

Acts Series Part 36

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[0 : 00] Cyprus, an island for all seasons. Explore 10,000 years of history and civilization.

Enjoy a changing landscape. Make new friends. Mix business with pleasure. Savor the local cuisine. Enjoy your favorite sport. Don't know if you're tempted.

Well, perhaps if the words were accompanied by the alluring images of sun-soaked beaches and stunning vistas that together make up the promotional video of the Cyprus Tourist Board, you might be more tempted.

Visit Cyprus. Love Cyprus. Although you might say, considering this weekend, who needs Cyprus when you've got Aberdeen? Well, a couple of thousand years ago, Paul and Barnabas visited Cyprus.

And they may indeed have had opportunity to explore. Then it would have been 8,000 years of history and civilization. They no doubt enjoy the scenery as they traveled across the island.

[1 : 10] They will certainly have savored the cuisine. And they possibly took a dip in the Mediterranean while they were there. They certainly mixed business with pleasure.

And what was their business? Well, their business was to tell all who would listen about Jesus Christ. To ply their trade as fishers of men.

And that was serious business. But it was accompanied by the pleasure of doing what was God's business. And seeing and enjoying and experiencing God's blessing on their labors.

And as we consider this first leg of the first missionary journey, I want to notice the three encounters recorded of their Cyprus mission.

the verses that we've read. And really from verse 4 through to verse 12 record for us this first leg of the first missionary journey.

[2 : 21] And we can identify three encounters, three audiences we might say. And three manners in which Paul and Barnabas get across the message that they have brought.

The three encounters, the three incidents if you wish that I want to notice. In effect, really they are two. But the second one we're going to divide in two.

First of all, a proclaiming in the synagogue. The beginning of the account of their time in Cyprus. Mention is made of how they were proclaiming the word of God in the Jewish synagogues.

So we'll consider just for a moment what was involved there and what lessons there are there for us. But then secondly, we find Paul particularly persuading the proconsul.

Proconsul. This man who is introduced to us, Sergius Paulus. He is one who engages in debate and dialogue with Paul and Barnabas.

[3 : 29] And so we find the missionaries not proclaiming to a gathered audience, not formally preaching as it were, but rather persuading the proconsul.

Then the third incident, though really it's part and parcel of one incident, but we'll divide it for the purposes of presentation. The third element we want to consider is Paul rebuking the sorcerer, rebuking the magician, rebuking this man named Bar-Jesus or Elymas, different names by which he was known.

So that's the manner in which we want to consider the passage. First of all, proclaiming in the synagogue, persuading the proconsul, and thirdly, rebuking the magician.

And as we consider each in turn, and particularly the audience and the manner of presenting the message on each occasion, we will identify lessons and principles applicable to us as we would ply our trade as fishers of men and engage in our God-given mission of proclaiming the good news concerning Jesus Christ.

Let's consider then each in turn as we have outlined. Proclaiming in the synagogue. In verse 4 we read, The two of them, that is Paul and Barnabas, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to

Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus.

[5 : 07] When they arrived at Salamis, the port on the east coast of Cyprus, they proclaimed the Word of God in the Jewish synagogues.

The journey that they had to undertake, the boat journey, the crossing, was a journey of some 130 miles.

And when they arrive in Cyprus, we are given direction as to who they first approach.

Who do they first direct their message to? Well, it's clearly stated for us. They proclaimed the Word of God in the Jewish synagogues. Now let's just pause for a moment and consider the significance of this.

And there's two points that I want to make concerning this approach of Paul and Barnabas. The first thing to say is that this approach is a principled approach.

[6 : 06] By that I mean that it's based on a fundamental missionary principle. That principle is expounded for us by Paul himself in his letter to the Romans in chapter 1 and verse 16.

We read there in that verse, Paul expressing his convictions. He says, I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes, first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.

First for the Jew, then for the Gentile. Now there is a clear principle. There is a priority that is given to reaching the Jewish people with the good news concerning the Jewish Messiah, Jesus.

And on this first missionary journey, which by merit of being the first missionary journey, carries with it greater significance.

I'm not suggesting that it becomes a paradigm of all missionary activity. But nonetheless, given that this was the first occasion in which a New Testament church formally sends out missionaries, and we have this first journey, then we do well to carefully consider the manner in which the mission is conducted.

[7 : 27] And what do we find? Well, we find that they arrive in Cyprus, and first of all, they proclaim the Word of God in the Jewish synagogues. And so I repeat, this approach is principle.

