

## The Open Door Of Faith

*Acts 13:1-14:28*

As we re-launch into *The Book of Acts* today, we come to the final leg of our year-long journey. Acts begins, as we saw in the fall, with the story of the birth of the church and its early days in Jerusalem as a fast-growing, status-quo-unsettling new sect of *Judaism*. This *Making Of A Movement* origin-story depicts the continuing work of *Jesus*, the Jewish Messiah who, after rising from the dead, ascends to heaven's throne and continues to live and work through a new Spirit-filled community called, *The Church*. Their mission: to be witnesses of Jesus' resurrection, ushering a new era of God's kingdom on earth in the power of the Holy Spirit. Then, the *middle* section of Acts reveals how this fledgling Jesus-community was persecuted and pushed out of Jerusalem into the surrounding regions where, in a surprising twist, suddenly *non-Jewish* people began encountering Jesus and experiencing the Holy Spirit, just as the first *Jewish* believers had.

This may sound like *good news*, but this new development was met with confusion and hostility, threatening long-held beliefs about Israel's unique identity as God's "*chosen people*." In *their* minds, the idea that *the church* was the surprise-ending of *their* story, that God's promise to *their* forefather, *Abraham*, inherited by *their* ancestors, *Israel*, safeguarded by *their* customs, culture, land, laws, and temple, all as recorded in *their* scriptures, was now something *anyone* could be part of, even without converting to *their* religion, was simply too much to take in. This tension permeates the final section of Acts, which shows how the message and mission of Jesus spread, not just beyond Jerusalem, but *to the ends of the earth*, even to the Palace of Caesar in Rome. And what we'll see is a triangle of tension between the deep-seated power of *Religion*, the far-reaching power of the *Empire*, and the subversive, power-relinquishing way of *Jesus*. And as we commence our final descent in *Acts*, we begin with the story of the very first *missionaries*.

Today's text has what's called a *chiastic* structure: an A-B-C-B-A pattern. In *chiastic* texts, the two A-sections – *how the story starts and ends* – reveal the passage's *purpose*, while the C-section clarifies its *point*. Then, the B-sections, which typically tell stories that mirror each other, provide additional *perspective* on the main *point*. So, let's start with the first A-section.

**“In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas (a Jewish man) Simeon called Niger (You have to pronounce this nickname carefully, as it is in fact a Latin word meaning ‘black’ – though with no negative connotation – suggesting Simeon had dark skin.), Lucius of Cyrene (Cyrene is an African country, now called Libya), Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch; a man of high social status) and Saul (our main character).”**

The Acts of the Apostles 13:1

Luke wants us to see that the early church was being led by an ethnically, socially, and racially diverse group of people with a variety of giftings, perspectives, and leadership styles. Luke reveals the church as a *multi-ethnic, every-nation-tribe-and-tongue, insiders-and-outsiders, rich-and-poor*, all-working-together expression of God's heart for the world. Now notably, no *women* are mentioned, but women do feature prominently in Acts, portrayed as equals with men, in a culture where that wasn't the case. A version of the phrase, **“both men and women”** appears 7 times in Acts, depicting **“prominent women”** and **“women of high standing”**, women leading households, running thriving business, and being leaders, teachers, and early-adopters in the Jesus-movement. While the church has mostly failed to live up to this ideal in the ensuing 2,000 years, this is an important point Luke doesn't want us to miss. He continues, writing that,

**“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.’ So, after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.” (Acts 13:2-3)**

Our story begins with the church praying and fasting and, while we aren't told *how* they collectively heard the Spirit's voice, they sensed God calling them to commission Barnabas and Saul for a special assignment. So, the two sail off and, jumping ahead a few chapters, we read:

***“They sailed back to Antioch, where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed. On arriving, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.”***

The Acts of the Apostles 14:26-27

With this second A-section, we have both *context* and a *conclusion*. Saul & Barnabas, having been called by the Spirit and commissioned by the church, went off into the unknown, returning back to Antioch with a report of a *mission accomplished*. But what exactly was the mission? Luke explains that, through Paul & Barnabas, on behalf of the church and in obedience to the Spirit, God had ***“opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.”*** The term *Gentiles* (in Hebrew, *goyim*) means *nations* and refers to all *non*-Jewish people. Through these missionaries, God had opened access to faith in Jesus to *all* people. With that in mind, let’s jump to the C-section:

The C-section takes place in a far-away city also named, confusingly, *Antioch*. Arriving in what we’ll call *other*-Antioch, Saul & Barnabas go to the synagogue on the Sabbath to make a connection with the local Jewish assembly and to tell them about *Jesus*. After the service,

***“Standing up, Paul motioned with his hand and said: “Fellow Israelites and you Gentiles who worship God, listen to me!” (Acts 13:16)***

The ***“Gentiles who worship God”*** are the non-Jewish converts to *Judaism*; second-class citizens in the synagogue, but still considered part of God’s *chosen people*. And what follows is the Apostle Paul’s very first recorded sermon, which he begins by recapping the storied history of Israel’s unique relationship with God, from *Father Abraham* to *Moses* to *King David*, adding,

