

were launching full steam ahead into Gentile territory. When the persecution drove them from Jerusalem, some of them had settled in Antioch, the third-largest city in the empire and the capital of Syria. Before long, crowds of Antiochene Gentiles were dedicating themselves to this Savior called Jesus Christos. With no Jewish background, *Christos* (Messiah) meant nothing to them as a title (the Oiled One?), so they treated it as a last name. Unbelievers in Antioch soon nicknamed them *Christianoi*, followers of this guy Christos.

If Philip's work in Samaria had been radical for the Hebraists, this new Gentile community in Antioch was off the page. The half million residents of Antioch were a cosmopolitan bunch, and people in such large trading centers tended to assemble their own approaches to spirituality from the smorgasbord of available religious options. A little Greek philosophy, a little Persian dualism, a little from the ancestral cult, a little Judaism, or maybe one of the other newer, fashionable cults. Antioch's priestesses of Daphne were famed ritual prostitutes. There was no telling what the pagans of Antioch might do with the teachings of Christ.

Accordingly, the apostles sent one of their trusted leaders, Barnabas, to inspect the Antiochene work. Barnabas was so impressed that he not only conveyed his approval to Jerusalem but decided to settle in Antioch. People were converting right and left; there wasn't enough leadership to keep up with them. Eventually, Barnabas thought of a fellow Hebraist believer who would be an ideal partner in slapping this Gentile community into shape. His name was Saul.

## The Adventures of Paul

Acts 9:1-31, 12:1-14:27

### Saul

When Stephen was raising the hair on the back of Jewish necks in Jerusalem, Saul was a student of Gamaliel, passionately attached to the Law, and already influential among the young rabbis. The Law asserted that anyone hanged on a tree (which included crucifixion) was under God's curse (Deuteronomy 21:23). According to this logic, it seemed that Jesus could not be the Messiah, and anyone who said He was, was blaspheming. This reasoning led to Stephen's stoning, a deed in which Saul played some leadership role. After that, he got himself appointed as a leader in stamping out the Jesus-blasphemy, arresting and executing dozens of believers.

Having all but exterminated the plague in Jerusalem, Saul took an official delegation to nip it in the bud in Damascus. (See map, page 345.) But somewhere along the 150-mile trip northward, a flash of light knocked him to the ground. He heard a voice: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?" The voice identified itself as Jesus.

Saul's clever reasoning was undone. Blinded and shattered, he let himself be taken to Damascus, where he fasted for three days. He groped to make sense of his world. If the voice was Jesus,

then Jesus was indeed the Messiah. If Jesus was the Messiah, then somehow the curse of crucifixion had been overcome. But why would the Messiah deliberately let Himself bear a curse? Moreover, if the Messiah had come, then was the age of the Law over? But how could one live without the Law?

After three days of this, a believer named Ananias arrived at Saul's lodging to lay hands on Saul. Jesus had appeared to Ananias in a vision and ordered him to restore Saul's sight and impart the Holy Spirit to him. Nothing short of a vision would have moved Ananias to approach Christian enemy number one, and even so Ananias argued with Jesus about the wisdom of this move.

But Jesus insisted that this persecutor would become one of His chief ambassadors: "I will show him how much he must suffer for my name" (Acts 9:16). Not a very encouraging promise, perhaps, but by this time Saul was a broken man, ready for anything.

### **Saul in Action**

The first thing Saul did after recovering his strength was make the rounds of the synagogues proclaiming Jesus as the Son of God. This claim from the man notorious for leading the Jerusalem persecution was electrifying. First electrifying, then infuriating for those who tried to refute him. For Saul knew the Jewish Scriptures backward and forward, and could argue Jesus' messiahship from any passage his opponents chose. He did this for more than two years in Damascus and the surrounding district of Arabia until the Jews were at last so enraged that they plotted to kill him. His followers had to smuggle him out of the city.

Next he traveled to Jerusalem, where the believers who remembered their martyred friends would have nothing to do with him. Eventually Barnabas saw the potential in Saul and convinced the apostles to accept him. Once part of the community, Saul launched his confrontational persuasion tactics in the synagogues until murder plots started surfacing again. Again Saul was smuggled out of town, and this time the community told him to go back to his hometown of Tarsus and lie low. He was still too much the same arrogant hothead he had always

been, and he needed his rough edges smoothed before he could accomplish anything useful. This training period went on for years until Barnabas arrived to invite him to Antioch.

