

Study 23: Paul's Early Missionary Period

Introduction

This study partly reviews some of the last few chapters from Paul's perspective. Until this time in his life, Paul's evangelistic work has been only scantily recorded. His zeal and teaching in the Synagogues immediately after his conversion are described, and we are left to imagine that he continued in this fashion on his return to Tarsus.

Paul was called by God to become the great evangelist to the Gentiles. The time has come for his labours to head in that direction, as the work amongst the Gentiles grows with the church in Antioch.

Body of the Study

The call from Tarsus

The work in Antioch

A whole year in Antioch

The First Missionary Journey

The Jerusalem Conference

Homework and preparation for next week:

- Read the notes as a review of the study
- What relationship did Paul have with the church in Antioch?
- What relationship did Paul begin at this time with the Galatian churches? How does he deal with them when he writes the Galatian letter (especially Gal 3:1-3)?

Notes for study 23: Paul's Early Missionary Period

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The call from Tarsus

When Paul came to Jerusalem three years after his conversion, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him. They were thinking that he was trying to infiltrate their numbers and find out who they were so that he could persecute them. They did not believe that he was a disciple (Acts 9:26). Barnabas vouched for Paul's credibility, however the Jews plotted to kill him. The Lord instructed Paul to leave Jerusalem because the Jews would not accept his testimony. He left and went to Caesarea, and then returned to Tarsus. (Acts 22:17-21; 9:30).

This event tells us much about Paul's reputation, and also about communications at that time. Paul had been out of action as a persecutor for three years, and yet he still had such a strong reputation that the brethren were still afraid of him. Some of the Jews had gone with Paul to Damascus and witnessed his road-to-Damascus-experience. They must have come back and told the Sanhedrin what had happened, but apparently the persecution of the christians did not stop. Had it stopped, then the christians would not have shown the fear that they did when Paul tried to join their number.

With such persecution, the christians probably "went to ground" as much as possible to escape the torture. Their interaction with the Jews would certainly have been much less than in the earlier days of the church in Jerusalem. So, the christian's knowledge about Paul and his rejection of the Jewish religion (at least as far as the Jewish leaders were concerned) would have travelled to them slowly. The Jews also would not have been overly zealous to want to spread this news around the traps. Knowledge of Paul's conversion might have been spread around by the christians, except that immediately after his conversion Paul seems to have vanished off the face of the earth! (as far as the christians in Jerusalem and Damascus would have been concerned). What we can observe is that Paul's reputation as a persecutor was so strong, that it overshadowed his reputation for becoming a christian.

So, when Paul came to Jerusalem and tried to join with the disciples, they were afraid of him and wanted to reject him. Barnabas must have been one of the few people who were well acquainted with the circumstances of Paul's conversion – perhaps he was in Damascus at the time, or perhaps he had had a personal acquaintance with Ananias. "Barnabas" means "*son of encouragement*" or "*son of consolation*" and his character shows through in his actions here, and also in other places during his later journeys with Paul.

Barnabas described the circumstances of Paul's conversion to the christians in Jerusalem, and how the Lord had spoken to him, and how Paul had spoken boldly in the name of the Lord in Damascus (which suggests that Barnabas had been there to hear him).

Paul describes this visit to Jerusalem in the Galatian letter as one in which he expressly went to get acquainted with Peter (Gal 1:18). The stay was brief – either a total of 15 days or 15 days with Peter. An interesting question here is, *Why didn't Peter introduce him to the disciples?* The most reasonable answer is that Paul had gone to the church before he went to Peter. In fact he might have gone to the church *in order to find Peter*.

The work in Antioch

The church in Antioch began with the great persecution that had been promulgated by Paul himself. Initially, the christians were scattered and preached the word to the Jews only (Acts 11:19). With the conversion of Cornelius (Acts chapters 10 and 11) it became apparent that the gospel was for Gentiles as well as the Jews.

Some of the christians who had left Jerusalem came to Antioch and converted some of the Greeks (Acts 11:20-21), not just a few, but “*...a great number believed and turned to the Lord...*”

The church in Jerusalem soon heard about what had happened in Antioch, and sent some brethren to go down and help and support them in the work (Acts 11:22). Barnabas was commissioned “*...to go as far as Antioch...*” which implies that on his journey he was to help as many churches along the way as he could. In fact contrary to his instructions to “*go as far as Antioch*”, Barnabas was selected by the church at Antioch to go to Tarsus to find Paul and bring him back to Antioch (Acts 11:25-26). He went to Tarsus to look for Saul and then went with him on the first missionary journey. This is not consistent with the Jerusalem church having “control” or oversight of the other churches, but rather it supports congregational independence. Barnabas was the logical choice, as he knew Paul, and was well acquainted with the work that was happening in Antioch at the time.

And so it was that Paul re-appeared in history at the church in Antioch in AD 42.

Antioch features very strongly in the Acts narrative, as one of the first strongholds of the Gentile christians, and the church that sent Paul out on his three missionary journeys. It was the home of Nicolas the Proselyte who was one of the seven deacons in Jerusalem (6:5), and may have been the home of Luke.

