

“What if” series (A study from the book of Acts)

Week 12: Acts 13

July 27, 2025

Acts 13:1 Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. 2 While they were worshiping 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 after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off. 4 So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus. 5 When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. And they had John to assist them. 6 When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they came upon a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet named Bar-Jesus. 7 He was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. 8 But Elymas the magician (for that is the meaning of his name) opposed them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith. 9 But Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him 10 and said, "You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord? 11 And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and unable to see the sun for a time." Immediately mist and darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking people to lead him by the hand.

Introduction

- When we look back, most of us have some regrets in our lives.
- Whether it was a lost opportunity, a habit we should have kicked, decisions we shouldn't made, relationships we should (or shouldn't) have pursued, we have them.
- When thinking about these regrets, a question that pops up in our minds is "What if?"
- "What if I had said no?" (or yes)
- "What if I had apologized right away?"
- "What if I had not spent that money and invested it?"
- "What if I hadn't taken that drink?"
- "What if I had chosen my friends differently?"
- And on and on it goes. We imagine what life might be like if we had done some things differently. What might be different today?
- We are in a series where we are going through the book of Acts, which is a history of the early church written by Luke. He recorded what the church did, what they believed, how they lived out their mission, how they dealt with opposition and conflict. We are calling the series "What if . . .?"
- One of the reasons we are going through this part of the bible, looking at the early church, is we don't want to look back some day and ask, "What if?"
- "What if we had taken that risk?"
- "What if we had chosen to step into the uncomfortable?"
- "What if we had prayed more?"
- We have said that **the church is God's way to change the world**, and that if we were to follow the way of Jesus, we would be the kind of church that would like with no regrets.
- This is true both personally and corporately.
- Today we are in Acts 13. It is a transition part of Luke's account of the early church. It's where he shifts his focus from Peter to Paul. From Jerusalem and Judea to the "ends of the earth."
- It highlights how God works and our role in it in order not to be a "what if" people.

- One of my favorite verses in all of Scripture is tucked in the end of this chapter and it frames out our discussion today.
- It's part of a larger sermon that Paul is giving, but this verse reached out and grabbed me.
- Paul is preaching about how Jesus was the fulfillment of God's promises, coming from the line of king David, Israel's greatest king, and in doing so, he describes David.

13:36 For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep and was laid with his fathers . . .

- "After he had served the purpose of God in his own generation."
- I can think of no other accolade, epitaph, or description of life that is as satisfying as this statement.
- I would say that many people end their lives having never accomplished what God's purpose was for them.
- When my life is over, I want people to say that I served God's purpose where I am. That I did what he created for me to do. That when it comes to people, tasks, actions, that my life mattered.
- When we each get to the end of our lives, I do not want the story to be, "He was a nice guy. He was nice to puppies. He was fun to golf with. He has good kids. He worked really hard."
- It is easy to live life for ourselves while occasionally helping people. To be primarily about me, my life, my fun, my goals, while relegating God to the back burner. This is like trying to use a drill as a spatula. This is a statement of priority.
- Unless my life is directed by God's purposes, all of those activities have no eternal value and are completely, utterly, pointless.
- I would say it this way. **Living according to God's purposes means no regrets.**

Main Sermon Text

- If you're like me, the big question then is, how do I know if I'm living by God's purposes?
- If you remember from the last few weeks, Luke had just recounted how God spoke to Peter about connecting with the Gentiles, how he realized what Jesus meant when he told them to spread the good news to all people.
- It resulted in him being imprisoned and having a miraculous escape. The persecution forced him to "relocate"
- Luke now turns his attention to Paul.

Acts 13:1 Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.

- Antioch was one of the larger cities in that part of the Roman world, with over 100k people and up to 300k. It was a chief trade intersection which made it a diverse place. The church that had grown up there had a mix of both Jews and Gentiles.
- Antioch is the place where the term "Christian" was coined. It was a derisive, dismissive term – little Jesus's.
- For context, this is about twelve years after his conversion experience.
- This is the church where Paul and Barnabas were fully integrated. They were using their gifts already there – this doesn't come from nowhere.
- Paul did not immediately start traveling the whole world, but he had learned and grown in his new faith. In the process, he had already preached the gospel and done ministry in Damascus, Arabia, Jerusalem, Syria/Cilicia and then Antioch.

2 While they were worshiping 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 after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

- What are the characteristics of the person/church living according to God's purposes?

I. Their actions were based on the Holy Spirit's leading

4 So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus.

- This begins what is termed by many, Paul's first missionary journey, although in reality, this was not new for him.
- Note that the sending agent is God. He has a plan. He has a purpose. He sent Paul and Barnabas on this trip.
- This seems a little far from us at times. It's fine that that this happened to them, but how does this apply to me? What does this look like? How does this even happen?

A. They actively engaged in practices to hear from God.

- Prayer, worship and fasting were part of the disciplines of the early church.
- It was out of this that they heard God speaking through the Holy Spirit.
- My friends, God is not trying to make things hard or confusing for us. As we saw last week, he wants to lead us, walk with us, and more. It means we have to be in a posture of listening.
- Like most things, this takes practice. The more listen, the more we hear. The more we hear and obey, the more we'll want to listen.

