
Light for the Nations

DAVE BAST

Have you ever noticed visitors in your church who were, well, different? Maybe from a different place; maybe spoke a different language; maybe of a different race or social background. How did their presence make you feel? Were you excited to see them there, or perhaps wondering who they were or what had brought them to your church? Or maybe feeling just a little nervous? Now imagine that the very next Sunday, these same visitors had not only returned, but had brought all their relatives and friends; so many that they outnumbered your own congregation. That could ratchet up the nervousness, couldn't it? It could also stir great excitement if you thought that God was at work doing something new in your church. Well, this is not just an imaginary story. It is exactly what happened one day in a city where the Apostle Paul was preaching, and we will look at that story today on *Groundwork*. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and now we have come to the third program in a six-part series, Scott, on the season of Epiphany. It is not the most commonly celebrated season in the Church year, but it is a wonderful time; and epiphany means manifestation or revelation. The idea being that Jesus is the light of the whole world and when he came into the world at Christmas in the incarnation, and then grew and began his public ministry, the light began to shine and to spread out from Jesus outward to the nations.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and so mostly in this series...we started, actually, in Matthew with the visit of the Magi, kind of the early indication that the Gospel was going to reach far and wide beyond Jerusalem and Judea; but mostly we are in the book of Acts. One of the things we have been seeing in this series already, Dave, and we will see it again on this program and kind of in a followup on the next program...you know, in Galatians after Paul gives the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians Chapter 5, at one point he says to the Galatians: Keep step with the Spirit...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I wonder if he was thinking about the experience with the apostles in the early Church, because the Holy Spirit is always about ten steps ahead of them, and the apostles are running as fast as they can to catch up to what the Spirit is doing next; and so we saw also in a previous program that ironically what launched the mission to the wider world was persecution. The apostles and everybody else had stayed kind of huddled in Jerusalem, but it was persecution that made people scatter and flee; but guess what? The Spirit used that too because they took the Gospel with them.

DAVE BAST

Exactly; and we are also, in this series, following roughly the outline of the book of Acts...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, right.

DAVE BAST

As Luke gives it, quoting the words of Jesus just before his ascension: Acts 1:8, where Jesus says to his disciples: I want you to wait for the power of the Spirit to come upon you. That is the idea of we are marching to the Spirit's orders; but then Jesus adds: You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and out to the ends of the earth. So, we actually looked in our last program at how the Gospel came in Acts Chapter 8 to Judea and Samaria, and as the first Christians were scattered by the persecution that broke out under Saul of Tarsus after the death of Stephen, they came to Samaria and they actually...there is a wonderful story that we also looked at of Philip witnessing to the Ethiopian eunuch. So, we see just these first beginning steps of the Gospel going out.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it is going to keep building in momentum; and so let's go to Acts Chapter 11, actually—Acts 11, starting at the 19th verse, and we read this:

Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, spreading the Word only among Jews. ²⁰Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the Good News about the Lord Jesus. ²¹And the Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord; ²²and news of this reached the Church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.

DAVE BAST

²³When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. ²⁴He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord. ²⁵Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, ²⁶and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year, Barnabas and Saul met with the Church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.

So, this wonderful story... We can almost...if you can visualize the map of Israel and Palestine and that region—the eastern end of the Mediterranean—it is as though the Christians are flowing to the north. So, they are driven out by persecution, but they do not just stop in Samaria and Judea, the regions right around Jerusalem, they keep going and some of them hit the island of Cyprus, just offshore of Lebanon. Others are in Lebanon—Phoenicia—and they get as far as the great city of Antioch in Syria.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and as they go we were introduced to this person, Barnabas, who is a good person, one of the early evangelists and missionaries, and he has apparently...according to Acts 11, what we just read...he has apparently heard about Saul of Tarsus, who in Acts 9, in a story we have looked at before on *Groundwork* ...it is one of the landmark stories of the whole Bible—the conversion of Saul on the Damascus Road—and apparently Barnabas must have heard about that because he goes to Saul's hometown. Now, Saul was not in his hometown when he came to believe in Jesus, but he must have gone home now. So, Barnabas knows that Saul is from Tarsus, so he goes and looks him up and says: We have work to do. It is interesting, we are not sure what Saul/Paul was doing in between there, but Barnabas collects him and they go to Antioch. People are incredibly responsive to the Gospel.

