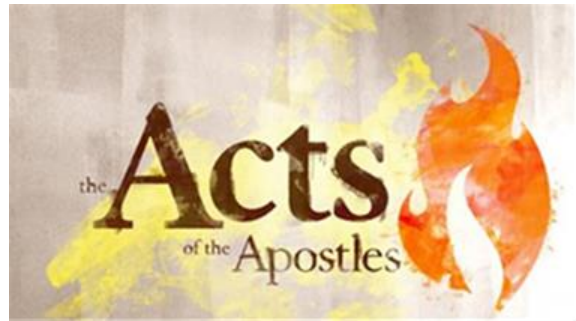


ACTS: THE STORY OF THE CHURCH – PART 14

Wizards, Magicians and The Gospel

Acts 13

Paul and Barnabas were in Antioch. This follows the whole Herod-eaten by worms thing, which was precipitated by his soaking in the adulation from the crowd from Tyre and Sidon who shouted, “these are the words of a god.” They were not, and neither was Herod after being smitten by an angel. One very Bad Apple out of the way but the persecution was certainly ramping up.



Luke tells us that in Antioch there were several prophets and teachers of the Word (note *word* rather than Law; the Jesus movement was in full motion). He lists them as Barnabas, Simeon from Niger, Lucius from Libya, Manaen and Saul/Paul. During a time of worship, prayer and fasting the assembly was moved by the Spirit to tap Paul and Barnabas for special assignment. After a bit more fasting and prayer they laid hands on them and sent them off. Think of the modern-day ordination process.

This was the beginning of the many missionary trips Paul undertook. He, Barnabas and John Mark set off for Seleucia where they boarded a ship headed to Cyprus. As soon as they came ashore, they sought out the synagogues and began preaching and teaching about Jesus the Messiah. Across the island they sought to do the same thing but encountered a sorcerer, or magician, named Elymas or Bar-Jesus (son of God).

In the Greco-Roman era philosophers, teachers and magicians were all the rage. A person could find a city and set up shop and the very good ones did quite well. Apparently Elymas/Bar-Jesus was good at his craft as he was a key adviser to the regional Roman Governor Sergius-Paulus. It's good to note that all religions have focused on the mystical, supernatural side of existence, even Jews (there are Jewish, Christian and Islamic mystics still today). It was widely held that anyone who sought a lead role in the Roman Empire should immerse themselves in the magical arts. Sergius-

Paulus, said to be an intelligent and wise man, is an example of the dependence on the mystical elements of life.

The Governor requested a meeting with Paul and Barnabas so he could hear their message about Jesus, which had to make Bar-Jesus squirm a bit. While they were addressing the Governor, the magician interrupted them and pleaded with Sergius-Paulus to ignore all they were saying. Essentially he was saying, "Don't believe them, they are not telling the truth."

Paul, never the shy one, looked him in the eye and said, "You son of the Devil! You are full of every form of fraud and deceit and an enemy of all that is right. When will you stop perverting the truth of God into lies? At this moment, the hand of God's judgment comes down upon you and you will be blind-so blind you won't even be able to see the light of the sun." Not just, "You fake magician, you're no wizard, you're a demon practicing all sorts of evil, but now you've gone and done it. BOOM you're blind! Stumble on out of here...now Governor, where were we?" Admittedly Paul's response was better than mine. Either way he went blind and the mighty wizard, the knower of all things, things seen, and things not seen, had to be led around so he wouldn't fall in his own darkness.

The Governor was moved by this spectacle and he told Paul and Barnabas he was ready to believe in and follow the Most High God and Jesus the Messiah/Savior.

Next it was off to Turkey for Paul and Barnabas (John Mark parted ways with them there and returned to Jerusalem). In Antioch they found a synagogue and joined in on the Sabbath. After the regular elements of Sabbath worship, they were asked if they would like to share a word of encouragement. Paul said yes and proceeded to tell the entire Jesus story, which was encouraging but wasn't what the Rabbis had in mind. As he and Peter were prone to do, he began at the very beginning and laid out all the teachings that God would send a Messiah and Jesus was that Messiah.

When you read 13:13-41 you will see a Peter-like address that stresses the bona-fides of Jesus and the rejection of many in Israel (primarily the leaders who influenced many Jerusalem Jews). It is salvation-centric, so it naturally breaks with a strict adherence with the Law, especially the older Hebrew tenets of law-based salvation. Paul echoes Habakkuk, a prophet he would have been intimately familiar with, to urge the diaspora

Jews to accept his “report.” Habakkuk’s prophecy warned Judah to “believe” rather than “scoff” when he speaks, or reports, God’s word to them. Paul is literally warning the Jews of Antioch to believe his “report” of God’s work that culminated in the Messiah Jesus. If they do not, they will forfeit the promised blessing of eternal life with God (The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary, Vol. X, Acts, Romans, 1 Corinthians, p. 193).

Chapter 13:42-43 depicts the response of the assembly, which the NIB Commentary lists as “cautiously positive” (p. 194). Cautiously positive is as close to a slam dunk as Paul would ever receive from his fellow Jews. He would become the Michael Jordan of apostles in the eyes of Gentiles (or LeBron, or Magic or Wilt or Pistol Pete, your choice), but this was his high-water mark with Jews. The Messiah he taught was not close to the preferred Messiah-type first-century Jews longed for. Love and peace? Nah, not when Rome had to go, and Jerusalem be returned to its former prominence.

The group invited Paul and Barnabas to return the following weekend and when they arrived so did most of the city: “On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord” (v.44). It quickly became a fiasco as the Jews saw the amazing crowd, mostly Gentiles, and the leaders became “jealous,” and spoke against Paul and Barnabas. Paul, who was not wired to back down from a challenge to the Gospel, said, “O.K., you lose!” Actually, Luke says it better than me:

“The 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 to the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth (V.46-47).

The Gentiles went wild, the message went viral, or as viral as messages could go in the first-century, and people came to a saving knowledge of the Jewish Messiah, someone they called Savior and Lord. This was when the flood gates opened, and the Gospel message went to the literal ends of the earth. The Jews, not all but most, had forfeited their initial place before God and that void was filled by Gentiles.

Takeaways

1. There is a mystical side to faith. There is also a supernatural element to life, one where magic and sorcery have always found a home. Is magic real? Is sorcery and witchcraft real? Can David Copperfield really make a building disappear? I'm told most is illusion or a subterfuge based on people believing what they are led to believe or in what they think they see. I suppose it's a mind over matter thing, or even a faith thing (people place faith in fortune tellers, magicians and sorcerers), but this is where we must be careful. The Holy Spirit is both mystical and supernatural but also a residing element in our lives. There is no discernment necessary for us to believe in the Holy Spirit, it comes with the package. The discernment comes when the Spirit speaks to us. If you must discern if an element or thing is real, like magic, then it's a sign to walk away. Let's keep our mystical and supernatural focus squarely on God's side of the equation.
2. The Gospel has always and will always have enemies. Paul and Barnabas ran into that buzzsaw in Antioch. A selfish element was in play when the Jews became jealous of the immense draw Paul's message had on Gentiles. Faith and all the accoutrements of faith belonged to them. They were God's people and they alone knew the code to access God: **Gentiles Need Not Apply!** That was never God's plan, however, and the time to shift to God's 2.0 message through Jesus had come. Sadly, it also passed as the Antioch Jews stood pat. The loss was theirs and the gain was an almost fully Gentile message and movement from that moment forward.
We don't own God or God's providential plans.
We are God's worker bees.
Let's stay in our lane.

Amen and Amen.

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