B. That trusted that God had a plan and purpose.

- This was not a small ask. The initiative for this work came from God's Spirit and he was asking them to go. Travel was riskier. Life would be uncertain.
- In fact, this was a worry of mine when I was younger. If I truly surrender to God, he's going to ask me to do something awful. Go to Africa. Give away everything I own. Make me do what I absolutely don't want to do.
- This reveals a complete misunderstanding of our heavenly Father.
- God's purposes for your life and mine are not for our detriment. They are not to make us miserable. I have never met ANYONE EVER who followed Jesus fully and had regrets.
- We'll never know if we aren't asking and listening, trusting that God has a plan and a purpose.

C. They pursued God's purposes together.

- Even though it was the Holy Spirit that sent them, the church cooperated in the process..
- They sought God together. They listened to each other. Even though the church did not initiate their calling, they confirmed it.
- How do we know if God is leading or it is just us?
- It has to line up with what God has revealed in Scripture. It has to be consistent with his character. He will never lead us to get revenge, to withhold forgiveness or repentance, to leave a spouse, to be stingy with our resources.
- When the decision or leading is larger, we really need to lean into the people around us.
- Most of the time, though, we don't need more direction. We need to listen and do what he has already said.
- What kind of things does God lead in? Changing us, sending us to someone (to pray with, engage with, have dinner with, etc.), future job (my story of being a pastor), to give resources, to serve in a ministry.
- When he does, what is your response? What we're going to see is that:

II. They did not play it safe.

- Paul and Barnabas had to travel to places unknown. To not know the plan. To just go where God led them to go, not knowing how it was going to turn out.
- But the church was in the same boat. They were sending away their best and brightest.
- The leading of the Spirit can almost seem counter-intuitive at times.
- God's leading, God's sending, looks different for each person. What seems risky to one might not seem risky to another.
- Let's pick up the story.

6 When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they came upon a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet named Bar-Jesus. 7 He was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God.

- Luke presents two different things at the same time.

A. They encountered where God was at work.

- This leading man in the city wanted to hear the word of God.
- The "Word of God" is the good news about Jesus, Israel's Messiah and Savior. If you continue in chapter 13, you'll read a great sermon on what the good news is. That we are broken and cannot save ourselves, no matter how much we try to be good or follow rules. We are destined for eternal torment and hell.
- Yet God sent Jesus, fulfilling his promises, to live, die and be brought to life, taking the penalty for my sin and make a way for me to know God personally and eternally, if I confess, believe and follow him.
- It is the best news. It is the purpose of God working in our world and when we follow those purposes it will always lead us to seeing God at work. When we listen and obey, we will see God do what only God can do.
- Almost every time in my life that I have seen God do crazy cool things is when I refused to play it safe. When I listened to God and did what he led me to do.

B. They encountered opposition.

- When we follow the Holy Spirit, our enemy, the devil, will oppose us. Following God does not shelter us from opposition – in fact, we will typically face more. But this should not scare us – let's see what happens.

8 But Elymas the magician (for that is the meaning of his name) opposed them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith.

- Perhaps he did not want his benefactor to believe because it might jeopardize his income or position. He wanted to get this good news dismissed.
- Your enemy will oppose you (and us as a church) because he opposes God.
- He will try to silence us by keeping us fearful.
- He will try to distract us with all the things, both good and bad, that might keep us too busy to pursue God's purposes.
- He will try to destroy us through wrecking our relationships, our health, our businesses and more.
- As we said, we do not need to be fearful.

9 But Saul, who was also called Paul,

- Saul is Paul's Hebrew name, while Paul is his Latin name.
- Signifies the movement of the gospel beyond the Jews to the Gentiles.

filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him 10 and said, "You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight

paths of the Lord? 11 And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and unable to see the sun for a time." Immediately mist and darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking people to lead him by the hand.

- Amazing! Don't miss this principle.
- God's power is available to us when we follow the Spirit's leading.
- God is bigger than our opposition.
- When God, through his Spirit, leads you, do you find yourself playing it safe?
- Where are you holding back because you want control? Where are you afraid of what might happen? What you might lose?

Conclusion

- **The church is God's way to change the world.**
- A church that lives and works based on the leading of God.
- A church that makes space to hear the voice of God, trusting that he has a plan and a purpose for each and every person.
- A church that helps each other discover and walk this out.
- A church that refuses to play it safe, knowing that even though we face opposition, God's power is so much greater than this opposition and he wants to work that power out in and through us.
- Let me share two verses that round out this chapter.

12 Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord.

- When it says the proconsul believed, it means he came to faith in Jesus, and his life, death and resurrection. Paul and Barnabas followed God and it changed the lives of many, including this man.
- If you read the remainder of chapter 13 (encourage you to do so), you will see that eventually Paul and Barnabas reach another place in their travels and they again are met with opposition and seeing God at work.
- In this case, the opposition is so strong they are kicked out the place where they are ministering.

50 But the Jews incited the devout women of high standing and the leading men of the city, stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district. 51 But they shook off the dust from their feet against them and went to Iconium.

- They followed the Spirit. They faced so much opposition that it appeared to derail the work of God. And it is the last statement that should inspire us this morning.

52 And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.

- His presence leads to joy even when circumstances are not good! My friends, it is the active filling and presence of God that leads to mission and joy.
- When you reach the end of your life, could they write about you that you serve God's purposes in your generation.
- In your time? Your place? With the people in your life? In your church? In your community? At your job? With your family?
- It's never too late.
- Do you trust God has a purpose for you?
- Are you making space in your days to hear from him?
- Are you playing it safe?
- May our lives, and the life of our church, be characterized as those who follow God, without reservation, without fear, and ultimately, without regret.