

The Historical Stories of the Acts of the Apostles

Lesson 8 Acts 11:18 – Acts 13:12

The world had waited for a Savior, and now the testimony of His saving grace was available to all the nations of the world without restriction. However, Christians of Jewish descent failed to understand that the Lord had died for all mankind, not just them. They struggled to free themselves from the traditions of the rabbis who had taken the Jewish faith far from the love of God. Peter, obedient to the Lord, takes the message to the centurion's home and every Gentile there accepts the Lord.

During Peter's interrogation back in Jerusalem, the Jewish believers are disturbed that the Gentiles are now part of the church. However, the fact that the Jews accept the Gentiles into the church does not mean that they will actively recruit them for the Lord.

Jewish believers recruit only Jews

Acts 11:¹⁹ So then those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose in connection with Stephen made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except to Jews alone. ²⁰ But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and *began* speaking to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus. ²¹ And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord. ²² And the news about them reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas off to Antioch. ²³ Then when he had come and witnessed the grace of God, he rejoiced and *began* to encourage them all with resolute heart to remain *true* to the Lord; ²⁴ for he was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And considerable numbers were brought to the Lord.

The Jewish Christians are jealous of their faith and share it only with other Jews. However, the proselyte Christian Jews¹³⁴ share the Lord with other Gentiles who need the Lord. The church in Antioch grows in number, making it the largest single church in the faith. Word returns to Jerusalem and Barnabas is chosen to investigate the membership. Barnabas is well-respected by the apostles and is responsible for the introduction of Saul at his first visit to Jerusalem after his conversion. Barnabas finds nothing wrong with the church and gives it his blessing.

THE BOOK OF JAMES

It is at this point that James writes his letter to the church which consists mainly of Jewish believers and proselytes to Judaism. They have all heard what Peter has done with Cornelius, and their gossiping tongues bring sin into the church. They think they are practicing their true religion, but they are not controlling their tongues. James says, "If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless."¹³⁵ It is James' attempt to

¹³⁴ Proselyte Christian Jews were Gentiles who had embraced Judaism and become converts. Upon hearing the gospel of the Lord, beginning on the Day of Pentecost, many of these Jewish Proselytes accepted the Lord and became Christians.

¹³⁵ James 1:26

correct the attitudes of the church scattered abroad. It is the first letter that is considered true Scripture and included in the New Testament.¹³⁶

Barnabas looks for Saul

25 And he left for Tarsus to look for Saul; **26** and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. And it came about that for an entire year they met with the church, and taught considerable numbers; and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.

Antioch is three hundred and seventy miles north of Jerusalem, and, by this time in the story, it has replaced Damascus as the chief city of the Roman Empire east of Rome. Damascus is no longer under the power of Rome but is in the hands of Aretus, King of Arabia. Antioch is one hundred and forty miles from Tarsus from where Barnabas returns with Saul. For a full year, Barnabas and Saul teach in the churches.

The people in Antioch are not thrilled with all the Christian activity in the town. In verse 26, the believers are called "Christian" for the first time by non-believers who are using it sarcastically, not as a term of endearment.

The first prophecy of Agabus – an offering taken for Judea

Acts 11:27 Now at this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. **28** And one of them named Agabus stood up and *began* to indicate by the Spirit that there would certainly be a great famine all over the world. And this took place in the *reign* of Claudius. **29** And in the proportion that any of the disciples had means, each of them determined to send a *contribution* for the relief of the brethren living in Judea. **30** And this they did, sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the elders.

Barnabas and Saul are speaking to the churches when Agabus arrives in Antioch and prophesies the coming of the great famine which then occurs during the reign of Claudius. We are not sure when Agabus makes this prophecy; however, we do know when Claudius reigned. He took the throne after the death of Caligula in AD 41, and he reigned until he was poisoned in AD 54. In expectation of the famine, the churches take an offering and send it to Judea with Barnabas and Saul. The famine occurs in the fifth through the seventh years of Claudius' reign, or AD 45 – 47.¹³⁷ AD 45 was the worst of the years. Peter and James are the only apostles left in Jerusalem and James is in jail at the hands of Herod. Peter will soon be persecuted by Herod and put in jail.

James put to death at the hands of Herod

Acts 12:1 Now about that time Herod the king laid hands on some who belonged to the church, in order to mistreat them. **2** And he had James the brother of John put to death with a sword.

Herod died in AD 44, so the death of James was in that same year or earlier. It is safe to say that James is killed in the later part of AD 43 or the early part of AD 44. The famine has not kicked in yet, so Agabus must have prophesied the doom in AD

¹³⁶ James is the half brother of Jesus who became a believer after Calvary.

¹³⁷ Eusebius 2:12

42 or 43. The years roll on until AD 45 when Barnabas and Saul deliver the offering to Judea.

