

Acts 13:1 -- 12. Paul and Barnabas on Cyprus September 2011

Introduction -- Context

Beginning of St Paul's first missionary journey.

Bit of geography and chronology. -- when did this happen and where are the places mentioned?

Geography -- eastern end of Mediterranean -- 3 sides of square -- Antioch and Tarsus in top right corner and Cyprus 50 miles off the coast of that corner.

Antioch in Syria -- the big centre of the church outside of Israel -- and the centre of the Gentile church.

Dates

Jesus death and resurrection AD 33

Conversion of Saul AD 36.

Saul in Damascus AD 36 -- AD 39 (with excursions to Arabian desert and Jerusalem)

Saul in Tarsus (home-town) AD 39 -- AD 46

Saul invited to Antioch AD 47

Paul's first missionary journey to Cyprus and Turkey AD 48

So Paul gets 12 years after his conversion before he begins his missionary journeys -- though preaching locally in Damascus and Antioch and Tarsus for that time.

On Cyprus..

Paul and Barnabas take boat across the 50 miles to Cyprus -- possibly chosen because it was Barnabas home country. He wanted to share the good news with his own people first.

They land at the eastern end preach there in one city and then walk the 90 miles across the island to the capital Paphos.

And what an opportunity! The Roman governor must have heard something about these two and he sends for them... (v7)

Application -- Pray for opportunities to speak

-- I do. Really important -- pray that people themselves will open the conversation -- it happens. (it is so much easier that way)

Now this was also a landmark in the spread of the Gospel. This was the first time Paul had spoken directly to non-Jews -- normally he went into the synagogue to address the Jews and some of the Gentile followers came to Faith also (v 5). But now he speaks directly to the top Gentile. And this is a turning point. After this Paul goes straight to the Gentiles -- and his name is changed from the Jewish version -- Saul, to the Roman Greek one 1 -- Paul.

(Still preaches in Jewish places as well -- but not exclusively)

Opposition.

Then opposition from this sorcerer Elymas - who seems to have been part of the governor's court. He knows that if the governor was won for Christianity his influence at the court would be over. Paul effectively deals with him . Rebukes him and causes him to go temporary blind.

A sorcerer/wizard -- the second encountered in Acts (Philip encounters one in Acts chapter 8).

So what's the difference between faith and magic/witchcraft?

First a magical digression -- but as we are covering this field -- what about Harry Potter. ?

Many Christians don't feel their children should read the books or watch the films. Some Christians feel quite strongly -- I know.

The reason is that you don't want children to become interested in witchcraft -- which by the way is very much alive and well in this country. They say Harry Potter puts a very positive spin on being a witch/wizard and could seriously influence them in the wrong ways.

I respect this view but personally don't feel it's a problem, or was a problem with my children. Where do you stop with such censorship -- is Mary Poppins beyond the pale? Harry Potter was written by a Christian and has many Christian themes.

However -- it's like Paul's advice about eating meat which has been offered to idols. It's a problem for some Christians and not for others. Just be aware that there is this debate.

Faith/Prayer and Magic

Aren't there similarities?

Both are concerned with calling on supernatural power.

Magic definition -- the arts that purports to control or forecast natural events or forces by invoking the supernatural, by charms, spells or rituals.

Strictly forbidden in the Bible. Why? Because it's all about manipulating things for our own ends.

Whereas walking by faith and prayer, while calling on the supernatural -- God, -- Jesus, -- The Holy Spirit, is different.

First it's about seeking God's will & his purpose for our lives - in order to obey his will and serve him and bring glory to him.

Okay -- petitionary prayer is where we ask for God's power to get things done. But even there we ask that it be done according to his will.

From our church prayer guide/address list.

“This power is so rich & so mobile that all we have to do when we pray is to point to the persons or things to which we desire to have this power applied, & he, the Lord of this power, will direct the necessary power to the desired place at once.

Here, too, we see divine grace & wisdom. How terrible this weapon would become if it could be used by anybody & everybody for purposes of revenge & destruction! Instead he has decreed that only his own friends can establish contact with these inexhaustible sources of power. In fact the means of contact has been devised so carefully that the connection is automatically cut off, even to the friends of Jesus, as soon as they try to employ this power in a way that is contrary to the will & purpose of Jesus. It is only when we pray for something according to the will of God that we have the promise of being heard & answered.”

So it's about me not meeting wielding power for my sake. But about releasing God's power into the world for his good to be done and his name to be glorified.

Can We Pray against Evil?

Final aspect of this -- can we pray against evil -- in the sense of rebuking evil or removing the influence of evil persons.

Isn't this praying negatively -- for God's judgement on someone?

Isn't that what Paul did with the sorcerer.?

There's an irony in what happened.

The seer that's spelt s e e r. -- one who sees the future, is blinded.

No doubt the governor got the point.

I think we can pray for God to remove people who stand in the way of the Gospel, in the way of his goodness being worked out. Robert Mugabe comes to mind.

But we do not do this from a personal point of view.

What Paul did was not of himself, not of his emotions, not of personal resentment.

The judgment came from the Holy Spirit.

God had tolerated enough of this man's sin, hostility to the Gospel and evil.

Maybe Elmas was converted by his experience -- converted to true faith from Magic. We don't know.

Conclusion

God has given us the tremendous power of prayer -- the sad thing is how little we use it.