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WEEK ONE

Unexplainable
BEGINNINGS

WEEK 1 | DAY 1

THE UNEXPLAINABLE CHURCH

VARIOUS PASSAGES IN ACTS

In case you weren't with us for *An Unexplainable Life: Recovering the Wonder and Devotion of the Early Church*—or maybe you were with us but it's been a while—let's start with a brief history lesson. Acts 13 began after the church had been in existence for a period of at least ten years and possibly closer to twenty. We were first introduced to Barnabas back in Acts 4. Neither an apostle nor a deacon, this humble believer became a key player in the growth and expansion of the early church. During pivotal moments, Barnabas came to the rescue and brought peace into difficult circumstances.

Read Acts 4:32–37 and record every detail you discover about Barnabas:

After Stephen suffered martyrdom under Saul's supervision in Acts 7, the believers fled Jerusalem and scattered throughout the Roman Empire. In an effort to find them, return them to Jerusalem, and have them suffer the same trial and sentencing as Stephen, a man named Saul set out from Jerusalem to Damascus. On this journey, Saul received his divine invitation to follow Jesus Christ and become His witness to the Gentiles.

Read Acts 9:1–19 and consider the following:

What question did Jesus ask Saul?

What command did Jesus give to him?

What additional information about Saul's calling is given to Ananias?

How did Saul, who became known by his Gentile name Paul, later describe this call in Galatians 1:15–16?

Acts 9:26–30 explains how Saul and Barnabas first became acquainted with each other. Describe the circumstances below:

According to Acts 11:19–26, how did Paul and Barnabas later become reunited?

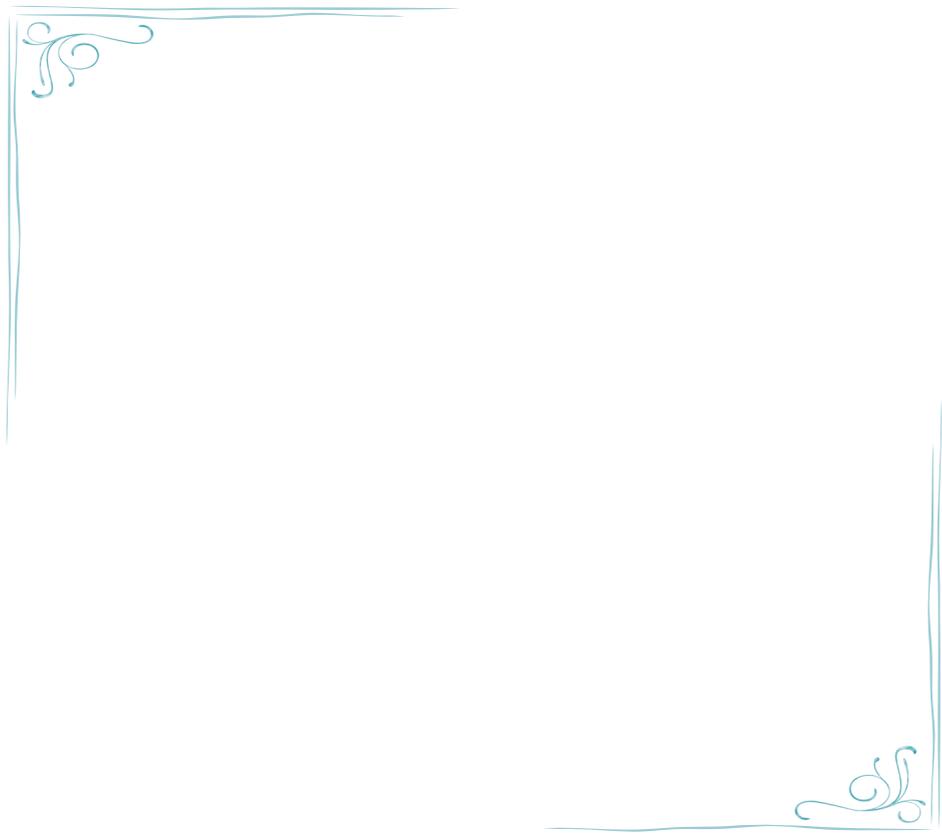
Describe in your own words what you think their relationship may have been like:

The church at Antioch was the first international church. Up to this point, it was Jews who primarily comprised the church, along with some Gentile proselytes. Antioch was the first church to admit Gentile converts—and it was located in the third largest city in the Roman Empire, second only to Alexandria and Rome. The city served as the capital of the province of Syria and was located about a dozen miles inland from the Mediterranean Sea along the Orontes River, making it a

large commercial center. Populated by people from varying ethnic and religious backgrounds, the citizens of Antioch acquiesced to the expression of new ideas more readily than other less cosmopolitan cities.