DAVE BAST

Yes, it is almost as though what happened after Pentecost—beginning on Pentecost Day in Jerusalem, is now being repeated in Antioch; and you are right, Scott. We would love to know more about those silent years

when Paul was studying. There are little clues here and there in the New Testament. There is a hint that maybe Barnabas had known Paul before and had introduced him to the other apostles in Jerusalem, but somehow Saul has been gone. He has been studying, he has been meditating...I don't know...digging into the scriptures himself...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

So when Barnabas brings him to Antioch, suddenly a new team is formed and the Church has new leadership; and something else that we are told here...another point of interest is that in Antioch for the very first time the disciples were called Christians, and it was as a result of this really revolutionary, groundbreaking act that some of them undertook...we are not even told who...these are just anonymous followers of Jesus...they started sharing the Gospel directly with gentiles; because up to this point, almost all of that evangelistic activity that had gone on was among Jews, by Jewish Christians reaching out to their fellow Jews. Here they take the decisive step in a gentile city of speaking to gentiles.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so they become known as Christians or little Christs—the followers of the Anointed One—*Mashiach* in Hebrew—Christos in Greek—the Anointed One—the Messiah. So these people of this new movement are the followers of that particular Christ. So, in Antioch they are reaching out to gentiles in a much more significant way than has happened. The term *Christian* is coined; and well, to put it mildly, it stuck all these millennia later...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And then something more keeps happening as we move into Acts 13.

DAVE BAST

¹Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen who had been brought with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. ²While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” ³So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off. So how would you like that in your church?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, there you go. Again, they are trying to keep up with what the Holy Spirit is doing. The church is growing and flourishing. They are having a prayer meeting. God lays a special anointing on those two, and so the church is being obedient to the leading of the Spirit, and that Spirit is going to lead them to another new venture, and we will take a look at that in just a moment.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and we are following along here in the book of Acts, Paul and Barnabas, a new team, and as we just saw, a new team divinely singled out. Somehow they discerned that God was laying his hands on Paul, the former persecutor of the Church, and Barnabas; and so they get going and they set sail to Cyprus.

DAVE BAST

Yes, which is not coincidental, I think, because Barnabas was from Cyprus. We are told that earlier in the book of Acts; so, I just still can hardly believe that this church in Antioch was so responsive to the Spirit. As you mentioned, Scott, they are keeping in step where the Spirit is leading them; and you know, we do not know how the Spirit conveyed that message...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

But Barnabas and Saul or Paul now, we will call him, were their pastors. They were the leaders of the team, and great things were happening, and you can just imagine...I can at least, people saying: Are you crazy? You cannot leave. We have a half-million people in this city. This is one of the great urban centers of the ancient world, and yet we are supposed to send you off, and so they did.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

They felt that God was telling them to do this.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; so, somebody once called Paul the Johnny Appleseed of the early Church. He kept moving and he kept planting churches every place he went, and this is going to become a pattern for Paul in particular. Barnabas will be with him a lot of the time, maybe not all of the time; but you know, we talk about, and sometimes in the back of certain Bibles you have the missionary journeys of Paul mapped out for you: the first and the second and the third, and so forth; so this is really kind of the first one...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Where they are heading out to a different part of the world.

DAVE BAST

So, they start on the island of Cyprus, and according to Acts Paul and Barnabas walked the whole length of that island. It is about a hundred miles long, and preaching as they went, and then from there they sailed due north—almost straight north—and landed on the southern coast of what today is Turkey, at a place called Perga. You can still see the ruins of it today if you visit that part of Turkey, and shortly thereafter, they moved inland, even though there were great cities along the coast, they go up maybe a hundred miles further into the interior, and if you have read the letter of Paul to the Galatians, which is addressed to this part of the Church, it may have been because of medical reasons, that Paul was suffering on the coast, so they went to a part of the country that was more healthy.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Paul will refer to his “thorn in the flesh”. It could have been a recurring illness. Some have speculated that it was some form of malaria. We do not know, but that certainly was often a factor in what they did; but at any rate, Paul and Barnabas arrive now in this strange city. They do not know anybody, nobody really knows them as near as we can tell; so when you are in a strange city and you are a believer in the Messiah of God, where is the first place you go, well you go to someplace familiar, you go to a synagogue.

