

**R. ALBERT
MOHLER, JR.
ACTS 13-28
FOR YOU**



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To
Marvin and Mary Kahler

I did not realize that when I married your precious and beautiful daughter, I would be received so graciously as your son, and join your wonderful family.

Your commitment to Christ and your love for the church have sustained us. Your love for each other and for your children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren inspires us. Your steadfastness undergirds us.

Dad was taken from us far too soon, but our memory of him is precious.

Mom, at age 94, you remain, as always, a marvel.

Thank you. Always.

Acts 13–28 For You

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CONTENTS

Series Preface	7
Introduction	9
1. Toward the Ends of the Earth <i>13:1 – 14:28</i>	13
2. The Council of Jerusalem <i>15:1-41</i>	29
3. A Cloth-Dealer, a Slavegirl, and a Jailer <i>16:1-40</i>	45
4. This I Proclaim to You <i>17:1-34</i>	59
5. I Have Many in This City <i>18:1-28</i>	75
6. Repentance and Riots <i>19:1-41</i>	91
7. Farewell to the Elders <i>20:1-38</i>	105
8. The Return to Jerusalem and the Arrest of Paul <i>21:1 – 22:30</i>	121
9. On Trial for the Resurrection <i>23:1 –24:27</i>	137
10. To Caesar You Shall Go <i>25:1-27</i>	153
11. The Apostle and the King <i>26:1-32</i>	167
12. God’s Kingdom at the Empire’s Heart <i>27:1 – 28:31</i>	181
Glossary	197
Appendix: Map of the Mediterranean in the Time of the Book of Acts	204
Acknowledgments	205

SERIES PREFACE

Each volume of the *God's Word For You* series takes you to the heart of a book of the Bible, and applies its truths to your heart.

The central aim of each title is to be:

- Bible centered
- Christ glorifying
- Relevantly applied
- Easily readable

You can use *Acts 13–28 For You*:

To read. You can simply read from cover to cover, as a book that explains and explores the themes, encouragements and challenges of this part of Scripture.

To feed. You can work through this book as part of your own personal regular devotions, or use it alongside a sermon or Bible-study series at your church. Each chapter is divided into two (or occasionally three) shorter sections, with questions for reflection at the end of each.

To lead. You can use this as a resource to help you teach God's word to others, both in small-group and whole-church settings. You'll find tricky verses or concepts explained using ordinary language, and helpful themes and illustrations along with suggested applications.

These books are not commentaries. They assume no understanding of the original Bible languages, nor a high level of biblical knowledge. Verse references are marked in **bold** so that you can refer to them easily. Any words that are used rarely or differently in everyday language outside the church are marked in **gray** when they first appear, and are explained in a glossary toward the back. There, you'll also find details of resources you can use alongside this one, in both personal and church life.

Our prayer is that as you read, you'll be struck not by the contents of this book, but by the book it's helping you open up; and that you'll praise not the author of this book, but the One he is pointing you to.

Carl Laferton, Series Editor

Bible translations used:

- ESV: English Standard Version (this is the version being quoted unless otherwise stated)
- NIV: New International Version, 2011 edition

INTRODUCTION TO ACTS 13 – 28

Acts 13 marks a watershed moment in the narrative of the early church. In the first volume of this expository guide, we left off at Acts 12, where Luke began to shift the focus of his story from Peter and the church in Jerusalem to Paul and Barnabas, who would take the gospel to Gentile lands. Indeed, where chapters 1 – 12 chronicled the birth and growth of the Jerusalem church, chapters 13 – 28 recount the advance of the gospel throughout the Roman Empire.

In Acts 1:8, Jesus said to his disciples, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” The latter half of Acts tells the story of the Holy Spirit’s work through Paul, Barnabas, and many others who bore witness to the gospel as it began to extend to the ends of the earth. God will have a people as his own from every tribe, tongue, and nation.

In these chapters, we will travel with Paul throughout the Roman Empire as he preaches the gospel, and plants and encourages churches, and then is arrested for his faithfulness to Christ. In Acts 9 Paul (formerly known as Saul) set out to persecute the church of Jesus Christ, but then the Lord appeared to him on the road to Damascus. Saul was converted to faith in Christ and then emerged as the great apostle to the Gentiles. Acts 13 – 28 will reveal the transformative power of God’s saving grace as he took a former opponent of the gospel and made him into one of its greatest heralds.