### **Antioch's Leadership Team**

The believers in Jerusalem were organized under the leadership of the twelve apostles plus some "elders." This was a natural system since synagogues were run by teams of elders. It was unheard of to have one man in charge.

Antioch seems to have adopted a similar team approach; at one point we read of five men called "prophets and teachers" making certain decisions for the citywide believing community. As in Jerusalem, much of their teaching, worship, and practice of life in Christ probably went on in homes and workplaces, but in some way the small cells were linked under their leadership team. Barnabas was a member—perhaps the most prominent one—of the Antiochene team. Saul became the fifth member when Barnabas brought him in to assist in teaching the Jewish Scriptures, the truths about Christ, and the lifestyle of a believer.

When Saul had been in Antioch for some months, some prophets arrived from Jerusalem. Prophets evidently functioned as official emissaries from the apostles, as well as bearers of messages from God. Like the prophets of Israel, they spoke God's current word to the community on matters about the present and the future. But because the Holy Spirit now inhabited every believer, these New-Covenant prophets no longer bore the sole responsibility for hearing from God. Antioch's leadership team included prophets (Barnabas and/or Saul may have served that function), but Jerusalem's prophets seem to have served alongside the leadership.

At any rate, one of the Jerusalem prophets, Agabus, told the Antiochene community that the empire was about to undergo famine. Judea was particularly at risk. The Antiochenes decided to show their love for their Judean brethren by sending aid. As Jews who had lived in Jerusalem, Barnabas and Saul were the natural choices for emissaries. (As it turned out, famine hit various parts of the empire successively during this decade. Judea suffered severely in AD 46 and 47.)

Barnabas and Saul seized this chance to report to the Jerusalem leadership on the work in Antioch. Everyone agreed that it was crucial to prevent two distinct branches of the faith from developing: a Jewish one based in Jerusalem and a Gentile one based in Antioch. So they came to an agreement about the essentials of their message, "the good news," or "gospel" as they called it. They also agreed that while there was only one community and one message of Christ, the Antiochene team (especially Saul) would be responsible for getting the message to the Gentiles, while the Jerusalem team (headed by Peter) would take responsibility for the Jews, particularly in and around Palestine.

### **An Apostolic Team**

This idea of getting the message to the Gentiles burned in the hearts of the Antiochene group. Their approach to strategic planning was to spend extended periods of time fasting, praying, and worshipping God. In the midst of one such session, one or more of the prophets received instructions from the Holy Spirit. Barnabas and Saul were to be set apart for a new task: to take a mobile team westward into areas where the gospel had never been proclaimed.

The two of them set out with Barnabas's cousin John Mark. Their plan was to go to cities as the Holy Spirit led and to find a synagogue in each one. Up to this point, the gospel had been most successful among Gentiles who either had fully converted to Judaism or sympathized with Jewish beliefs but had not yet undergone the rites of conversion. Also, God had laid down a principle that the truth must be offered to the chosen race first before it was proclaimed among the nations. The Jews still deserved a chance to take up their ancient assignment to be lights to the Gentiles.

Saul had the rare privilege of being a Jew born with Roman citizenship. His family must have had some standing in his hometown to have won that right. As a citizen, he had a Roman name as well as his Jewish one. His Roman surname was Paulus, and when he left Antioch to proclaim Christ to the Gentiles, he decided to use that name rather than one that advertised his Jewishness. One of his basic principles of ministry was to adapt

to the culture he wanted to reach in every way possible. He wouldn't compromise his morals, of course, but in nonessentials like food, clothing, customs, and even his name he was committed to "going native" in order not to obscure his message.

A curious shift occurred as Barnabas, Paul, and Mark traveled from city to city. When they left Antioch, Barnabas was the ranking team member. But it soon became clear that Paul was the more gifted spokesman and that God was choosing to work more miracles of power through Paul than Barnabas. Without debate, Paul became the senior partner.

Moreover, during this trip the biblical account shifts from calling the partners "prophets" or "teachers" to labeling them "apostles." Paul and Barnabas began to realize God had given them a commission parallel to the Twelve's. They were apostles to the Gentiles. No one would challenge the Twelve's special status, since they had actually been with Jesus, but Paul and Barnabas were now serving as "sent ones" with apostolic authority and even the signs of power — blinding a sorcerer and healing a lame man — to back it up.

