for God. He struck the Philistine down in a duel. David patiently received God's divine discipline in the wilderness. After becoming king, David fought the enemies of his people and liberated the kingdom. As king, he did not reward his friends and destroy his political opponents; rather, he embraced everyone with a shepherd's heart to unite the kingdom. God was pleased by David. God promised to send the Savior of the world from his line. As God promised, Jesus came. Jesus is the Savior of the world.

In the second place, God sent Jesus to suffer, die and rise again. In verses 24-31, Paul presents the facts of the life and death of Jesus. Jesus' coming was prepared by John the Baptist. Jesus came as a good shepherd for the people of Israel. Jesus loved all kinds of sick and lonely people very personally. Jesus healed a man with leprosy, restoring him to live a normal life in society. Jesus heard the cry of a blind man and gave him sight. Jesus drove out evil spirits from a wayward woman and made her a holy mother of prayer. Jesus did exactly what the prophets foretold of the Messiah. Yet the people of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognize Jesus. With no charge, they had him condemned and crucified. However, his death was not a tragedy; it was the fulfillment of prophecy that the Messiah would come as the Lamb of God. Jesus' death was to save men from their sins. Ultimately, Jesus died to obey his Father and fulfill God's will for world salvation.

What did God do when his one and only Son Jesus was buried in a tomb after crucifixion? God raised him from the dead on the third day (30). By raising him God proved that he is living and almighty. By raising him God destroyed the last enemy, death. By raising him God gave a living hope of the kingdom of God to those who believe in the Son. Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection are historical facts. God established Jesus' apostles as witnesses of these facts to all mankind.

In the third place, Jesus' resurrection brings forgiveness of sins and justification to all who believe. In verses 32-41, Paul applies the gospel message to his listeners. By quoting several Old Testament prophecies, he shows that Jesus' resurrection fulfilled the promises of God. Like Peter did in chapter 2, Paul quotes Psalm 16:10. He says in verse 35, "So it is stated elsewhere: 'You will not let your Holy One see decay.'" Though David spoke the words of Psalm 16, and most of it can be applied to David, this part cannot. After David served God's purpose in his own generation, he died and his body decayed. But Jesus, whom God raised from the dead, did not see decay (37). What this means to mankind is the focus of Paul's message. Look at verses 38-39. "Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses." Through Jesus we have the forgiveness

of sins. Not only so, but we are also justified—that is, declared “Not guilty.” Jesus paid it all. By faith in him we can stand before God as his righteous children. Those who believe the gospel are saved to the uttermost. But as Paul warns by quoting Habakkuk, those who scoff at the message will perish.

Fourth, God makes his servants a light for the Gentiles (42-52).

The people of Pisidian Antioch were deeply touched by Paul’s message. They invited him to speak again on the next Sabbath. After the meeting was over, many who heard the message followed Paul and Barnabas home. They wanted to know more. We can imagine that they had many group Bible studies and one-to-one Bible studies. The word of God worked mightily. On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. However, when the Jews saw the crowds of Bible students, they became jealous and began to speak against Paul and Barnabas. It was a painful moment. Paul and Barnabas had brought the life-giving gospel to the Jews through the Holy Spirit. The Jews rejected it. Not only so, they became enemies of the gospel.

How did Paul and Barnabas respond? Look at verses 46-47. “Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: ‘We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. For this is what the Lord has commanded us: “I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.”’” Paul and Barnabas did not feel rejected. They saw these Jews as the proverbial swine who did not deserve the pearls of eternal life. At the same time, they saw the Gentiles as the precious children of God. Instead of being discouraged, they pressed forward through the open door to Gentile ministry.

What did Paul mean when he said, “The Lord has commanded us: ‘I have made you a light for the Gentiles....’” Of course, ultimately, Jesus is the light for the Gentiles. Jesus reveals God’s love for the Gentiles. Jesus reveals God’s forgiveness to the Gentiles. Jesus reveals God’s peace to the Gentiles. Yet, by commanding Paul, Jesus was making Paul himself a light for the Gentiles as he proclaimed the gospel of Jesus to them. When we have Jesus in our hearts, he makes us a light for the Gentiles. Jesus told his disciples, “You are the light of the world” (Mt 5:14). When we recognize ourselves as a light for the Gentiles, we are not discouraged by rejection. Instead, we are really happy with God’s high calling. We can see all kinds of people as precious children of God with a great hope for world salvation.

Then, who are the Gentiles? To American Christians, Muslims are the Gentiles. God called America to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Therefore, we must reveal God’s love to the Muslim people, not hatred. We must reveal God’s forgiveness to the Muslim people, not grudges. We must reveal God’s peace to the Muslim people, not violence. On a national level, we have failed to do so. We must earnestly pray that God may help America to be a light to the Gentiles. Closer to home, Gentiles include people we hesitate to teach the Bible to. They may be rap artists who look like gangsters. They may be those who prefer same sex relationships. They may be atheists. To these people we must reveal the love and saving grace of Jesus by sharing the gospel with them. Will there be rejection? Sure. However, the greatest joy and deepest meaning for any human being is to be a light for the Gentiles.

In this passage we learn that the Holy Spirit chooses and uses those who love Jesus for his world mission purpose. Through their obedience to the Holy Spirit, he leads them step by step to be a light for the Gentiles. This is the most glorious privilege and greatest joy anyone can have. May God use each of us as a light for the Gentiles to make North America a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.