The arrest of Peter and his miraculous release

3And when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. Now it was during the days of Unleavened Bread. **4**And when he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out before the people. **5**So Peter was kept in the prison, but prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God. **6**And on the very night when Herod was about to bring him forward, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains; and guards in front of the door were watching over the prison. **7**And behold, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared, and a light shone in the cell; and he struck Peter's side and roused him, saying, "Get up quickly." And his chains fell off his hands. **8**And the angel said to him, "Gird yourself and put on your sandals." And he did so. And he said to him, "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me." **9**And he went out and continued to follow, and he did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. **10**And when they had passed the first and second guard, they came to the iron gate that leads into the city, which opened for them by itself; and they went out and went along one street; and immediately the angel departed from him. **11**And when Peter came to himself, he said, "Now I know for sure that the Lord has sent forth His angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting." **12**And when he realized *this*, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John who was also called Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying. **13**And when he knocked at the door of the gate, a servant-girl named Rhoda came to answer. **14**And when she recognized Peter's voice, because of her joy she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter was standing in front of the gate. **15**And they said to her, "You are out of your mind!" But she kept insisting that it was so. And they kept saying, "It is his angel." **16**But Peter continued knocking; and when they had opened *the door*, they saw him and were amazed. **17**But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had led him out of the prison. And he said, "Report these things to James and the brethren." And he departed and went to another place.

With the death of James, Agrippa gains favor with the Jews and seizes the opportunity to increase that favor by arresting Peter. It is spring, just before Passover, and the arrest of Peter greatly encourages the Jews who want Christianity destroyed. The Passover season lasts eight days and the strictest rabbis consider it an abomination to kill someone during the season. Agrippa knows it and refrains from killing Peter until the season was over. The story is straight-forward, presenting the miraculous release of Peter from jail where he was guarded by 16 men.¹³⁸ The release occurs on the night before Herod Agrippa plans to kill Peter. During some time between the regular changing of the guards, 3:00 AM and 6:00 AM, the angel awakens Peter and leads him through the gates and past the guards.

¹³⁸ A squad consisted of four men. Four squads consisted of sixteen men.

Peter makes his way to John Mark's house where many of the church members are praying for his release. Rhoda, the servant girl, is so excited at his presence that she doesn't even unlock the door to let him in. The church cannot believe Rhoda's report and they all run outside in excitement. Peter has to keep them quiet so they do not draw the attention of the night-watchman who would have sounded the alarm causing Peter to be taken back to jail along with the rest of the household for disturbing the peace. Peter has no intention of staying at John Mark's house; he just stops by to let them know their prayers were answered. He asks them to tell James about his release. We must not confuse him with James the brother of John whom Herod Agrippa had killed just a few days before. Peter is speaking of James, the half-brother of Jesus who became a believer after Calvary and is now at the church in Jerusalem as its pastor.

The execution of the guards and Peter goes to Caesarea

Acts 12:¹⁸ Now when day came, there was no small disturbance among the soldiers as to what could have become of Peter. ¹⁹ And when Herod had searched for him and had not found him, he examined the guards and ordered that they be led away to execution. And he went down from Judea to Caesarea and was spending time there.

Peter's miraculous release from jail brought about the death of sixteen men because they could not justify or explain Peter's escape. Herod's death sentence upon the jailers was not out of the ordinary. It was the standard custom when prisoners escaped. Leaving Jerusalem, Herod then travels to Caesarea.

The death of Herod

Acts 12:²⁰ Now he was very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon; and with one accord they came to him, and having won over Blastus the king's chamberlain, they were asking for peace, because their country was fed by the king's country. ²¹ And on an appointed day Herod, having put on his royal apparel, took his seat on the rostrum and began delivering an address to them. ²² And the people kept crying out, "The voice of a god and not of a man!" ²³ And immediately an angel of the Lord struck him because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and died.

Herod is in Caesarea to enjoy the games that are held in honor of Claudius Caesar. To the north of Caesarea are the towns of Tyre and Sidon which are located in the country of Syria and are controlled by King Aretas of Arabia. The two kings are constantly at odds with each other because Herod Agrippa has cut off the food supply to the two cities. People from Tyre and Sidon have heard of Herod's presence in Caesarea and come to beg for his help. They are able to win the sympathy of Blastus, the servant who protects and oversees Herod's sleeping quarters. Winning his support encourages them to attempt to win over Herod when he speaks at the national games. They call him a god and he does not deny it. When he does not give glory to God, the Lord strikes him dead. In horror they see the king fall to the ground, taken to his chamber and eaten by worms from the inside out over the next five days.¹³⁹ The death of Herod occurs in AD 44 just shortly after the Passover season is completed.