So the local team in Antioch had spawned something new: a mobile apostolic team for spreading the gospel to places it had never touched. The threesome journeyed to the island of Cyprus, then sailed to the coast of Asia Minor. Young Mark had had enough of the grueling missionary lifestyle by that time and took a boat to Jerusalem. But Paul and Barnabas hiked inland to and around the region of Phrygian Galatia.

Every Sabbath they would visit a synagogue, and as learned Jews from Jerusalem they would naturally be invited to speak on the passage of Scripture for the day. Invariably Paul would use the passage as a springboard to announce the Messiah. He consistently won over Gentile converts and sympathizers, but the Jews were usually furious and ran the team out of town. However, the expulsion normally didn't take place until a tiny new community of believers had been established.

### **Homeward Bound**

After planting seeds in seven towns, the pair retraced their steps to visit each cell group. Along with impressing on the new

disciples the basic truths they needed to remember, the team had a word of tough encouragement: "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). It was not going to be easy to follow Christ in towns where the community of faith numbered maybe a dozen, where the Gentiles scorned people who accepted only one God, and where the Jews viewed the new sect as a wicked heresy.

In each city, Paul and Barnabas selected a few of the most responsible new believers to serve as elders. It wasn't ideal to put raw recruits in charge of a platoon, but there weren't any alternatives. And these people had the Holy Spirit just like every other disciple, so the apostles trusted Him to mature the new plants however He chose.

What with the snail's pace of ancient travel and the time needed to establish new cells, this trip probably took a couple of years. But sometime in AD 48, the mobile team arrived back in Antioch, flush with victory, to report to their home community. There they stayed for probably more than a year.

No doubt they needed the rest. Road life in the ancient world was not first class. A very rich man might rent a carriage, but exactly two means of travel were available to anyone else: a ship by sea, or one's two feet by land. (Horses were extremely hard to ride since stirrups and real saddles had not yet been invented.)

The Roman roads were pretty good and relatively safe; at least there were no pillaging armies, although bandits were inevitable. And about every twenty-two miles was an inn.

But twenty-two miles is a stiff pace on foot. If the road was hilly, the weather wet or muddy, or the morning start delayed, Paul and Barnabas no doubt camped in the open. Heat or illness could weaken them; snow could block a mountain pass; hail, flooding, and wild animals could be life-threatening. The road across Asia Minor (modern Turkey) crosses a plateau that averages 3,000 feet of elevation, and is twice that in some sections. Temperatures rise and plummet dramatically.

Furthermore, the inns were not exactly the Ritz. Most were bare courtyards surrounded by rooms. Baggage and animals shared the courtyard with livestock drivers, who slept around dried dung fires. If Paul and Barnabas were low on funds, they

would probably have slept with them. If they had more money, they could rent a bed in a room along with several strangers who snored, or who might steal their possessions while they slept. There was also the inevitable colony of bedbugs.

If a traveler wanted food from a local peasant, he had to pay for it. Paul was trained as a leather worker, but it took time to ply the trade. Yet Paul preferred to avoid mooching off the people he was introducing to Christ, so the team probably spent stretches of time working to earn money to finance the next leg of their trip.

With land travel so slow and hazardous, one might think people would have traveled by sea whenever possible. But because ships of the day were at the mercy of prevailing winds, east-to-west sailing was exasperatingly slow. Paul preferred to walk west and sail east. Further, passenger ships were rare, and cargo ships took passengers only when they had room. Paul and Barnabas would have to find one going in their direction, haggle with the owner over the fee, then wait until the captain had judged both winds and omens to be favorable. (Sailors were even more superstitious than landmen.)

On board, passengers took turns cooking their own food in the galley after the crew was fed; the captain generously furnished water. A stray splash or rough seas might mean no fire for the evening. There was no way to refrigerate meat, so ships planned to dock at least every few nights. But if a storm or long voyage delayed docking, only grain would be edible.

Few ships had cabins, so passengers lived on deck with only the sail for shade and shelter. Experienced travelers brought tents for nights when the ship docked at a port with no inn.

Shipwreck and damage were common. Violent storms made winter sailing suicidal, but even in spring and fall sailing was a risk. Yet Paul was willing to take it. In the course of his life, in addition to trudging about 1,795 miles overland on missionary journeys, he also logged about 1,290 miles by sea.

In a letter some years later, Paul mentioned that an illness first brought him to preach in Galatia (Galatians 4:13). This may have been a preexisting condition, but weeks of exposure, hunger, thirst, sea sickness, and hard hiking might drop even a strong man in his tracks.