***“From [David’s] descendants God has brought to Israel the Savior Jesus, as he promised. Fellow children of Abraham and you God-fearing Gentiles, it is to us that this message of salvation has been sent. The people of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognize Jesus, yet in condemning him they fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath. Though they found no proper ground for a death sentence, they asked Pilate to have him executed. When they had carried out all that was written about him, they took him down from the cross and laid him in a tomb. But God raised him from the dead, and for many days he was seen by those who had traveled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. They are now his***

**witnesses to our people. We tell you the good news: What God promised our ancestors he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus.” (Acts 13:23, 26-32**

Paul declares Jesus to be the arrival of the long-awaited Jewish Messiah. And while the Jerusalem Leaders had failed to recognize his true identity, *having him killed instead*, they’d inadvertently helped fulfill all the ancient promises written about the Messiah. Paul concludes,

**“Therefore, my friends, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is set free from every sin, (adding) a justification you were not able to obtain under the law of Moses.” (Acts 13: 38-39)**

Imagine! After centuries of waiting, the Messiah had finally come with forgiveness and freedom for everyone. Surprisingly, *despite his dig at the law of Moses*, the whole synagogue is receptive to Paul’s message, following him around afterwards, listening and learning about Jesus, even inviting him back to speak again *next Sabbath*. *The Jesus-message was a hit!* In fact,

**“On the next Sabbath, almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord.” (13:44)**

Imagine if we were so gripped by Jesus that, by next Sunday, we didn’t have enough seats or parking spots for all the friends and neighbours coming to hear about Jesus for themselves?

**“When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy. They began to contradict what Paul was saying and heaped abuse on him.” (Acts 13:45)**

Once again, jealousy – *fear of losing their special identity, spiritual superiority, and religious power* – was choking out their initial eagerness to embrace Jesus. And as a result,

**“Then 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 for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.”’” (Acts 13:46-47/Isaiah 49:6)**

This phrase, lifted from the prophet *Isaiah*, is the same one quoted by Jesus in **Acts 1:8**, when he commissions the church to be his witnesses, **“...to the ends of the earth.”** This mission,

given by Jesus at the birth of the church, is the exact same mission given to *Abraham* at the birth of the nation of *Israel*. When God called Abraham, God commissioned him, saying:

***“Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations (Gentiles) on earth will be blessed through him.” (Genesis 18:18)***

Bringing hope to the *Gentiles* wasn't just some new-fangled idea hatched by a rebellious revolutionary or over-eager people-pleaser. Paul wasn't bowing to cultural pressure or political-correctness to *“not be so exclusive”*; it was *always* God's plan for *all* people to be blessed with inclusion in the Jewish Messianic hope, now fully realized and fulfilled in the person of *Jesus*. And while the Jewish leaders pulled back in fear of losing their special status and privilege,

***“When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.” (Acts 13:48)***

*This* is the *point* of our story and the final chapters of Acts, that the message and mission of Jesus isn't just for the privileged few; it's for *everyone*. The door of faith is swung wide-open to welcome us all in, no exclusions or exceptions. *Amen?* It may seem strange to us now, but for religious, political, and probably deeply psychological reasons, resistance to letting Gentiles into the Jewish Messianic-hope was *the* issue in the early church, *the* thing that threatened to stem the spread of God's heavenly kingdom on earth. God always wanted faith and forgiveness to be fully and freely available to *all*, but it was hard for some to let go of their privileged position for the sake of those they felt hadn't *earned the right*, forgetting that *their* special bond with God had *also* been born out of faith in God's unearned grace, just as ours is today. As Paul wrote,

***“So, in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith... There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.”***

Galatians 3:26-29

What it means, what it has *always* meant to be part of the Abrahamic family and heir to *all* God's promises is to be a descendent, not of Abraham's *physical bloodline*, but of his *faith* and *belief* in God. By trusting in Jesus, we're included in a sacred lineage as full-fledged family members, regardless of our background. *That's pretty good news for a mostly Gentile audience!*

And yet, I wonder how many of *us* still harbour an instinct to see some people as *insiders* and others as *outsiders*, just as the Jewish leaders did. And, as a bit of a time-out, this passage (*and much of Acts*) is really, *really* hard on the *Jewish* leaders, who honestly were being asked to give up so much, to trust that breaking every cultural and biblical rule they'd ever known was somehow God's plan. They saw Roman occupation as God's judgment for previous generations' failure to uphold God's covenant, and they weren't about to be repeat-offenders. No one was more sensitive to this than *Paul*, who was the furthest thing from *antisemitic*, seeing himself as **"a Hebrew of Hebrews"** ([Philippians 3:5](#)). This is complicated stuff and, as a person who doesn't even want to say the 3-letter version of *Jewish* because of how Gentile Christians like me have used it to give rise to antisemitism, while we need to look honestly at these stories, we should be careful not to view the Jewish leaders too harshly, given our own propensity for exclusion and non-diversity. We're no different than these synagogue leaders when we want to be church with certain people, but not others, treating some as second-class citizens, while clinging to first-class privileges for ourselves. We may not draw the lines around ethnicity or race, but are we any different when we belittle those with different theological views, or mock those who practice faith differently than we do, when we label or dehumanize those we find hard to love, who make us uncomfortable, or who sin (*according to us*) in ways that make us feel superior. At the end of the day, however we draw the lines between *innies* and *outies*, it's the very tendency