How did the Antiochan believers express their desire for unity with their fellow Palestinian believers in Acts 11:27–30?

After this trip to Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch, where our story is ready to begin. Both men who faithfully served the Lord for over a decade will now be set apart for a special work, bringing the gospel into global expansion and turning the world upside down.



WEEK 1 | DAY 2

READY, SET, GO!

ACTS 13:1-3

I so often feel like the timeline of my life could be effectively described by the adage “Hurry up and wait.” Can you relate? I feel rushed day to day, yet I’m also filled with hopes and dreams in the depth of my soul to which God whispers, “Hold on, child. Not just yet.” Prayers I long to have answered. Trials I’d like to have over. Chapters I’d like to have closed. Waiting, still waiting. I wonder how Paul felt during this expanse of time since Jesus first appeared to him on the road to Damascus. Prone to emotion and the influence of circumstances, did he ever waver in his belief? As the years passed by, did he begin to doubt God would ever give him the green light to go to the Gentiles?

I find it interesting that we are told virtually nothing as to what Paul did during this time. Other than his trip to Arabia where he received instruction from Christ Himself (see Galatians 1:11–18), we only know that he went home to Tarsus. Then Barnabas showed up and invited him to come to Antioch to help disciple the Gentile believers who needed instruction in how to live. Did Paul feel ready at that point? Was he excited or afraid?

I love the fact that God had Paul minister alongside Barnabas for a solid year before they set out together on their first missionary journey. After being separated for so long, God knit their hearts together through service in a thriving church before sending them into difficult circumstances. God’s ways and timing are so unexplainably perfect. During that year, the church at Antioch also received incredible teaching and instruction from these two heroes of the faith. This surely prepared the church at large to pray for Paul and Barnabas as well as continue to thrive in their absence.

Read Acts 13:1–3 aloud and answer the following questions:

What two specific roles of leadership are mentioned?

List the names of the five men in these roles and anything else we are told about their background or ethnicity:

In what two activities were they participating when the Holy Spirit spoke?

What did He say?

Three actions take place in verse 3. Write them out below in their order of occurrence:

The diversity of the church in Antioch is reflected in its leadership. We have already been introduced to Barnabas, a Jew from the tribe of Levi, resident of Cyprus, who therefore presumably spoke Greek along with Hebrew. Paul was a Greek-speaking Jew who grew up in Tarsus and became a Pharisee well versed in the Old Testament writings and fluent in Hebrew. Calling Simeon Niger suggests this man was dark-skinned, an African, or both. Lucius also came from Cyrene.

Manaen, identified as having an intimate relationship with Herod the tetrarch, presumably was well-educated in Hebrew as well as current philosophies and religions common to the first century—possibly due to having been raised in the royal court along with Herod.

Togetherness is implied in their worship and fasting. This emphasizes the unity among this leadership. They were also not too busy carrying out the work of the Lord to gather together and worship the one for whom they so tirelessly labored. What a wonderful lesson for us today in our busy lives! It was this practice of worship, along with fasting, that opened the door for the Holy Spirit to speak.

Do you find it difficult to cease attending to your unending duties in order to gather with other believers solely for the purpose of worship? How so?

On a practical level, what are some things from which we could “fast” in order to allow more time in our lives for worship?

