

The Beginning of Paul's Ministry

Acts 13:1—12

After Saul's conversion, he spent three years in Arabia and in Damascus (Galatians 1:17—18). During this time Jesus Christ was revealing the Mystery to him, the body of knowledge that had been hid from all other generations (Romans 16:25—26). His conversion marked the beginning of the Body of Christ, and all those who followed became members of that Body (1 Timothy 1:16). He was set forth as a pattern, the first member of the Body of Christ and example of all who would be saved after him. He calls himself the chief sinner, not as the worst, but as the first sinner saved into the Body of Christ (1 Timothy 1:15). This can be understood when read in context.

Approximately 10 years following his conversion, Paul is called to Antioch to teach there for one full year (Acts 11:25) and then he and Barnabas went on Paul's first recorded journey. Most people think that Paul pretty much disappears until he and Barnabas travel together on what most people call his first missionary journey. This is not what Scripture teaches.

Paul's ministry

Right after Paul (Saul) was saved, he went into the city of Damascus to preach about his encounter with Jesus Christ (Acts 9:22). He began preaching only after receiving his sight, which, I believe, was tied directly to his salvation. He continued preaching in Damascus for a time and then traveled to Arabia, apparently to meet with Jesus Christ who began teaching him the Gospel of Grace and Mystery doctrine. According to Acts 11:23, he went back into Damascus for many days, presumably part of the three years mentioned in Galatians 1:17—18. He was boldly preaching Jesus Christ in Damascus (Acts 9:27) and received death threats for his preaching. He escaped by being let down in a basket over the walls of the city and then went to Jerusalem (Acts 9:23—25).

While in Jerusalem, he once again was preaching Jesus Christ boldly (Acts 9:29). He once again was the target of those who hated his preaching and the Lord told him to leave Jerusalem (Acts 22:17—21). With that, the Disciples brought him to Caesarea and then up the coast of the Mediterranean Sea to Tarsus. According to Galatians 1:21—22, Paul was working in the regions of Syria and Cilicia. Syria includes the cities of Damascus and Antioch, Cilicia includes the cities of Tarsus, and nearby are Iconium, Lystra and Derbe. It appears that Paul spent 10 years working at proclaiming the Gospel of Grace and building up churches before Barnabas brought him to Antioch for a year of ministry, and before God sent Barnabas and Paul out to minister together. Paul had a ministry in Damascus, Jerusalem, Syria and Cilicia for 10 years before he was called to travel with Barnabas. To call Acts 13 Paul's first missionary journey really twists the facts and discounts about 10 years of active ministry as he traveled and formed churches in Gentile lands. This early ministry was done at the hand of the Lord as much as his journey with Barnabas in Acts 13.

However, the focus for the past few years were on the Hebrew church and how God was revealing to them these dispensational changes. The Gospel of the Kingdom was put on hold while the Gospel of Grace was now being taught. Peter's ministry was decreasing while Paul's ministry was increasing. Acts is showing to us the diminishing of Israel after their fall (Romans 11:11—12). Now the focus has changed to Paul, showing us how the Jews are continuing to reject God's word, the Gospel of Grace. This continued diminishing of Israel is documented in

Paul's three journeys when he declares three times that he is going to the Gentiles (Acts 13:46, 18:6, 28:28). These declarations are not to be taken in a chronological sense, but geographically, as he travels up and around the Mediterranean Sea. He is covering the areas more heavily populated by Jews, making sure they know of the Gospel of the Grace of God and giving them the opportunity to understand who Jesus Christ is.

Acts 13 journey

Although characterized as a missionary journey, God actually called for Barnabas and Paul to minister to many churches already in existence at the hand of Paul in the past 10 years or so. Those who think the Body of Christ was formed in Acts 13, with the setting apart of Barnabas and Paul, do not take into account any of the previous work done by Paul. I'm sure that Barnabas and Paul covered some new territory, but much of their work was about encouraging and building up churches formed from Paul's previous ministry. Some of these churches certainly could have been formed by those who were saved under Paul, who themselves were active in spreading the word.

They first sailed to the Island of Cyprus, Barnabas' home (Acts 4:36). In the city of Paphos, the same city that John was impressed and had a vision of the future, they meet a false prophet, Bar-Jesus and a Roman, Sergius Paulus. Bar-Jesus was a Jew who was a sorcerer who opposed Barnabas and Paul and tried to turn Sergius Paulus away from the truth. Paul struck Bar-Jesus temporarily blind, as an enemy of righteousness, which was similar to what Paul had experienced on the road to Damascus. This first recorded miracle of Paul's led to Sergius Paulus becoming saved.

We are given this story because it is a picture of Israel and the Gentiles. Israel had rejected Jesus Christ and they were actively working to keep the truth of Jesus Christ from reaching the Gentiles. On the other hand, the Gentile, Sergius Paulus, gladly received and believed what Paul was preaching. This rejection by Israel and acceptance by a Gentile characterized Paul's entire 35-year ministry. This event shows how God judicially blinded Israel, but only temporary, and partial (John 12:40; Romans 11:7, 25).

God provokes Israel

Although God stopped dealing with Israel as a nation with the stoning of Stephen, He has been provoking Israel in order to get Israelites to believe. We usually think of provoking as something irritating in a negative manner, like fathers told not to provoke their children (Ephesians 6:4). In this case, God was trying to push the Jews off balance to get them to see who Jesus Christ is, and get them to believe. He is provoking them to become jealous of the Gentiles, who received gladly the word of God (Acts 13:48). There are actually three ways that God was provoking Israel. First, He provoked them through the Little Flock of believers (Romans 10:19). Moses had a prophecy that God would raise up a nation (the Little Flock, not the Gentiles!) that would serve to provoke unbelieving Israel to become believers.

Second, God provoked Israel through the Gentiles (Romans 11:11). Seeing the Gentiles could now come to God apart from the nation of Israel would hopefully drive some to believe.

Third, Paul was given the ministry of provoking Israel to jealousy (Romans 11:14). This could be thought of as a part of the Gentiles provoking the Jews to become jealous, so that they would believe. Although Paul was a Jew, he was going to the Gentiles with the Gospel of Grace apart from Israel. This was one reason the Jews continually sought to kill him and end his ministry.

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