It's based on a fundamental missionary principle. And that becomes all the more striking when we remind ourselves, as we were considering a few weeks ago, as to the journey that Paul and Barnabas had made just a little time previously, and from which they had returned to Antioch prior to their being sent as missionaries.

I refer to a journey that they made to Jerusalem, in the first instance, to carry or to hand over the collection that had been raised for those who had been affected by the famine in Jerusalem.

But we're told that while they were there, and we turn to Galatians chapter 2 and verse 9, there was a discussion. And we just want to remind ourselves of this. We've commented on this previously, but just let's remind ourselves, as we read in Galatians chapter 2 and verse 9, what was discussed on that visit that these two men, Paul and Barnabas, had made to Jerusalem.

The conclusion of the discussion is related for us in verse 9 of chapter 2 in Galatians. James, Peter, and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me, that is Paul, and Barnabas, the right hand of fellowship, when they recognized the grace given to me.

[9 : 02] And then listen carefully. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews. So here, Paul and Barnabas, they've been in Jerusalem. A very clear agreement has been arrived at, as regards missionary strategy, we might say.

Peter is to concentrate on the Jews, Paul and Barnabas, and the Gentiles. And yet, Paul and Barnabas, on their first missionary journey, the first leg of it, the first opportunity to announce the good news, and what do they do?

They go to the synagogues, to proclaim the gospel, precisely to the Jewish population in Cyprus.

What is going on? Well, what is going on is that Paul is stating very clearly that though he is indeed an apostle to the Gentiles, and though he will perhaps dedicate the majority of his time and his efforts in that mission, nonetheless, he holds firmly to the principle that while he is doing that, he will also give the priority that is established to reaching the Jews, in this case, here in Cyprus.

It's also worth noting that their proclaiming of the Word of God in the Jewish synagogues could not be dismissed as simply a courtesy call on day one of their mission.

Even the manner in which we're told that in this particular city there were more than one synagogue, because we're told that they proclaim the Word of God in the Jewish synagogues, already giving us some indication of a significant Jewish population in this city.

[10:47] But it does suggest that they very specifically sought out each of the synagogues. Whether there were two or three, we don't know. But they made it their business to visit the ones that there were to proclaim the Word of God.

This is important. And though 2,000 years have passed, we too must be reminded of the priority that there is of reaching the Jewish people with the Gospel.

We have the opportunity and the privilege this coming Sunday of having amongst us guests from Christian Witness to Israel. And next Sunday evening, they will be taking responsibility for the service and sharing some of the work that's been done among Jews around the world at an after-church fellowship.

And one demonstration that we do indeed hold to this principle will be the interest we show in hearing what they have to say, in supporting the work that they are doing, even in the realm of supporting materially and financially for that missionary endeavor.

So here we find Paul and Barnabas proclaiming in the synagogue based in the first place on a principle that is finding expression.

[12:09] But their approach, as well as being principled, is pragmatic. And these two things don't need to be divorced. Sometimes we think that you have to choose between principle and pragmatism.

But on this occasion, both can marry very happily. And why do I say that their approach is also pragmatic or simply common sense? Well, for a number of reasons.

First of all, Barnabas, who is one of the missionary duo, as we've discovered previously, was from Cyprus. He was a Jew from Cyprus. And so it seems entirely reasonable that he would have had existing contacts among the Jewish community.

And so it seems common sense to make use of those contacts and visit the synagogues and connect with people, perhaps, who he already knew.

It's also sensible, common sense, if you wish, because in the synagogues, they were guaranteed an audience. They wanted to proclaim the message. They wanted as many to hear.

[13:14] Well, in the synagogues, they could be guaranteed a captive audience for the message that they were bringing. Certainly a captive audience for the first occasion that they spoke.

Perhaps there wouldn't be subsequent opportunities if the message wasn't well received. But certainly on the first occasion, they had that opportunity. But there's another practical or sensible, pragmatic reason.

And that is that among the audience at the synagogue, there would have been God-fearers. Now, they were Gentiles who were sympathetic to the Jewish faith. But they were Gentiles.

And so, by proclaiming the Word of God in the synagogues, they were establishing, we might call, a bridgehead to the surrounding Gentile population. Some of these God-fearers, no doubt, would hear the message and by the working of God's Spirit would believe, would respond, and doors of opportunity would begin to open to others, to the Gentiles in Cyprus.