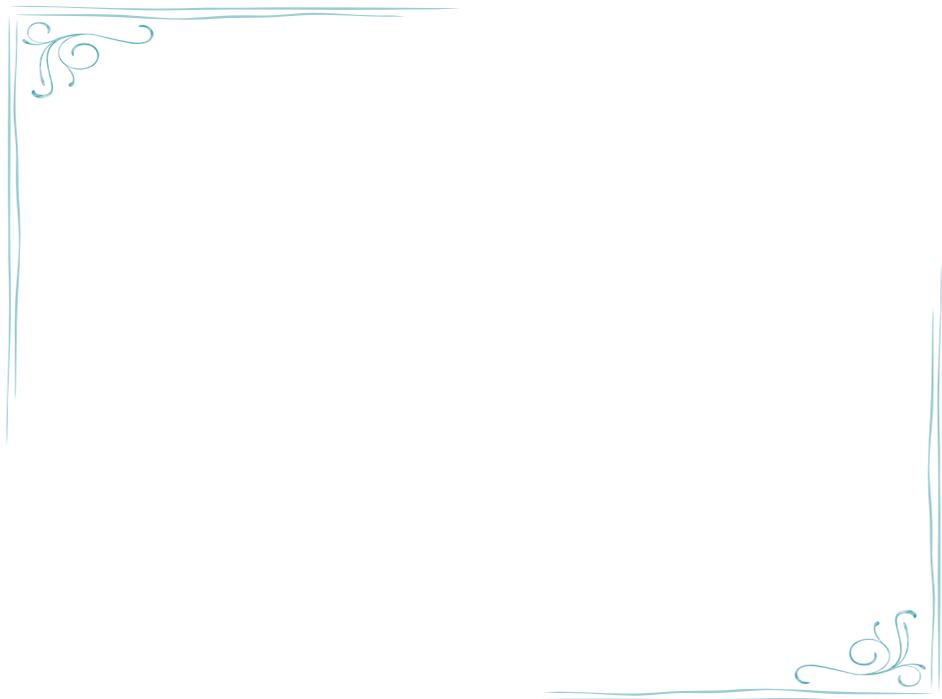
Why do you suppose the Holy Spirit chose to reveal His will in this moment of worship rather than in the midst of their labor?

Notice that it was *after* their worship and the Holy Spirit speaking that they prayed. We are always wise to seek confirmation when we feel we have received a directive from God. After the revelation of the Spirit’s will, they quite possibly interceded for Paul and Barnabas, asking for wisdom, guidance, and preparation for this special work.

Why might the Holy Spirit have chosen to communicate His plans to the church collectively rather than directly to Paul and Barnabas individually?

How might you have felt if you were Paul and Barnabas at this moment? Or one of the other three men?

God prepared Paul and Barnabas for this moment. They were ready. Through the unity of the leadership at Antioch, they had the prayer covering, the financial provision, and the blessing for their journey. Now, ten years or so after Saul's conversion as he waited for God to put His call into action, the Spirit said to Paul, "Go!"



WEEK 1 | DAY 3

BLIND DISBELIEF

ACTS 13:4-12

Up to this point in the book of Acts, authentication of the gospel message was accompanied by miracles. It is no wonder, then, that we see Paul perform a miracle. If either Paul or Barnabas harbored any doubt that God was directing their journey, their supernatural ability over demonic power immediately squelched it. This passage of Scripture records Paul's first miracle.

After traveling the nearly fifteen miles from Antioch to Seleucia, Paul, Barnabas, and John Mark boarded a ship and headed for the island of Cyprus. Their first stop on the island was the city of Salamis.

Where did they preach the gospel within this city?

Where did they go next?

Whom did they encounter there and what was his occupation? Who specifically sought his services?

How is Sergius Paulus described?

From a practical point of view, why would Elymas oppose Paul and Barnabas?

What happened to Elymas as a result of his opposition?

What effect did Paul's miracle have on Sergius Paulus?

Roman citizens were appointed as proconsuls by the Senate. Often they were members of the Roman Senate themselves and well educated. This position is contrasted with procurators who were appointed by the emperor. Why he employed Bar-Jesus, or Elymas, is unknown, but it appears other high-ranking Roman officers employed sorcerers or magicians during this time, presumably to give them advice and to predict the future. In spite of his superstitious nature, Sergius Paulus is still called an “intelligent” man.

Interestingly, it was through the miracle of Elymas's blindness that Sergius Paulus came to see and believe the message of Paul and Barnabas.