¹³⁹ Record of Flavius Josephus – Now when Agrippa had reigned three years over all Judea, he came to the city Caesarea, ... and there he exhibited shows in honor of Caesar, upon his being informed that there was a certain festival celebrated to make vows for his safety. ... On the second day of which shows he put on a

Barnabas and Saul's return to Antioch

Acts 12:24 But the word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied.

Acts 12:25 And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had fulfilled their mission, taking along with *them* John, who was also called Mark.

Acts 13:1 Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was *there*, prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. **2** And while they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." **3** Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.

Barnabas and Saul have successfully delivered the offering to the churches in Judea and, as they make their way back to Antioch, they pick up John Mark. In Antioch, the continued ministry of Barnabas and Saul is put on hold during the funeral days of Herod Agrippa.¹⁴⁰ One of the facets of Egyptian mourning was never discarded when Israel left that country. In Egypt, at the death of a national figure, thirty days of fasting ensued. Later when a Jewish king died, the nation mourned for thirty days. No one traveled, shaved, cut his hair, attended parties or any other type of celebration during those days; the nation came to a standstill. The custom continues with the Jews even after the Lord asks them to do away with it.¹⁴¹ After the national time of mourning is over, the church leaders commission Barnabas, Saul and John Mark for their missionary journey and they leave.

Saul becomes Paul and the ministry at Paphos- first missionary journey begins

Acts 13:4 So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus. **5** And when they reached Salamis, they *began* to proclaim the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews; and they also

garment made wholly of silver, and of a contexture truly wonderful, and came into the theater early in the morning; at which time the silver of his garment being illuminated by the fresh reflection of the sun's rays upon it, shone out after a surprising manner, and was so resplendent as to spread a horror over those that looked intently upon him; and presently his flatterers cried out, one from one place, and another from another, (though not for his good,) that he was a god; and they added, "Be thou merciful to us; for although we have hitherto reverenced thee only as a man, yet shall we henceforth own thee as superior to mortal nature." Upon this the king did neither rebuke them, nor reject their impious flattery. ... A severe pain also arose in his belly, and began in a most violent manner. He therefore looked upon his friends, and said, "I, whom you call a god, am commanded presently to depart this life; while Providence thus reproves the lying words you just now said to me; and I, who was by you called immortal, am immediately to be hurried away by death. But I am bound to accept of what Providence allots, as it pleases God; for we have by no means lived ill, but in a splendid and happy manner." When he said this, his pain was become violent.

Accordingly he was carried into the palace, and the rumor went abroad everywhere, that he would certainly die in a little time. But the multitude presently sat in sackcloth, with their wives and children, after the law of their country, and besought God for the king's recovery. All places were also full of mourning and lamentation. Now the king rested in a high chamber, and as he saw them below lying prostrate on the ground, he could not himself forbear weeping. And when he had been quite worn out by the pain in his belly for five days, he departed this life, being in the fifty-fourth year of his age, and in the seventh year of his reign. *Ant. XIX.* 8, 2

¹⁴⁰ Herod Agrippa's birth name was Marcus Julius Agrippa.

¹⁴¹ Zechariah 8:19

had John as their helper. ⁶And when they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they found a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet whose name was Bar-Jesus, ⁷who was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence. This man summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. ⁸But Elymas the magician (for thus his name is translated) was opposing them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith. ⁹But Saul, who was also known as Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, fixed his gaze upon him, ¹⁰and said, "You who are full of all deceit and fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease to make crooked the straight ways of the Lord? ¹¹"And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and not see the sun for a time." And immediately a mist and a darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking those who would lead him by the hand. ¹²Then the proconsul believed when he saw what had happened, being amazed at the teaching of the Lord.

First Missionary Journey – AD 44

Departure	Arrival	Miles	Via
Antioch	Seleucia	20	land
Seleucia	Cyprus/Salamis	150	water
Cyprus/Salamis	Paphos	80	land

Cyprus is the home of Barnabas and Salamis is a town on the island where the team proclaims the gospel in the synagogues. Paphos is also a town on the island where the team meets up with a magician. We cannot miss how careful Luke is to make sure we know that Paul has the same experiences Peter had in his journeys. This magician's name is Bar-Jesus or son of Jesus. His professional name is Elymas. Sorcerers like Elymas hold great power over the uneducated Jews of Cyprus. He is a false prophet of the Jews and intends to turn the heart of the Roman official away from the gospel. The team is in the official's home by invitation, but the magician continues to interfere. The more the team speaks to the official, the more the magician interferes. Here we see the power of the Lord swell within Paul. The Holy Spirit directs him to speak and handle the situation, and he obeys. At that moment, Paul becomes the undisputed leader of the team.