

LIGHTS IN THE DARKNESS

Acts 13:13-16

We would all agree that we've been living in some dark days with a lot of fear and anger and hopelessness and confusion. It's a dark world spiritually. The good news is that as Christians, we have the privilege and purpose of being lights in that darkness. Philippians says we are as "*lights in the world.*" But how can we be a bright light? And what effect does a light have on darkness? That's where Luke, the inspired author of Acts, is taking us in chapter 13.

Luke & Acts: Two volumes of one story of Light going to the Gentiles.

Remember that Luke and Acts, though separated in your Bibles, are **both written by Luke** and are like **2 volumes of one story**. The books are about the same length with nearly the same amount of words, each taking up an entire 35-foot-long scroll. That proportionality seems interestingly purposeful. Both Luke and Acts begin in Jerusalem. Luke ends with the commission and ascension and Acts begins with the commission and ascension. Both cover a time span of about 30 years. Luke, Jesus' birth to ascension. Acts, from the ascension to the early 60's A.D. Luke ends with Jesus' trials and death (19:28-24:53) and Acts ends with Paul's trials and impending death (Acts 21:27-28:31), each taking up a significant portion of the books. So Paul continues Jesus' work. Acts is the continuing work of Jesus through the apostles and the Church.

When you consider Acts 13 in light of the context of the entire Luke-Acts narrative, chapter 13 is a **major turning point**. Luke is writing to a man named **Theophilus**, likely a Roman Gentile official or higher up who is likely a recent convert to Christianity or considering it. As a Gentile, he wants to know "*the exact truth*" of the things that he has been taught (See Luke's intro, 1:1-4). Remember, Christianity is fairly new still and God's program has for centuries been predominantly Jewish and Theophilus wants this history recorded for himself maybe to reassure himself of his place in God's program. And so what you see throughout Luke and Acts is **Luke highlighting God's salvation project coming to and working through unexpected Gentile people** – Roman centurions, Simon of Cyrene, women, prostitutes, tax collectors, Samaritans.... Luke 19:10 is often considered the theme verse. Jesus came "*to seek and save that which was lost.*"

Luke's Authorial Intent: Advancing the gospel to all nations.

In Luke chapter 2 in the Christmas story, **Simeon**, this old man in the temple holds baby Jesus and quotes **Isaiah**, saying, "*Now Lord, You are releasing Your bondservant to depart in peace, according to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation, which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a **Light of revelation to the Gentiles**, and the glory of Your people Israel.*" So whereas a lot of the religious leaders in Jesus' day despised Gentiles, Simeon is a real standout: he looks forward to these OT prophecies of the Messiah blessing the Gentiles. But when Luke wrote that in Luke 2, he had in mind the narrative of Acts 13.

Acts 13 is where this *Light to the Gentiles* prophecy really takes shape and is being fulfilled. Acts 13 is where we enter the **2nd half of the book of Acts**. The outline for Acts is **Acts 1:8** where Jesus said **you will be My witnesses** to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the uttermost. Well, **the light of the witnesses** has flooded Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria. The church now has a beachhead in Gentile territory up in **Antioch of Syria** and the Spirit calls out **Barnabas** and **Saul** to go. They go to Cyprus and have this encounter with **Sergius Paulus**, a Roman governor, and **Bar-Jesus** a Jewish sorcerer. The Jew, Bar-Jesus, opposes the gospel and is **blinded in darkness**. Sergius, a Roman governor, believes and comes into the Light. If anyone should've believed it was the Jew but this is a taste of what the rest of Saul's ministry is going to be like. He will preach to the Jews first wherever he goes, typically finding rejection – and then turn to the Gentiles, where he finds more receptivity to the gospel. What is happening there is explained in Romans 9-11.