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly; and Paul being a trained rabbi would have been qualified to preach. It was customary for distinguished visitors like that. Incidentally, it is a little bit confusing because the city where they first landed in the interior there was also called Antioch...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

So, Acts calls it Antioch of Pisidia, or Pisidian Antioch to distinguish it from the larger Antioch—more famous Antioch—where they had started from; but Paul goes to the synagogue with Barnabas and he is invited to preach, and so he gets up and basically launches into a sermon, which would have been very familiar to the Jewish members of that synagogue, on the history of Israel.

So, he starts out this way:

²⁶Fellow children of Abraham, and you God-fearing gentiles, it is to us that this message of salvation has been sent. ³²We tell you the good news, what God promised our ancestors, ³³he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus.

SCOTT HOEZEE

³⁸Therefore my friends, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you.

³⁹Through him everyone who believes is set free from every sin, a justification you were not able to obtain under the Law of Moses. (And then a little bit later) ⁴²As Paul and Barnabas were leaving the synagogue, the people invited them to speak further about these things the next Sabbath. ⁴³When the congregation was dismissed, many of the Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who talked with them and urged them to continue in the grace of God.

DAVE BAST

So, there is a really significant introduction there, Scott; and maybe we should go back and highlight that, because when Paul begins his sermon in the synagogue of Pisidian Antioch, he addresses himself to “fellow children of Abraham”, number one—to the Jews in the audience; and “you God-fearing gentiles”; and that was a special kind of person, wasn’t it?

SCOTT HOEZEE

To a degree...we do not know a lot about them—we do know...even, you know, you go back to the Gospels and so forth...we do know that in the Temple in Jerusalem there was an outer court called the Gentile Court; in fact, we think that is where the merchants were who Jesus drove out of the Temple in the Gospels, because he wanted to make room for non-Jews to come and pray to God; so there is this tradition of God-fearing gentiles. They really had not converted to Judaism, but they did seem to believe in the same God as the Jews; and so now Paul is kind of lumping them all together, saying: Look, this Jesus, who we believe is the promised Messiah, is for all of you. He is the one we Jews have been waiting for. He is the Son of the one you God-fearing gentiles have been praying for, and through him...and this cannot possibly be the sermon they thought they were going to get at a Jewish synagogue...through him you are going to get the forgiveness of sins you never could get through Moses. Now, if you were a Jew who was raised to revere Moses and Torah and the Law, this might have rankled some people to say: Look, Moses could not bring salvation. Only Jesus does—the Messiah of God.

DAVE BAST

So, all this longing and longing and longing for the coming of the Messiah and the conviction that when the Messiah finally arrived he would bring all the blessings and benefits of salvation and forgiveness, and then the gentiles would flow into Jerusalem and worship also the God of Israel. Paul kind of stands that on its head in a way by saying: You know what? This crucified one God raised from the dead and it has already begun. It is already happening. Salvation has arrived, and you can just believe and take it to the bank, that the

average Jewish listener to this would have said: Really? And the average gentile God-fearer would have said: Hey, hooray! That is good news for me.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; the contagion of Paul's enthusiasm for this Jesus, who was raised from the dead, and who brings us a justification and the forgiveness of sins, that message caught on, as it tends to do all through Acts; and so by the time they leave the synagogue that day, they say: We would like you to be the guest preacher again next Sabbath. Can you come back next week? And they agree and they will do that; and so before wrap up this episode, we are going to see what happened a week later.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*; and we just saw how Paul preached this sermon in the synagogue. The whole congregation was stirred up; Jews had many questions, gentiles also questioning, and they together kind of mobbed Paul afterwards. So, we pick up the story now one week later on the following Sabbath day.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We are still in Acts 13 here.

DAVE BAST

Still in Acts 13.

⁴⁴On the next Sabbath, almost the whole city gathered to hear the Word of the Lord. ⁴⁵When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy. They began to contradict what Paul was saying, and heaped abuse on him. ^{46a}Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly...