This volume will cover the story of God’s overflowing mercy not only to Paul but to all believers in Jesus Christ. God reveals in these chapters that he uses broken, sinful people to accomplish his purposes in salvation history. This is a humbling privilege. This is unspeakable grace—the holy God of the cosmos rescues us out of our sin and rebellion, and refashions us into ambassadors for his kingdom. As he commissioned Paul to take the gospel to the nations, so he also calls

* Words in **gray** are defined in the Glossary (page 197).

all his redeemed children into his service to bear witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. The church's obedience to our Lord's command in Acts 1:8 is dramatically revealed in this second half of the book.

We also learn that true gospel ministry often meets enormous suffering, trials, and opposition. Indeed, as we will see in the coming chapters, where you find the kingdom of God advancing, you find mount-

Where you find
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ing spiritual opposition. Yet despite the forces that seek to thwart Paul and his missionary journeys, we shall see how God proves himself faithful repeatedly. Nothing will overcome God's will. Nothing can oppose his purposes.

These chapters, therefore, possess an abundance of spiritual nourishment and theological edification for the contemporary church. They provide at least three vital lessons for the church in our day: a church that, much like the church of Paul's day, faces fierce opposition, in our case from the secular forces of modernity.

First, Acts 13 – 28 reveals the need for God's people to be zealous in gospel ministry. In Acts 20, Paul delivers his famous farewell address to the Ephesian elders. In verse 24, Paul says, "But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God." Paul laid his life down for the gospel of Jesus Christ. He measured the value of his life by his fidelity to the mission given him by God. Paul's zeal for God's glory shines in every chapter. This is a lesson for every Christian, not just for full-time pastors and missionaries. Zeal for God and his gospel ought to mark every disciple of Jesus Christ. God has saved us out of darkness and made us ambassadors of his kingdom. This mission demands an ardent passion for God and his glory—a passion that overcomes the fiercest opposition and suffering.

Second, Luke details in these chapters the power of the Holy Spirit. While zeal for God must grip every disciple, the Holy Spirit must empower us. Indeed, our hope for fruitfulness hinges upon the work of the Spirit. We can muster all our energy and passion for any task, but if we do not have the Spirit, we will crumble beneath the weight of opposition. All efforts apart from the Holy Spirit will fail. Acts 13 – 28 tells the incredible story of Spirit empowerment—how a group of unlikely men and women utterly changed the world because they possessed the Spirit and the Holy Spirit possessed them. These chapters ought to drive us to our knees in prayer. Where you find a church in triumph, you find a people dependent upon the Holy Spirit’s direction and empowerment.

Third, Acts 13 – 28 will reveal that the church must be marked by an unshakeable trust in the sovereign power of God, especially in the face of suffering. In almost every chapter, the reader would expect Paul to meet his end or to surrender to defeat as again and again he faces fierce persecution. He is frequently beaten, stoned and left for dead, shipwrecked, and often held by prisoners’ chains. Yet despite the enormous opposition Paul faces, God’s sovereign rule uses Paul’s suffering in glorious ways. Acts reminds us that God is with us, even in our suffering for the gospel.

These chapters, therefore, remind Christians that discipleship means difficulty—a life of ease, comfort, and prosperity does not await people zealous for God and his kingdom. Quite the contrary—Acts shows us the immense suffering that awaits the faithful servants of Christ. Yet, despite that suffering, it reveals the glorious grace, mercy, and power of God. While Paul faced what seemed like certain death at several points during his ministry, he pressed on with an unspeakable joy; he knew that he lived as a citizen of heaven and that his inheritance lay safe in the courts of heaven under the protection of God himself. No thief could steal Paul’s treasure; no moth could destroy it. So Paul lived zealously, trusting in the promises of God. He relied upon the Spirit. He clung to God.

Introduction

This is the story of Acts 13 – 28. As we progress through these pages of holy Scripture, may God use his word to make us more zealous for his kingdom, to show us our need for his Holy Spirit, and to help us trust in him as we, in our turn, face trials and suffering in the cause of the gospel. For while the Book of Acts tells the story of the earliest years of the church of Jesus Christ, it is not only the story of the apostles and the earliest churches. It is the story of the church—the church that Jesus Christ established and to which he promised that the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. Thus, this is the story that now continues in your church. May God encourage Christ’s church through this continuing study of the book of Acts.

1. TOWARD THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

Acts 13 begins a phase of the book which centers upon the missionary journeys of the **apostle** Paul. These chapters do not merely chronicle the geographic movements of a faithful apostle. They demonstrate the power of the gospel as it advances throughout the Mediterranean world and beyond. This mass movement of the gospel, however, began when the people of God sought his name through fasting and prayer (**13:2***).