While his name, Bar-Jesus, means “son of salvation,” Paul called him a “son of the devil.” Paul doesn't make this accusation until after he “looked intently at him,” thereby implying Paul's discernment into his heart by the power of the Holy Spirit. I think Paul's gift of discernment, along with his ability to perform miracles, is meant to alert us to his new role as an apostle. This special gift of discernment is also attributed to Peter on more than one occasion.

Describe Peter's exercise of this gift in Acts 5:1–11:

Describe it again in Acts 8:14–24:

How does Paul describe his apostleship in 1 Corinthians 15:10?

From this moment forward, we see Paul step into the fullness of his calling as apostle to the Gentiles. Remember, it had been several years since he had been called Christ’s “chosen instrument to go to the Gentiles” (Acts 9:15). Paul had learned much, labored intently, and sought to remain faithful to Christ. The moment when he was struck with sudden blindness is brought into crystal-clear clarity. Paul is granted the ability to perform miracles and see into the hearts of men. He has the gifts of an apostle. And Paul’s first convert on his inaugural missionary journey? A Gentile.

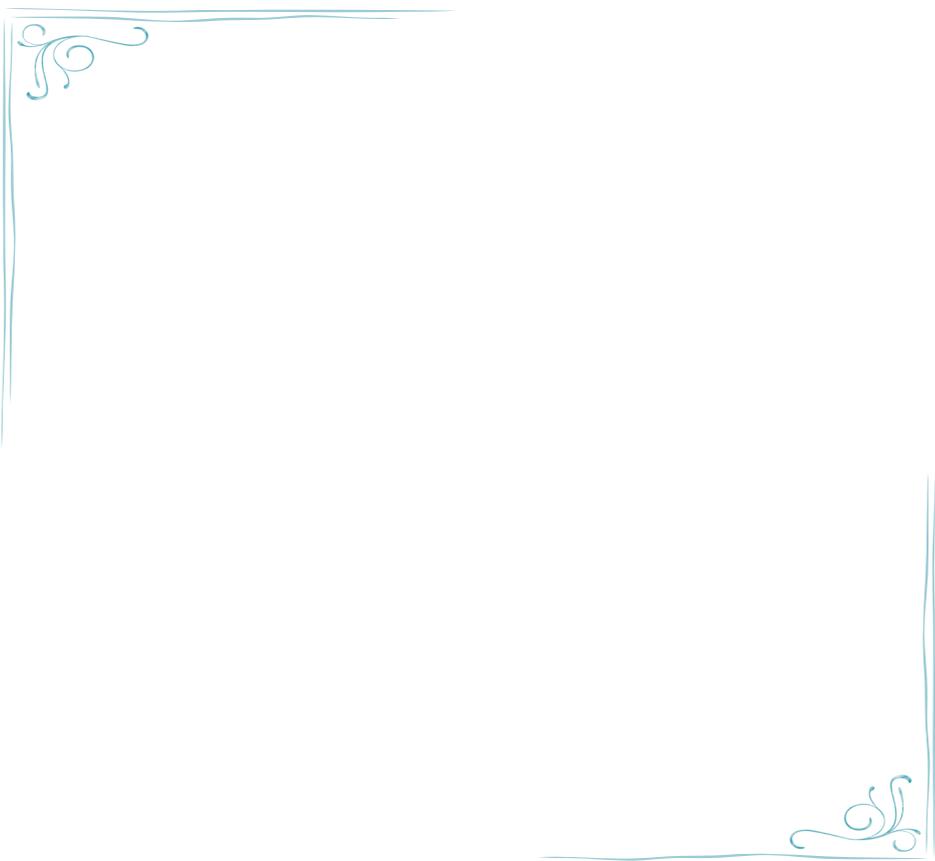
I find it so beautiful that God allowed Barnabas to witness this monumental fulfillment of Paul’s divine call. After all, Barnabas was the first believer to bring Paul into the fold in Jerusalem. In faith he embraced the chief murderer of the early Christian church, believing God was able to change the vilest of hearts. Then again it was Barnabas who set out on the hundred-mile trek from Tarsus to Antioch (Acts 11:25–26) to bring Paul to the first Gentile church. Now, after his faithful encouragement to Paul and belief in his testimony, God allows Barnabas to witness firsthand the fullness of Paul’s calling.