SCOTT HOEZEE

^{46b}"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. ⁴⁷For 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.'" ⁴⁸When the gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the Word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed. So, here you have, Dave... We noted some real momentum the previous Sabbath, and now we are told the whole city is showing up, and you know what happens—and this happens all the time—when somebody really seems to be successful immediately others are envious, jealous; and here the Jews say: Wait a minute; this message about this Jesus that we are not even quite sure about—we are not quite convinced that he is the Messiah—it is attracting more crowds than we ever get at this synagogue with our own regular message about Moses; and so they do not like it. So now we start to see for the first time some real push-back against Paul, and it will not be the last time, as we well know. They heap abuse on him—verbal abuse, we assume—but eventually, as Paul's ministry continues, we know he will get plenty of physical abuse, and imprisonment. So now we are starting to see that resistance to the Gospel.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and actually if you take the story further and look down the road, he will go to a whole string of cities along the main Roman Road here in southern Asia Minor, and at each point, basically, he is going to either get run out of town or beaten up or stoned, left for dead; and generally speaking, it comes from his fellow Jews, who are offended by the message offering salvation in Christ to one and all—to gentile as well as Jew; and you know, before we get too critical and down on the members of this synagogue, just try to imagine what would happen in *your* church if a totally different ethnic group or a different race or a different social class, or even a different age group, you know... Suddenly the sanctuary is filled with young people, and you are sitting there saying: Whoa, wait a minute. What are they going to do? They are going to change the order of worship. They are going to turn the music around, and I don't like that. So, you can kind of sympathize with them, I think.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Sure; it is a story as old as humanity probably, and certainly in terms of the Church, it is a story as old as the Church because we are in the earliest days of the Church here, and we recognize that when new people come in things will change. That is not just an exaggerated fear. They may not change hugely, although sometimes they may; but when we incorporate people who had not previously been incorporated, they are going to bring new traditions, new customs, new music, new ideas; and then the question becomes: How do we react to that?

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

If we are sure it is the Holy Spirit doing it, well, of course we had best follow along, but we are not always so easily convinced, either, that this is of the Spirit.

DAVE BAST

Right; well, you know, are you threatened by this or do you see it as an exciting opportunity where God may be doing something new—something new in your church—something new for *the* Church, broadly speaking. Paul does not just see the circumstances pointing to his reaching out to gentiles. He sees it rooted in scripture, and specifically in the prophecies of the Old Testament; so, in this sermon at the end he quotes from Isaiah 49:6, which is one of the Servant Songs in Isaiah. “It is too small a thing that you should be my servant, only to reach the House of Jacob and Israel. I will make you a light for the nations—for the gentiles—that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, and so Paul is appropriating that now to himself. He even changes the passage a little bit, but he is appropriating that to himself and to the fellow apostles, actually, who are going to go out into all the world; and interestingly, Paul says here to the Jews who are opposing him: Look, I am telling you, this Jesus is your Messiah. This is the one you have been waiting for. You are rejecting it; so, enough with you then. We are going to go to the gentiles. You are making it inevitable that the message is going to be globalized because you are not accepting it, so we are going to preach to people who will accept it. So Paul, who will agonize...we will talk about this...he will agonize eventually about his own people, the Jews...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And what their rejection of Jesus might mean in the long run; but in the short term, he is saying: Look, we are going to bring the message to the people who are going to believe, and at this point that is going to be people all over the place way outside of the House of Israel.

DAVE BAST

I remember reading several years ago an article by the Christian writer Philip Yancey, the very fine writer, about his experiences traveling the world and seeing where the Church was growing and coming alive in unusual places, and he called his article: *God Goes Where He is Wanted*, and I think we see exactly that happening here. These gentile God-fearers really wanted God. They were dissatisfied with the pagan gods of Greece and Rome, and their immorality and their shenanigans. They were drawn to the God of Israel in his holiness and mercy and grace; and yet, they were not Jews, so what was their hope? And the Gospel came to them full of life and hope. It really was a light to those gentiles; and so they turned to Christ in great numbers; and Paul says this is all God’s plan. It does not mean that the Jews are excluded. They are still God’s beloved...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

But it means the gentiles are included, and that is the message we have for the world.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That we too are a light to all the nations to bring salvation to the ends of the earth. That is the mission of God; thanks be to God we get to participate in it.

DAVE BAST

Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Dave Bast with Scott Hoezee, and we hope you will join us again next time as we study Acts Chapter 15, another pivotal event, to learn how the first believers discern God's will even as they encounter growing pains. So connect with us at groundworkonline.com to let us know what scripture you would like us to dig into on *Groundwork*.

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