So, this is the audience that Paul and Barnabas approach as they arrive in Cyprus. They do so on the basis of principle to the Jew first and then to the Gentile.

[14:27] But they do so also because it's an eminently sensible manner of achieving their purposes. How about the manner in which they shared the message that they had with this first audience in the synagogues in Salamis?

Well, we're told that they proclaimed the Word of God. There in verse 5, when they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the Word of God. Now, this verb, proclaimed, implies a solemn announcement.

It carries the idea of declaring something with authority. When Paul and Barnabas take the opportunity in the synagogues, when they make use of the opportunity they are given, they don't propose some interesting ideas that they're mulling over.

They don't make some telling suggestions for the audience to consider. They don't test the waters with some new ideas. No, they are proclaiming God's message with confidence and with authority. The message that they are bringing is true. And they are persuaded that it is true. And so, it is entirely appropriate that they should announce it, they should proclaim it with that conviction and with that authority.

[15:53] And that is something that we do well to remember in our own day and generation when the Christian message is attacked from all sides, when the convictions that we hold seem to be

being undermined by so many.

Our convictions are deemed quaint by some, pernicious by others, ridiculed by many. And there is a danger that we can go on the defensive and be apologetic about what we believe.

But we are reminded by Paul and Barnabas on this missionary journey that if we are persuaded as to the truth of what we believe, then we are to proclaim it with conviction and with confidence and with God-given authority.

Our message is true. In the marketplaces of ideas, there are many philosophies and many ideas and many messages and to claim that what you believe is true is deemed intolerant and narrow-minded by many.

Well, so be it. If we are persuaded that it is true and we most assuredly are, then that should be reflected in the manner in which we announce it. What were the results of this proclaiming with authority the Word of God?

[17:15] Well, we're not told. We are given no information as to the impact of this announcement, of this proclamation. The suggestion would seem to be that there was very little impact.

We don't know that, but certainly no mention is made of any impact that there was from this proclaiming the Word of God in the Jewish synagogues. If indeed it was the case that the message was rejected, if indeed it was the case that the response of the Jews in Cyprus was of amusement or bemusement or apathy, was it then a waste of time to have done what they did?

No, not at all. Because they were doing it as a question of principle. It was the right thing to do to proclaim the Word of God in the Jewish synagogues. And so regardless of the results, what they did was right and proper.

And I think that in itself is also an encouragement to us as we would proclaim the good news concerning Jesus and sometimes find very little result, very little impact seemingly from that announcement.

Is it a waste of time because nobody seems to respond? By no means. If we are doing the right thing, then we can rest assured in that.

[18:33] Well, from Salamis where they'd arrived in Cyprus, they then journey west to Paphos on the west coast of Cyprus.

It would have been a 90-mile journey across the island. Paphos is a city that today can be visited, not exactly the same location, but very close by in modern-day Paphos.

Well, they head to Paphos and there they will meet two very different characters whose stories are intertwined, but we will deal with them separately, though noticing the connections that there are.

First of all, they meet or we are given the account of the encounter with the proconsul, proconsul.

There in verse 7, there was this man, Sergius Paulus, the proconsul, an intelligent man.

Just briefly to give a very little bit of background to this, Cyprus was annexed by the Roman Empire in 57 B.C. and some 30 years later in 22 B.C., it had been designated a senatorial province.

[19:53] That's as opposed to an imperial province. Judea was an imperial province and was governed directly by the emperor and would have had, as we know it did have, a military presence.

A senatorial province like Cyprus was governed by the senate. It was a province that did not require any military presence. There was no conflict or prospect of rebellion and so the senate were responsible and the proconsul was the senate's man on Cyprus.

So, Sergius Paulus, the proconsul, was the main man. He was the head of the administration in this province of Cyprus and given that it was a fairly, it would seem, comfortable position.

There didn't seem to have been any great problems or conflicts or difficulties. This was, I suppose, quite a cushy posting to be the proconsul in Cyprus.

And we're told in the passage that he was an intelligent man. The proconsul, an intelligent man, sent for Barnabas and Saul. His interest was aroused by these itinerant missionaries and so we're told he summons Paul and Barnabas.

[21:16] And here, also we would do well just to pause for a moment and ask the question, how did he even know of their presence? You know, Cyprus is a large island even in these days.

It would have had a very considerable population. And here we have two missionaries, two Jewish teachers who have come and are traveling around the island. Why would the proconsul have had any reason to even know that they were there?