At the end of 13:46-48 Paul, speaking to the Jews opposing him in Galatian territory quotes **Isaiah**, just like Simeon, *“It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to your first; since you repudiate it and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us, ‘I have placed you as a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the end of the earth.’ When the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord.”* This dynamic shift of Paul becoming largely the apostle to the Gentiles is intentionally highlighted in the narrative. **Saul replaces Peter** as the main character and leading apostle. **“Barnabas and Saul”**, Barnabas and Saul, Barnabas and Saul.... now becomes... **“Paul and his companions”**. From here on out, Saul (a Hebrew name) will go by his Roman name, **Paul** – which ironically means **“little”**. There is a lot of irony in the names there.

	Places	Chapters	Personality	Gospel Receptivity	Date
1 st Section	Jerusalem	1-7	Peter	Jewish	A.D. 33-34
2 nd Section	Judea & Samaria	8-12	Peter/Saul	Jew & Gentile	A.D. 35-48
3 rd Section	Uttermost	13-28	Paul	Mostly Gentile	A.D. 48-62

So chapter 13 is a big deal. And as I was studying this chapter, I couldn't help but pick up on several principles related to being light in the darkness (an Old and New Testament concept).

Jesus' witnesses are like lights in a dark world.

Jesus continues to seek and save the lost through His witnessing Church. And I want to approach the rest of chapter 13 a little slower than we have been, learning mostly from Paul's approach and Paul's theology how to be winsome "lights".

13 “Now Paul and his companions put out to sea from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia; but John [-Mark, writer of the gospel of Mark] left them and returned to Jerusalem. 14 But going on from Perga, they arrived at Pisidian Antioch, and on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down.”

I. TRAVELS TO ASIA MINOR. (VV. 13-14)

Having evangelized the island of **Cyprus**, the home of Barnabas, the men sail north north-west to the city of **Perga**, in the territory of **Pamphylia**, on the coast of **Asia-Minor** (modern day Turkey).

It's at this point that **John Mark decides to return to Jerusalem**. The exact reason why is not recorded but it's not just a minor detail because if you turn to Acts 15:36-40 Paul and Barnabas consider going on a 2nd missionary journey to revisit the places evangelized in the 1st missionary journey and a sharp disagreement occurs. Barnabas wants to take along again his cousin Mark but Paul "*kept insisting that they should not take him who had **deserted them** in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work.*" This becomes such a point of contention between them that they part ways. **Barnabas and Mark** sail to Cyprus and **Paul and Silas** go to Turkey. It's not until several years later in 2 Timothy 4:11, his last letter, that Paul says, "*Bring Mark with you, for he is useful to me for service.*" By then, Mark had probably been discipled by Peter (1 Peter 5:13) and written the gospel of Mark so it's not the end of Mark. God just had different plans for him.

Why Mark left, we don't know, but Paul deemed it unjustified, as desertion. A lot of ink has been spilled over this issue as to what happened and I want to spill some too (!) because as someone who has been on the mission field myself and left earlier than expected, I found much relatability with Mark and his journey that has deeply ministered to me. But I think it could've been a combination of things: **1)** when Mark joined this team, it was cousin Barnabas & Saul, but now it's become **Paul & Company**. **2)** Maybe the **original plan** or destination had changed. I think they were originally intending to go to Rome but Sergius, from Pisidian Antioch, asked them to go there and share with his family and hometown. Sergius Paulus' name is inscribed on stone at Pisidian Antioch. **3)** Maybe the **religious shock** of Gentiles getting saved without baptism or circumcision might be too much. There is great opposition to it. **4) The culture shock:** he's not in Kansas anymore. Culture shock is a real thing. The romance of missions wears off. Homesickness and weariness set in; depression maybe. **5)** Maybe he was **questioning whether God had called him** there or he just tagged along in Paul and Barnabas' call. Maybe God really was calling him home and no one else understood that. **6)** Some suggest maybe he felt like he needed to return home to care for his **widowed mother**. When Peter was miraculously delivered from execution, he went to Mark's mother's house (12:12).