Do you have someone in your life for whom you have been waiting a long time to see the work of God fulfilled? Maybe this is occurring in your own life. How does Paul’s testimony encourage you?

May we, and those whom we have faithfully served, see, believe, and be astonished at the teaching of the Lord!

Note: It's certainly possible Paul was already ministering to Gentile believers in Tarsus before arriving in Antioch. We cannot definitively know this one way or another; however, this passage in Acts 13 is Scripture's first account of Paul functioning fully as an apostle with the ability to perform miracles and exercise discernment.

For more about Antioch in Syria, see Deeper Discoveries at ericawiggenhorn.com.



WEEK 1 | DAY 4

THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME

ACTS 13:13–43

Traveling to Cyprus meant familiar territory for Barnabas. This island was his home, and he no doubt knew many people there. Paul and Barnabas then sailed to Asia Minor, the region that included Paul's hometown of Tarsus, though that town was not included in their trip. Rather, they traveled a hundred miles north from the coast through mountainous terrain to reach Pisidian Antioch (a different Antioch than Antioch in Syria). John Mark left them and returned to Jerusalem before completing this arduous journey. Upon arrival, Paul and Barnabas once again entered a synagogue to share the good news of Jesus Christ with their Jewish brothers.

What did the synagogue rulers invite Paul and Barnabas to do?

What two groups of people did Paul address? See verses 16 and 26.

What did he admonish them to do?

Carefully read through Acts 13:17–23 and circle every action word (verb). Draw an arrow back to the person doing the action (the subject) in the sentence. What do you notice?

How does Paul describe David in Acts 13:22?

Who is David's promised offspring, according to Acts 13:23?

How does John the Baptist compare himself to Jesus in Acts 13:24–25?

Through this whirlwind history lesson, Paul emphasizes God as the initiator and completer of His will for His people Israel. God carried out and fulfilled His plans despite the unbelief and disobedience of His people (see Numbers 14:20–23; Judges 2:1–4; 1 Samuel 8:4–10). Paul brought to mind God's faithfulness and grace toward His people during pivotal moments in their history. This introduction is paramount—because Paul's next section calls the current generation of Jews in Jerusalem to account for their rejection of God's anointed Messiah.

Read Acts 13:26–39.

Note again the two groups Paul's audience contains:

What does Paul call his message?

Of what are the people of Israel currently guilty?

What action did God take in this passage?

In verse 34, Paul cites Isaiah 55. How does this passage of Scripture allude to the Gentiles being included in the promised salvation of the Jews (see especially vv. 5–11)?

How is David contrasted with Jesus in Acts 13:36–37?

What promise is given in Acts 13:38–39?

The promises given to David were made in 2 Samuel 7:1–17. God proclaimed that the throne of David would last forever. Because Jesus rose from the dead never to die again, He was able to fulfill this promise. He was also able to forgive all sins, our past and present sins, both willful and unintentional.¹

After delivering his explanation of how Jesus fulfilled the Scriptures, Paul now moved into his final point: “Now that you have heard the good news, you must make a decision.”

Read Acts 13:40–43.

What warning did Paul issue to his audience?

How did they respond?

How does the Scripture imply that some of them believed Paul's message (see especially verse 43)?

Yesterday we noticed the parallels between Peter's spiritual giftedness as an apostle and how Paul had been given those same abilities. This sermon by Paul also demonstrated the authenticity of his apostleship. The elements of this first recorded sermon by Paul mirror Peter's initial sermon given on Pentecost.

Read Acts 2:22–36 and fill in the following blanks.

Jesus was crucified according to the _____ of God (v. 23).

Both quote a prophecy of David. Read Psalm 16:8–10 and then write out Acts 2:27.

In Acts 13:33, Paul quotes Psalm 2:7. How does Paul tie in David's prophetic words with who Jesus is?