to draw lines of separation that's at the root of how we get church and faith so wrong. 2,000 years later, this same *us-and-them* attitude that *divides* and *demeans* is one of, if not *the* issue in our world and in the church, keeping us from being the full, diverse, open-door expression of God's heart; *contributing* to, rather than *healing* the polarization around and among us. As we saw during *Lent*, the Cross of Christ is an image of *peace* and *reconciliation*, a call to practice a wider kingdom-perspective; to sacrifice our sacred cows, reach across the aisle, bury hatchets and get comfortable being uncomfortable as we show hospitality, welcome strangers, befriend enemies, and love our neighbours; an invitation to let God turn us into door-of-faith *openers*.

This leaves the two B-section stories that sit like brackets around Paul's sermon. For time, we can't go verse-by-verse but, in the first story, Paul and Barnabas meet two people: a *Jewish* man, described as "***a sorcerer and false prophet***" and "***a child of the devil***" (a.k.a., the *bad guy*) and a Roman proconsul, a powerful politician described as highly intelligent (a.k.a., the *good guy*). This Jewish false-prophet, "***opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith,***" but is stopped and struck blind by Paul. "***When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord.***" (Acts 13:12) The Jewish sorcerer is left groping in the dark, while the Roman Gentile sees the light and turns to Jesus. This first look through the open door of faith underscores the tension that Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, remains unwelcomed by his so-called *own people*, yet is embraced eagerly by *Gentiles*.

In the other B-section story, we see familiar themes: Paul and Barnabas are once again attacked by the *Jewish* leaders (Luke says they planned "***to mistreat them and stone them***") but they find open hearts among the *Gentiles*. Now, I said earlier that these B-section stories tend to mirror each other. In Acts 13, a man is struck blind, but here in Acts 14, a lame man is made able

to walk. In the first story, Paul & Barnabas are *opposed by a devil*, while here they are actually *embraced as gods*. It's true! Seeing the power of Jesus displayed by these missionaries, the locals pull together a spontaneous worship service, complete with temple priests and animal sacrifices; not to worship *Jesus*, but *Paul* and *Barnabas*, thinking them to be Greek gods.

These strange stories highlight the *purpose* and *point* of the passage; that despite even deadly opposition from the *Jewish* leaders (*who should've been the most receptive to news of the arrival of their Messiah*), Jesus is embraced by a new *Gentile* audience, even if at times with misguided enthusiasm. Intelligent people believe, those with faith are healed, those who trust Jesus are forgiven, as the door of faith swings wide open. Yet these stories also show how the gospel's progress was nearly halted, hijacked by fear and intimidation in one story, and success and acclaim in the other. Luke is offering a critical warning to us, as we seek to carry out our calling and mission to share Jesus with the world. Unlike Paul & Barnabas, we likely won't become sudden targets of *satanic warfare* or objects of *spontaneous worship*; but like them, we must be prepared to face a world where some may *undermine our intentions*, while others *overestimate our importance*. The *fear of failure* and the *thrill of success* are twin threats to the gospel mission, just like the jealousy and religious demands of the synagogue; all ways we can be tempted to make it all about *ourselves*, inadvertently becoming the very bottlenecks and obstacles to people encountering Jesus for themselves, standing in the way of the open door of faith. Our challenge is to seize every opportunity, not letting *intimidation* or *fear*, *ego* or *self-importance*, *pride* or *privilege* get in the way of shining the spotlight humbly, courageously, and indiscriminately on *Jesus*; to go into all the world, to *the ends of the earth*, to *our* end of the



earth, the end that begins at the end of our doorsteps and driveways, classrooms and cubicles, to share the life, love, and grace of Jesus, partnering with God to prop open the door of faith.

Finally, as the band comes to lead us in a response, I suspect there may be some here today who are hearing this message from a very different vantage point, from the perspective of those Gentiles who first heard that, because of Jesus, the love of God and life of the Spirit is for *us too*. That *we* can find forgiveness and grace, hope and healing, inclusion as full-fledged family members. Just like the intelligent Roman proconsul who believed, the disabled man who got up and walked, and all the Gentiles living in *other*-Antioch who saw the light and received eternal life, Jesus is inviting *you* to walk through the door of faith, to begin *your* journey into a whole new life, to be reborn into a new family, *the church*, given a clean slate and a new identity as a beloved child of God. Maybe you feel a stir in your soul, a gentle whisper, or tug at your heart, inviting you walk through the open door of faith. If that's you, today I want you to hear that the door of faith *isn't just barely cracked; it's flung wide-open*, just waiting for you to walk through. Maybe you've been putting it off, holding back, not sure if the timing is right. But let me ask you: if you're waiting for the right time to walk through the open door of faith, to trust in Jesus as the source of forgiveness, freedom, and eternal life... I guess the question is, *why not right now?*

**[SONG: Why Not Right Now?]**