7) This was a **difficult, dangerous journey**. From **Perga to Pisidian Antioch** where they are going, is a 100-mile, 3600 ft climb through the crags and cliffs of the **Taurus mountains**. When Paul talks in 2 Corinthians 11 about experiencing danger from robbers, dangers in the wilderness, in hunger, thirst, without food, in cold and exposure, we should think about this journey through these mountains. That word robbers or thieves could and probably should be translated **pirates** because of all the piracy on the coast of southern Turkey that pushed regular folks into the back country. The Grecian world-conqueror, Alexander the Great, said that the toughest part of his campaign was getting through the Taurus Mountains and fending off these barbarians while doing it. **Malaria** was another issue in the area. Paul even says in Galatians (this same territory) that it was because of a bodily illness that he preached the gospel to them the first time.

I think in light of all of this, Mark might be assessing the situation and thinking, “This just isn’t what I signed up for,” and it’s more than he and many of us would be willing to take on. But from all these difficulties and the tenacity of Paul we can find a principle:

“Lights” should be willing to endure hardship for the gospel.

A lot of times we think that if God is in it, everything will be smooth sailing. Well, Paul was shipwrecked and spent nights in the deep, so... being a witnessing light isn’t always easy! In fact, in you are a bright light, we’ll see by the end of the chapter the darkness tries to snuff you out.

Whatever Mark’s reason for leaving, we also know that **in time God used it**. Mark becomes the disciple of Peter and Mark basically writes his and Peter’s gospel. Mark writes the greatest work of his life after, and despite, the failure in mission work.

“Lights” move forward knowing failure is a back door to divine opportunity.

This is what I love about Mark and about Peter. Mark could relate to Peter who discipled him. **Both had failures** and both became incredibly **useful** as a result of it. Peter took the opportunity to minister to Mark. Sometimes failure is a back door to success. Henry Ford said it’s “*the opportunity to begin again more intelligently.*” It’s a time to reevaluate and grow in maturity.

In fact, I kind of feel bad for those who’ve never experienced failure. If we don’t experience failure, it might an indication we don’t risk enough or set goals high enough or dream enough or leave our comfort zones. And if you don’t, you tend to judge those who do fail. Erwin Lutzer says, “*The reason some people are more noticeably a success than others is that they have not had a chance to fail! For example, I have never had to return home defeated from missionary work in a foreign country. But perhaps the reason is that I have never gone as a missionary to a foreign country. Can I honestly understand the loneliness, culture shock, and adjustment some missionaries have had to make? It is cowardly to judge others when they fail to reach goals that we have never tried to achieve ourselves. Spectators find it easy (and enjoyable) to boo a football player for misjudging a play. But what if those spectators had to play? How would they measure up against the skills of that “despicable” quarterback? There is one sure way of never missing a touchdown pass: just never play the game.*” I liked that. How relevant!

You see lights for Jesus can become even brighter and more attractive lights if they **respond properly to their failures** and **move forward in God’s grace** because God’s grace is adequate to make the best of any situation.¹ And that’s not an excuse for the sin, but it is true that “*Where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more*” (Rom. 5:20). Grace outpaces our sin. So when you fail, don’t turn on one hand to a how-to-be-successful book or to positive thinking or self-confidence; or the other hand, beat yourself up too much and enter the slough of despondency. **Turn to God’s grace**, remembering you are accepted not on the basis of your performance but on the basis of what Christ has done for you. Remember that we have a God who can redeem even our failures and use them powerfully for our transformation. He can override and work out His will despite

our bad decisions (Judges 14:4). Of all people, we should move forward knowing **God is a God of new beginnings and 2nd chances**. Just ask just about every Bible character: Abraham, Moses, David, Jonah, Peter, Mark...

II. ARRIVAL AT PISIDIAN ANTIOCH. (V.14-16)

“they arrive at Pisidian Antioch, and on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down. After the reading of the Law and the Prophets the synagogue officials sent to them, saying, ‘Brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say it.’ Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand said, ‘Men of Israel and you who fear God, listen’” And it’s here that we see Paul’s first recorded message which we’ll have to study in depth next week, Lord willing.