Saul and Barnabas were “old friends” from the time of Saul’s conversion (about 7 or 8 years previous). Luke gives a brief “picture” of the conversion of Saul, but Barnabas had spent many days with him, and was very aware of the facts of Saul’s conversion, declaring it to the church in Jerusalem (9:26-27). This would doubtlessly include that Saul was “*...chosen to be the apostle to the Gentiles...*”

The work amongst the Gentiles grew, “*...and a great number believed and turned to the Lord...*” (11:21). They needed strong teaching and leadership, and who better to provide that than “*the apostle to the Gentiles*”. The language of the passage is that Barnabas had to go and “hunt” for Saul. He did not have his address as Cornelius did for Peter! Barnabas *knew* Saul. He knew who he was looking for, and he may have had to persuade Saul to come with him back to Antioch. Who better to go that Barnabas?

A whole year in Antioch

Barnabas and Paul came back to Antioch and laboured together for a whole year (11:26). They assembled with the church. They did not “come by for a weekend” or “breeze through for a two week mission”, but located themselves there for a whole year “*...and taught a great many people...*”

This was the instruction in the great commission to “*...make disciples of all men...*” (as had already happened in Antioch) and to “*...teach them to observe all things...that I have commanded...*” (Mt 28:19-20). It was during this time at Antioch that the disciples were first called christians.

Some prophets came down from Jerusalem during this time, and predicted that a great famine was to occur (Acts 11:28). Paul and Barnabas were sent to Jerusalem with the famine relief, and they arrived during the reign of Herod – who died in AD 44, and his death in Caesarea is recorded in Acts 12:20-23.

After Herod's death, Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch again. This visit is not mentioned in the Galatian letter, as there Paul is addressing the issue of his knowledge of the gospel, and he asserts that he did not get his knowledge from any of the apostles. This particular visit to Jerusalem was not relevant to the discussion in Galatians IF (and only if) Paul did not consult with any of the apostles whilst he was there. (On the other hand, if Paul HAD consulted with the apostles, then failing to mention it in the letter to the Galatians would leave Paul wide open to the Judaisers who had been attacking his credibility to the Galatians, and saying that Paul only learned his doctrine second hand from the other apostles).

Consequently, Paul's visit to Jerusalem on this occasion must have been quite brief. Bearing in mind that the journey would have taken about a week each way, then it is likely that he would have only stayed for a short time (perhaps only a week) in Jerusalem. This places the time of the visit to the time of the death of Herod in AD 44 – since Paul left to go to Jerusalem before Herod's death, and returned to Antioch after his death, and was only away for a short period of time (a few weeks).

Returning from Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas brought Barnabas' nephew John Mark (Col 4:10) with them. He was the author of the second gospel.

The First Missionary Journey

God called Paul and Barnabas to a special work. The first missionary journey is sometimes called the mission to the Galatians, and began in AD 45, not long after the death of Herod in AD 44. Initially, Paul, Barnabas, and John Mark went to Cyprus, which was where Barnabas was from (Acts 4:36). They began the missionary journey in familiar territory, and then branched out from there.

The tour of Cyprus lasted several months, since "...they had gone through the whole island..." (Acts 13:6). Paul, Barnabas and John Mark were quite thorough in their tour of the land.

At the Western end of the island at Paphos, Elymus the magician was rebuked and struck blind by Paul. This was a turning point in Paul's life – up until this time it was "*Barnabas and Paul*", but after this powerful demonstration, it was "*Paul and his party*". Paul remained in the most prominent position for (essentially) the rest of the Acts record.

After leaving Cyprus, Paul, Barnabas, and John Mark headed to Pamphylia. At Perga, John Mark left and went back (probably to Jerusalem). It is thought that Paul became sick (possibly Malaria) since he wrote to the Galatians that it was *because of his sickness* that he first came to Galatia (Gal 4:13-15). His first visit was the one described in Acts 13. The Galatian mission really began at Antioch in Pisidia. Whilst the Gentiles were eager to hear the word of God from Paul and Barnabas, the Jews rejected them. They shook the dust off their feet and went to Iconium. They stayed a long time in Iconium (Acts 14:3) but the people of the city were split, and eventually the Jews made a move to stone them, so they left and went to Lystra.

It was during this time in Lystra that Timothy would have been converted, and Paul was actually taken out and stoned, and left for dead. The next day he and Barnabas left the city and walked to Derbe. They must have spent some time there, and they then doubled back and re-visited the churches again (Paul's second visit to the Galatian churches). They returned to Syrian Antioch about AD 48, after a time away of nearly three years. When they returned, they stayed there for "...a long time..." (Acts 14:28).

The Jerusalem Conference

Probably about 18 months after the return from the first journey, Paul, Barnabas, and Titus (Gal 2:1) went to Jerusalem taking several of the brethren from Antioch with them (Acts 15:2). Some

people had come to Antioch insisting that the Gentiles needed to keep the Law of Moses (and by implication that Paul was wrong by not insisting that the Gentiles he converted kept the Law).

Paul outlined to the apostles the work that God had been doing through him amongst the Gentiles. Peter discussed how it was through him that God showed that the Gentiles were to be converted in the first place, and that being a christian had nothing to do with keeping the Law – and therefore that to bind the Law on the Gentiles was stupid – especially since the Jews were unable to keep it themselves! James chaired the meeting, and summed up that the Law should not be bound on the Gentiles.

A general letter was written that showed that these things were not necessary (– and the letter was actually disseminated by Paul on his next journey).

Paul says that the apostles in Jerusalem “*had nothing on him*” (Gal 2:6), and they were in complete agreement with each other.

Shortly after this time, Peter came to Antioch for a visit, and Paul and Peter ended up in a dispute about keeping Jewish traditions (Gal 2:11). This was not an issue of what Peter taught – but one of his hypocrisy in doing one thing himself, but demanding different standards from others.

Not long after this the second journey began.