Luke begins the narrative by summarizing the ministry and the status of the church in Antioch (**v 1**). Luke includes these details to indicate the growing influence of Antioch as a hub of Christian activity. In so doing, Luke sets Antioch up as an equal to Jerusalem in terms of influence in the Christian world.

After Luke records some of the leaders there in Antioch, he writes, "While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them'" (**v 2**). As the church fasted and sought the face of the Lord through prayer, God interrupted their prayers and answered. The Holy Spirit spoke his will: the **consecration** of Barnabas and Paul for a glorious mission of gospel proclamation.

This meeting in Antioch was true fellowship. Churches today often settle for a watered-down vision of fellowship which typically includes

* All Acts verse references being looked at in each chapter part are in **bold**.

eating a meal and talking about the newest movies and latest professional sport developments. This is not biblical fellowship. True fellowship radiates the glories of Christ through prayer and love. At this prayer meeting in Antioch, God answered and set apart two men who would turn the world upside down. Never underestimate the power of true fellowship when God's people gather together in prayer.

The story continues as the church **laid their hands** on Barnabas and Saul, and sent them to Seleucia and Cyprus (**v 3-4**). After praying over them, they sent them on their way to the seaport of Antioch in order to begin their mission in Cyprus, the home of Barnabas (4:36). Once they were on Cyprus, Luke records three things of significance.

1. The Strategy

Luke tells us in **13:5** that Barnabas and Saul began to preach the word of God in the synagogues. These people already believed in God and in the Scriptures. Barnabas and Saul, as Jewish men, would have shared a common religious background with those at the synagogue. Saul and Barnabas, therefore, were leveraging the common ground they shared with Jews toward proclaiming the gospel. This strategy of preaching first to the Jews demonstrates the careful and reasoned approach that Saul and Barnabas took as they sought to advance the gospel of Christ throughout the Mediterranean world. Their gospel preaching began in the synagogues.

2. John Mark

Barnabas and Saul enlisted the help of John to serve as an aide and apprentice in their gospel work (**v 5**). This John was John Mark, the author of the Gospel of Mark. Saul and Barnabas would have had no indication that God would use John Mark as an **inspired** author of the New Testament. This short introduction to John Mark shows how God can powerfully use brief encounters and relationships in order to extend his kingdom. Every glorious end has humble beginnings.

3. Saul to Paul

Our missionaries make their way to Paphos, which served as the territorial seat of power and the location of the governor's palace (v 6). While in this influential city, they find a man named Bar-Jesus, meaning son of Jesus or son of Joshua, a common name during that time (v 6-7). What should strike the reader as uncommon, however, is the **oxymoron** of a Jewish magician. Jews, according to several Old Testament texts, should have nothing to do with sorcery, divining, or magic.

Saul and Barnabas find this magician as they come to proclaim the gospel to Sergius Paulus, the **proconsul** of the region (v 7). The magician begins to oppose them by influencing the proconsul away from the message of the gospel (v 8). This kind of anti-missionary effort will span the rest of the narrative of Acts. This does not, however, deter Paul and Barnabas from proclaiming the good news. No amount of persecution, hostility, or rejection will hinder their zeal for gospel proclamation.

In **verse 9** Luke writes, "But Saul, who was also called Paul..." Why did Luke start referring to Saul as Paul? Notice, this is not a new name given to Paul. The text says he was already "called Paul." Thus, Paul's parents probably gave him several names at his birth. Saul would have been his Jewish name, while Paul was his Roman name. Luke shows the reader that Saul, now Paul, will have a mission which increasingly departs from Jewish lands and people, and ventures into the **Gentile** world. Paul will live as the grand missionary and apostle to the Gentiles.

The text continues to show us how Paul, filled with the Spirit, deals with this Jewish sorcerer. Paul says, "You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord?" (v 10) This verse succinctly delineates the nature of theological confusion and **heresy**. Theological error abounds with subversive deceit and flows directly from the lies of Satan himself. Heresy opposes righteousness and aims to confuse the commands, teachings, and character of the Lord our God.

Judgment comes to Elymas in the form of blindness (**v 11**). Through this display of God's power and through the preached word, the pro-consul repents and believes in Jesus Christ as his Savior (**v 12**). Paul and Barnabas leave Cyprus, without John Mark (**v 13**), making their way to Pisidian Antioch (**v 14**). Perhaps John had reservations about an **evangelistic** push toward Gentile lands. This would explain the bitterness and conflict which erupts later in Acts between Paul and Barnabas when John tries to rejoin the team (15:39).