Pisidian Antioch is different from the mission base at **Syrian Antioch**. Just like there’s a bunch of Antioch’s today (there’s even one just east of Alliance), there was back then. There was around a dozen of them, getting their names after rulers named **Antiochus**. Antioch was a **Roman colony** on the **Roman road** which would have made it a great place to plant a church. Merrill Unger said they are planting a church in the nerve center and heart of Asia Minor.

Like on Cyprus, we see **Paul’s custom of entering the synagogues** which were like local churches for the **Jews** and **God-fearing Gentiles**. An order of service might have went as following: they would start out with the **Shema**, the basic Jewish confession from Deuteronomy 6:4-9 – *“Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might...”*; **prayer**; a reading from the **Torah** (Moses’ first 5 books); a reading from the **Prophets**; followed by a **blessing** and a homily or **exposition** of Scripture, here called a **word of encouragement**.ⁱⁱ It was common too for the local synagogue ruler to ask a competent visitor to share so you see why Paul would go to the synagogues. He had opportunity to speak and if he went to Gentiles first, he probably would’ve been turned down by the synagogue before he even entered. We know that he also loved his Jewish brethren and desperately wanted them to know Jesus, the Jewish Messiah (Rom. 9:1-5).

But I find it very winsome that they don’t bust in and start preaching. They respectfully attend the services and listen and wait until called to share. I’ve taken a witnessing principle from this for us in that if we want to be winsome lights in the darkness, we have to be respectful listeners.

Winsome “lights” are respectful listeners.

Proverbs 11:30 says he who is wise wins souls and Paul is a strategic soul-winner (17:2-4, 16-17; 1 Cor. 9:19) as we’ll see. He would take notice of where people were at so that he would know how to reach them and reason with them from Scripture. One of the things we can do to be better soul winners is to work on listening. There are times to be straightforward - times to preach. But asking questions and listening, especially in a one on one conversation, is going to help you know how to share with them – you might be able to bounce off their trials and find some common ground. Jesus seemed to do that too. Not that there’s anything wrong with the Bridge Illustration

or 4 Spiritual Laws, but He seemed flexible in His approach to witnessing. At the well, He talked about living water. Be willing to bend your “Romans Road” a little bit to fit the occasion. But that’s also why it’s important to saturate our own hearts and minds with Scripture so that you can reason from it – reason from Scripture is the most effective way to witness no doubt.

Also, if you’re going to be straightforward in sharing the gospel with a friend or coworker or whoever one on one, why not just ask them if you can share the good news with them? *“Have you ever heard the gospel? Do you mind if I share the gospel with you?”* Nothing wrong with that. If they say yes then they don’t feel like you’re shoving it down their throat. But just ask them and be honest. Maybe you’d say, *“Hey, I was really glad that someone shared with me about what the Bible said about how to get to heaven. Do you mind if I share that with you?”* People appreciate that and will usually respond positively.

On one occasion in the past, I had someone ask me to get some coffee with them. Oh, that’s awesome, I’d love to get to know them more. So we meet up that week at a coffee shop and it’s not 5 minutes before I realized this person was just trying to sell me something. They weren’t really interested in me as a person but like a customer. Not cool. If they’d just said, *“Hey, I sell such and such a product and I was wondering if you’d like to meet up and I could share more with you about it and just get to know you more,”* that would’ve been great. Truth is best spoken through loving relationships, especially in our culture today. Truth in love.

Paul, as we’ll see, is a very **strategic** but **flexible** and **courageous** witness. If we are going to be light in the darkness of our culture, we too need strategy, flexibility and courage. We’ll look more at witnessing in the weeks to come.

ⁱ Erwin Lutzer, *Failure: The Back Door To Success* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1975, 2016).

ⁱⁱ Bock, *The Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books), 451.