It would seem reasonable that their presence could have been completely ignored. The proconsul, we would have thought, would have had no reason to know of their presence.

Of the many visitors and travelers that would come and go, why should these men be able to claim the attention of the proconsul?

Well, we don't know the answer to that, but we can, I think, speculate, and it seems reasonable that the reason why he came or they came to the attention of Sergius Paulus was because of what they were doing, their message that they were proclaiming, the authority with which they were proclaiming, the impact, perhaps, their message was having as they were going through the island, no doubt, taking every opportunity to proclaim the good news.

[22 : 35] It is possible, though we're not told, that that proclamation was accompanied by signs and wonders. We don't know, but it may have been. We don't know, then, for sure, why it is that Sergius Paulus hears of these men and is intrigued by who they are and what they are preaching, but the point is, he is, and so he summons them that he would have a face-to-face meeting with them.

And even that simple point is pause for thought and consideration as we would ask, who is summoning us? Who are those who are seeing our lives and hearing the message that we proclaim and noticing the change that God is doing in our lives and in our community and asking questions and saying, what is going on there?

What is the meaning of this? Why do these people have this impact? Why can they announce the message that they have with such authority? Who is summoning us? Who is asking us questions? And if nobody is asking us questions, then we should, at the very least, ask ourselves, why is this? Why is nobody taking note of the lives of the followers of Jesus in this city?

So this was the man who they had the opportunity to present the message to, the proconsul. And how do they do so? How do Paul and Barnabas present their message to this man, to this one-man audience, Sergius Paulus?

[24 : 15] Well, the manner of presentation moves from proclamation in the synagogues to what we, I think, can reasonably presume was the means of dialogue or debate.

It's no less authoritative of that, let's be very clear, the manner of presentation doesn't in and of itself make anything more or less authoritative.

The fact that they're not proclaiming or preaching, but rather in a debate or a dialogue, they still engage in that debate with authority.

But the approach is different. Sergius Paulus, we're told, is an intelligent man. No doubt he had many questions of Paul and Barnabas. He had many concerns as to the content of their message, maybe intellectual difficulties with what they were saying as they spoke of the resurrection. No doubt he'd have said, well, what's that all about? And, well, we could speculate as to the multiplicity of questions that this man might have had. He came to the matter with his own worldview, with his own philosophical understanding or framework.

[25 : 24] And so, there is this conversation, this dialogue, this debate between the missionaries and this intelligent man, Sergius Paulus, a well-read man, a man who had much to say and many questions to pose.

The manner necessarily was going to be different. And there is a lesson there for us too. We, today, very particularly, in a day when so many different views and philosophies are held, we need to be able and we need to be prepared to enter into debate and dialogue with others.

We must be familiar with the views that others hold. We must seek to be in a position to answer the questions that they might pose to us. We need to be well-read as to what the competition is writing and be familiar with that in order to engage with it and, indeed, where necessary, demonstrate the fallacy of competing arguments.

All of this is important. Most importantly, of course, is that we should know our own message well and thoroughly, that we might be able to present it convincingly and cogently.

Certainly, we can be sure that that was true of Paul and Barnabas. And what is the result of this encounter? What is the result of this declaring the good news in this particular way?

[26 : 50] Well, we're told in verse 12, the final outcome concerning Sergius Paulus. When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, but he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord.

Now, in a moment, we'll come back to that just very briefly, but simply to make the point that he believed. This is the response. He was brought to faith. He was converted.

But then there's the third man we want to just think about briefly that Paul and Barnabas have an encounter with, and it is this magician or sorcerer, Bar-Jesus or Elemas, who is introduced to us in

this passage.

He was, or is described as a magician. His powers, such as they were, perhaps an unholy cocktail of occult practices and simply con-tricks.

Paul speaks of his deceit and trickery, suggesting that perhaps much of what he did was really not even laying hold of occult powers, though real powers, but simply he was a con-artist.

[27 : 55] He had tricks up his sleeve with which he could impress and give the impression of being a very powerful man. Well, he was certainly opposed to Paul and Barnabas, you might say on principle, but also more importantly for reasons of self-interest.

If Sergius Paulus were to believe, if Sergius Paulus were to buy into the message that Paul and Barnabas are bringing, then there would be no job anymore for Bar-Jesus, for Elemas, and he sees that his position is in threat, so he opposes the missionaries.

We have here not the apathy of the Jews, as it would seem, not the curiosity, at least to begin with, of Sergius Paulus, but we have here in your face hostility of elements, and we find him deliberately sabotaging the evangelistic message being presented to the pro-consul.