You, dear one, have mined much information from the Scriptures today. I am proud of your diligence! My prayer, as was Peter's and Paul's in their Spirit-filled sermons, is that you are able to grasp how Jesus is indeed the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. As Paul later penned, "For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory" (2 Corinthians 1:20). I also pray you were able to see how Paul preached the same message that Peter preached. This is important because as the Acts narrative unfolds, you will discover that Paul was accused of distorting the elements of the gospel message, creating division among the Jewish and Gentile believers.

You and I hold this beautiful message within our hearts today. If we have accepted Christ as our Savior, we have been given every promise of God.

What are we given as a guarantee that we have received the promises of God, according to Paul in Ephesians 1:13–14?

The powerful Holy Spirit enables us to live unexplainable lives. He unites us together to become the unexplainable church. We are entrusted with the message of salvation in our time and place in history. Paul and Barnabas started their first missionary journey by returning "home." Maybe you and I need to be diligent to first share the message right in our own backyard.

Write down the names of one to five people for whom you will pray "to be a witness" throughout the remainder of this study.

WEEK 1 | DAY 5

WOMEN OF INFLUENCE

ACTS 13:44–52

Yesterday we read how Paul's sermon left the people wanting more. They begged him to return next Sabbath for further instruction. Some of them even sought out Paul and Barnabas afterward. Their hearts were stirred and minds were piqued with interest to hear more about Jesus. We can assume that news of Paul's sermon spread throughout Antioch in Pisidia by what we discover in today's passage.

Read aloud Acts 13:44–49.

Who gathered on the next Sabbath?

How did the Jewish leaders of the synagogue feel about this? What did they do?

How did Paul and Barnabas respond to them? How did they justify their response?

How did the Gentiles respond to Paul's declaration?

I wish the story ended right here with the semi-happy ending of many Gentiles turning to faith and the rejection of the message by many Jews minimizing the joy. However, this next detail, added on to the end of the story, leaps off the page with conviction and application.

Write out Acts 13:50 below and circle the action words (verbs).

Some synonyms for *incited* include *provoked*, *goaded*, *aroused*, and *inflamed*. Did you notice the women were mentioned in the verse before the men? In a culture where women were second-class citizens, it is uncommon that they would be listed first—unless, of course, their influence exceeded that of the men. Being in women’s ministry for over twenty years, I can testify how women hold truly remarkable qualities. Women are tremendous networkers and influencers. If something needs to be accomplished, one woman can round up ten others at a moment’s notice to help her complete the task. If you want an event to be organized or an action to be taken, get women involved. They will wholeheartedly jump into a task to meet a need and not look back until it’s completed.

But there’s a flip side to this. Women’s hearts are so big they will quickly and easily offer their help when needed. Sometimes, however, our big hearts become overwhelmed by emotion rather than logic. We jump on board due to our feelings. I don’t think the women were listed in this passage first because they were the biggest offenders. I think the women were listed first because the Jews, who harbored jealousy, intentionally sought to incite the women. They knew if they could rouse a small number of prominent women and convince them of the danger Paul and Barnabas posed, they would quickly and effectively network throughout the city to take action. In essence, these Jewish leaders used the giftedness and uniqueness of women against them.

As the Acts narrative unfolds, the role of women in each city Paul visits is highlighted. In every church, women play a vital role in its health or its sickness. Their influence is either directly stated or implied, but they are mentioned in every account. What does this mean for you and me today? A pastor I dearly respect has

said, “It’s the women who bring the family to church.” Mother Teresa said, “If you want to change the world, go home and love your family.” My husband frequently jokes, “Happy wife, happy life.” Ladies, you and I have tremendous influence in our homes and our churches. We may sometimes feel like second-class citizens, but our influence remains.

Before we close our study this week, let’s stop and spend some time with our heavenly Father. Sit at His feet and pour out your heart to Him. Record what He reveals to you below:

How does my attitude influence my family? My church?

How does my speech influence my family? My church?

Do my actions demonstrate the love of Christ to my family? To my church?

The incredible truth is that the church will not become unexplainable without the presence of unexplainable women. Our influence effectively undergirds other believers. As the Christian church navigates through an increasingly turbulent culture, we can either shore up the body of believers or shipwreck it. When others emotionally incite us to respond or take action, may we first run to the arms of our Father for guidance.