**Acts 13:4-12 The early church on Cyprus 20/9/20**

**PART ONE**

One of the things I’ve really missed over these past 6 months is the uninterrupted time for *studying* my Bible.

I don’t just mean reading my Bible, I mean proper Geeking out.

I confess…I like to properly geek out…I want maps, and timelines, and cross references, and commentaries and if you can throw a bit of language comparison in and historical accuracy then so much the better!

Where someone else will be excited and activated in their gifting when all the columns in their spreadsheet add up – or someone else will get their cup filled up by loving people well, or creating beautiful things or passionately teaching children…I confess that one of the ways my cup gets filled is me, my Bible, silence and a world of discovery at my fingertips!

This was awoken in me, I’ve told you before after I prayed sincerely that I would grow to love the Bible – at a time when I struggled even to read it regularly – so pray big prayers if something is bothering you!

So it has been sooo good to get back to Acts – to delve into the history and accounts of Luke and to find out what happened next. Last week Pete told us about the assembling of the A Team in **Antioch**…instead of Hannibal, Face, BA and Murdock we have Barnabus, Saul, John Mark and the Holy Spirit! (young people are going…who *is* she talking about?!)

They were sent out from that thriving church in Antioch (a church made from lots of those who scattered from Jerusalem under persecution plus interestingly some *from* Cyprus and Cyrene) and so Barnabus, Saul and John Mark, commissioned by the Holy Spirit and their christian brothers and sisters, travel a few miles from Antioch to the port of Seleucia and catch a boat to Cyprus. From there they are going to sail on to Asia Minor – now Turkey and make a circular tour of towns before heading *back to Antioch*. And this makes up what you might have heard called *Paul’s First Missionary Journey.*

So today we are going to focus just on what happened whilst they were on the island of Cyprus. But before that let me just set a bit of background:

Interestingly at the start of this chapter it is *Barnabus* who is mentioned first – he is the *Senior* member of the team and Saul is the Junior member and there is also Barnabus’ younger cousin John Mark, who is merely the assistant at this stage. I want to talk a bit about Barnabus first:

Barnabus is *such a great character* – he is described in the Bible in different places *as glad, encouraging, a good man, full of the Holy Spirit, full of faith, hard-working* and then I would also add that we can *infer* he is *generous, honest, a gatherer* of people and really he has the *gift of discernment. (plus prophetic gift of encouragement)*

Remember, he is the one who brought Saul to the apostles when they didn’t believe Saul could have changed – he wasn’t believed by the Christians in Jerusalem, but Barnabus was the first one to *trust him* – to trust the saving and transforming work of Jesus in Saul’s life. It is Barnabus who fetches him from Tarsus and brings him to Antioch in the first place (11:22).

Have you ever thought about those 7 or 8 years where Saul was in Tarsus? After his conversion on the road to Damascus he spent three years or so living in the countryside outside of Damascus – going in to town on the Sabbath and preaching in synagogues until eventually he has stirred them up so much he has to escape in a basket over the wall to avoid assassination…Saul is *controversial, confrontational and obsessional*. He travels to Jerusalem but isn’t accepted by the Christians there – even though Barnabus tries to vouch for him, only Peter and James will meet with him (Gal 1:19), the others don’t want to know, and after a few short weeks he gets sent back to his home town of Tarsus where he stays for *7 or 8 years*……that’s a decade, in total of ministry with a very slow start and little significant blessing, he doesn’t achieve much in 10 yrs. It is notable that when he leaves Tarsus, he never returns, we don’t know if he ever even wrote to those in Tarsus.

He is hugely learned, full of enthusiasm and energy, skilled in debate and argument, and has this amazing conversion story – he’d get top billing at some evangelistic conference these days!! so *why* didn’t God use him *more* in those first 10 years? *Maybe* because he had a *lot to learn*!

He needed to learn how to be more conciliatory, more forgiving of others, more humble, how to be less confrontational and I think he needed to work out that *he needed others*. He needed to learn about fellowship and teamwork – from a natural character that was independent, and a solo worker. He struggled with mixing with the other apostles, we later see him struggling to accept money or hospitality, preferring to work as a tent maker to pay his own way. (which also stops others from being able to exercise their gifts)

But dear old Barnabus who discerns God’s hand on Saul, travels all the way to Tarsus to fetch him out of his dead end ministry to bring him back to *other* Christians in Antioch, back to being part of *a team*. That’s what I mean about him being a gatherer.

And together they make the A team to begin with! It’s obvious these two, Barnabus and Saul have *spiritual charisma* together – in the next chapter they are going to be mistaken for Gods (in Lystra)!

Barnabus is *from* Cyprus, from the port of Salamis on the east side of the island where their boat is going to land. In one sense Barnabus is taking the gospel home, but it is likely that there is a growing community of Christians there *already* - as we know some of them must have travelled to help plant the church in Antioch. Barnabus must have been excited to take with him all he has learned and seen in Jerusalem and Antioch back to the family and friends he has in his home town.

So Barnabus, Saul and John Mark land in Salamis, the main commercial centre, and the largest city on the island.

And in part two we’ll see what happens, as they travel the length of the island…

**PART TWO**

We have only one verse that tells us what happened in Salamis. Verse 5. We don’t know how long they stayed or even how they were received. There are some who think it may have been hard going in Cyprus – there is no mention of “many coming to faith” or anything like that and some suggest it may have been one of the reasons why John Mark leaves them when they get back to the mainland in Pamphylia and sails back to Jerusalem, young and inexperienced he may not have realised how hard going missionary work was going to be.

BUT all the verse actually *says* is that they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues. It was a place big enough for more than one synagogue.