As we read there, he opposed them and tried to turn the pro-consul from the faith. And as we fast forward to our own day, we ought to be aware that where the disciples of Jesus are applying their trade as fishers of men, where God is pleased to own and to bless those efforts, there will be necessarily opposition and hostility, and sometimes from the most unlikely places.

Some might say, well, surely not magicians today in 21st century Scotland. Well, maybe or maybe not. But the bottom line is that Elemas was opposed to the truth, and there is plenty who fall into that category today who will and who do oppose the gospel.

[29 : 45] What is the manner in which Paul deals with this man? How does he present his message to him? And there is a message for Elemas. It's not the same message, but there is a message.

I might even be so bold as to suggest a gospel message for this enemy, for Elemas. What does Paul do where we're told that he rebukes him? In verse 9, we read, then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elemas and said, you are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right.

And he goes on and finishes his rebuke with a question, will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord? He rebukes Elemas.

It's not a fit of pique, but a spirit-inspired rebuke. This man, far from being as his name, meant a son of salvation. He was a son of the devil.

He is a peddler of lies, and his purpose is to frustrate God's purposes. And for this he is rightly rebuked, and not only rebuked, but judged and punished.

[30 : 51] Verse 11, 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. And we surely conclude, well, there's no hope for this man.

He's such an evil man, such a wicked man, deliberately opposing the missionaries who bring the good news concerning Jesus. What hope for this man? No hope, surely.

Quite the contrary. There are, I think, very clearly hints of hope that taken together point to a gracious door of opportunity being opened even for elements.

Notice that in the rebuke, Paul addresses a question to elements. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord?

Now that may be a way of simply condemning him for doing what he is doing, but might there not be imposing it as a question, an opportunity being given to him for him to consider and to say, well, perhaps I won't always do this.

[31 : 56] Perhaps I could stop doing what I am currently doing. Is there not an opportunity being given to him even in the manner in which he is rebuked? Indeed, even the judgment that he is subject to, this physical blindness.

Does that physical blindness not actually constitute a vivid message that could serve, it may not have done so, but that could have served to demonstrate to Elemas his own spiritual blindness. At the very least, this judgment, this punishment from God would puncture his pomposity, which is never a bad thing to be brought down and to be humble from a place of pride where this man was. And then also we are told that the blindness to which he was subject was for a time, very explicitly. You will be unable to see the light of the sun for a time.

And again, there is a hint of hope there. There is a suggestion of opportunity, of grace, an opportunity to repent even for this man. What was the result?

[33 : 06] Did he repent? Well, there is no indication that he did so, no indication that the opportunity was seized. We might say, well, nothing was gained then.

Nothing was gained from this rebuking and condemning and judging of this man. Well, far from it. The means that used, sorry, the means used by God in the conversion of the proconsul was, we are told, the combined effect of what he heard, amazed at the teaching, and what he saw, the rebuke and the subsequent blindness of Elnas.

And so, even though Elnas himself, chose not to seize the opportunity given, the judgment upon him was used by God to impress and to draw Sergius Paulus to faith.

And so, doing the right thing on the part of Saul, rebuking this evil man, and with the authority of God bringing judgment upon him, solemn though it was, was in God's providence used to draw another man to faith in Jesus Christ.

And, in this matter too, there are lessons for us. Though they may seem not so obvious, we would shy away from the manner in which Paul, as an apostle, exercises this authority.

[34 : 29] And yet, there are lessons, because we, as the church of Jesus Christ, will today face enemies. And perhaps, in the days that lie ahead, there will be more and more of the in-your-face variety, very upfront and deliberate and hostile enemies.

And we need the discernment that combines the robust rebuking of that which is evil, while at the same time, keeping open the door of opportunity for repentance.

Whether it is seized or whether it is ignored, that is beyond our responsibility. So, this first leg of this first missionary journey in Cyprus, very different audiences, very different backgrounds.

The Jews, the very important Roman official, this Jewish magician, very, very different people, very different ways of thinking. And quite rightly, on the part of the missionaries, very different methods of approaching and encountering these different audiences.

the unifying element is that there is one message and one same Holy Spirit who is directing them and enabling them to do the work that they have been called to do.

[35 : 50] Well, let us learn then from these missionaries as we would seek to be faithful to the calling that is placed upon us to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to this city and to our land and indeed beyond.

Let us pray.