There were a whole numerous section of ‘God-fearing’ gentiles…these existed before the gospel arrives – they were non-Jews attracted to monotheism (belief in one God not all the different Greek Gods) who attended synagogues, but drew the line at some of the Jewish practices like circumcision – God-fearers included *lots of* *women*,(Jospehus the historian tells us that *almost all* the women in Damascus were synagogue-attending God fearers. *Freedmen* (who had once been slaves but many then became very successful, educated, businessmen or accountants/physicians etc) there were also artisans, soldiers and sometimes a few people of high status like senators. This group of *god-fearing* gentiles emerge as *the most receptive group* in all the Roman Empire and form the *majority* of the early church. What is great is that they also form a *bridge and a network* of contacts that reach into the much larger gentile communities in a city. Later Paul is known for always going first to synagogues in a new town proclaiming Jesus is King of Israel AND the Nations ie the multi-ethnic non-jews. (to the Jew first and also to the Greek Rom1:16). Jews would have probably rejected him out of hand if he had gone to the Gentiles first.

Salamis was known for having the largest Agora or market place of all colonies in the entire Roman Empire. Paul may well have set up temporarily in the marketplace to fix awnings, tents etc. whilst talking to people about Christianity.

Anyhow, by verse 6 they are on the move again, travelling through the island and ending up 90 miles away in a city port on the West Side of the Island called Paphos. Whilst Salamis is the *largest* city, Paphos is actually the *administrative centre*, being the seat of the Roman government of the island. Paphos was also the worship centre for Aphrodite (or Venus), goddess of love and there was a large temple dedicated to her worship there.

The island was governed by a Roman proconsul called Sergius Paulus. We are told he was an *intelligent* man, *sensible of sound understanding*. And one of the clues that the Holy Spirit is most definitely the 4th part of this team is that the Holy Spirit is *already* at work – because I can’t imagine Barnabus and Saul marching in to demand to talk to the proconsul – that probably wasn’t part of their plan at all *but* the Proconsul sends for them! Amazing open door! He wants to hear the word of God – their reputation proceeds them!

One of the amazing things that highlights the historical accuracy of this account, that I found whilst researching is that the archeological ruins from the Proconsul’s house can still be visited in Paphos on Cyprus – they have found the plausible meeting room where Sergius Paulus would have held audiences with folk. And you can pop on Google Earth to see it! Look at that! Check it out!

He’s even got a fountain in the middle of his atrium courtyard, plus deep baths you could stand in – which made me wonder if they jumped in and baptised him there when he came to faith! Can’t imagine Paul doing anything else!

But I’m jumping ahead. Before Sergius comes to faith there is one *obstacle*. A false prophet or sorcerer called Elymas who is part of the group of men Sergius surrounds himself with. Elymas was someone who would have used healing remedies, or amulets, spells or astrology, a peddlar of falsehoods – who made things up to manipulate others and benefit himself. He not only fears the influence of Barnabus and Saul, he senses their power in the spirit realm and tries to pervert the truth. He tries to turn the proconsul *away from the faith*, probably fearing losing his own standing or position. He tries to *put up a wall* to the gospel and then something very significant happens.

*FROM this moment – Saul becomes filled with the holy spirit and Saul becomes PAUL. Stood in front of a ruling governor of Rome called Paulus he becomes Paulus, no longer Saul the Jew, a Hebrew from the tribe of Benjamin but Paul, a citizen of Rome, preacher to the gentiles!*

From this moment Paul becomes the *prominent figure* of every event. Paul becomes the leader. The roles reverse – Paul and Barnabus not Barnabus and Saul. Paulus meaning *little* – showing how far he has come in his humility, and understanding that when he is weak *God’s strength* is evident.

The door had been opened when Cornelius and his household became Christians with Peter but *discipling ALL nations* really starts here.

There is this *power encounter* - a contest between good and evil…Paul looks Elymas straight in the eye and calls him out for what he is *‘a son of the devil’*. Can you imagine the picture? When the Holy Spirit falls Paul stares Elymas in the eye, like Ezekiel whose face was made harder than flint, or Isaiah whose mouth was made like a sharp sword – Paul fixes his penetrating gaze on Elymas and tears down the obstruction. You can tell by the words he uses: *‘Will you never stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord?’* v10 That might sound oddly familiar to you…He is speaking in direct contrast to Isaiah’s words (that everyone would have known) which were then quoted by John the Baptist *‘Make straight in the desert a highway for our Lord’.* Isaiah spoke to a people in exile in Babylonia that God was coming to rescue them! GOD is making a beeline for you! A *straight* path. Prepare a way for him!

Elymas makes crooked that path, the beeline straight path of the Lord – he tries to cause obstacle and lengthen the rescue path and plot against the Lord’s saving purposes. Elymas is an adversary of heaven.

And in a twist of irony Paul, who was blinded by the light on the way to Damascus in his own encounter with God, now condemns the sorcerer to temporary blindness and the Roman proconsul believes the good news about Jesus. *“Salvation opens a door in what looks for all the world like a wall”* Barbara Brown Taylor.

It makes me want to go to Cyprus and stand in that room in the villa of Theseus. And just drink in the history – of where Paul was anointed by the Spirit and his real mission of straightening out the path, and tearing down obstacles, between God and all nations began!

Friends – don’t get in the way of the straight path of the lord, don’t put up obstacles to God’s rescue plan – put up signposts! The door in the wall is this way! Point to Jesus – he is the way the truth and the life!

Next week we have a guest speaker and then there’s an Allsorts, and then we have a mini series coming up so it is actually not until Nov 8th when Geraint will pick up the story and we set sail again, leaving Cyprus and on to Perga in modern day Turkey. I for one, cannot wait to find out what happens next!