The Mission Moves to Galatia


Once Paul and Barnabas make it to Pisidian Antioch, a city in the region of Galatia, they enter the synagogue and listen to the reading of the Scriptures (**13:15**). Then, the official asks if Paul has any word or exhortation for the present congregation. As Paul begins his sermon, he stands up and motions with his hand (**v 16**). Peter, in just the previous chapter, also motioned with his hand before he spoke. Luke includes these details in order to parallel Peter and Paul as the two foundational apostolic preachers of the first-century church.

Paul begins his sermon by stating, "Men of Israel and you who fear God..." (**v 16**). Paul reveals the diversity of his crowd. Not only are ethnic Jews present but Gentile converts also fill the synagogue. Paul's content resembles that of **Stephen's** sermon in Acts chapter 7.

13:17-22: In these verses, Paul takes his audience back to the book of Genesis. When asked if he has a word of exhortation, Paul takes them back to the very beginning because the foundation of the gospel itself is in the dawning of creation.

Verses 23-25: Up to this point, Paul's message would have resonated with his audience. Paul has established his message on the common ground he shares with the Jews. Common ground only serves as a launching pad, not a place of rest. He knows he has to confront his audience with the truth, and indeed, the offense, of the full gospel message. He does this here, where he indicates that the promises of God have been fulfilled in Christ Jesus. The one that the nation of Israel

longed for has come and secured salvation, not only for the Jews but for the entire world. Christians must learn from Paul's style of presentation. On the one hand, he exuded empathy as he grounded his message in something that his audience would have understood. On the other hand, Paul advanced his message to the uniqueness of Christ, which would have required courage and conviction. Christians need both empathy and courage in order to present the gospel effectively, persuasively, and passionately.



We need both empathy and courage if we are to present the gospel effectively.

Verses 26-27: In **verse 27**, Paul condemns the actions of the Jerusalem leaders who rejected the **Messiah**. However, Paul roots the identity of Jesus in the very Scriptures which the community hears read every **Sabbath**. He also tells his audience that Jesus' rejection in Jerusalem fulfilled the prophetic pronouncements contained in the holy word.

Verses 28-34: In these verses, Paul recounts the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul recognizes that these events have brought to fruition the entire redemptive plan of God in the Scriptures and have secured the good news of eternal salvation. Paul reveals how all of God's word points to the **Christ** who was to come and the ministry of Jesus.

Verses 35-37: Paul contrasts the life of **David** with the life of Jesus. In **verse 35**, Paul quotes Psalm 16:10, which would seem to be a promise for King David. Paul reveals in Acts **13:36-37**, however, that the promise of Psalm 16:10 yearned for its fulfillment in a greater David to come. That psalm could not have been about David. David's bones are dust. It had to be about the one David saw. It had to be about the One from David's line: the true, lasting and eternal fulfillment of all God's promises.

Acts 13:38-39: We come to understand the significance of Paul's words in these verses when we remember his audience: Jews, who

thought salvation came through works of the law. The Bible teaches the inability of the law to save. Galatians 2:16 says, “Yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ ... by works of the law no one will be justified.” Romans 3:20 says, “For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.” The law could not save because of the power of sin. The law does not provide salvation but points to the need for salvation. Paul, therefore, preached the chain-breaking power of Christ’s ministry, which secures freedom for all who believe in his name. Salvation comes not by works but by faith in the One who fulfilled the law’s demands perfectly.

Acts 13:40-41: Paul’s concluding words reveal the incredible significance of responses to the preached word. Paul shows us that there is no such thing as a neutral response to the gospel. The gospel demands repentance and faith in Jesus Christ; anything less amounts to a rejection of God’s grace and provision through the cross of his Son.

A Watershed Move in the Gospel Mission

The people of Pisidian Antioch initially responded to the gospel with acceptance. Indeed, “nearly the whole city assembled” to hear Paul and begged him to continue preaching the words of life (v 42-44). This response created a problem for the Jewish leaders, who simmered in jealous rage as Paul’s ministry flourished (v 45). These leaders began to contradict Paul’s message. This opposing argument, however, amounted to a **blasphemous** declaration and a rejection of God himself (v 45).

Verse 46 contains a stinging indictment by Paul and Barnabas against the Jewish leaders. In this verse, Luke records a massive **mis-siological** shift—a watershed moment in the Acts narrative. The gospel will advance to the Gentile world. Paul now becomes the apostle to the Gentiles. Indeed, Paul establishes the validity of his mission through the prophetic witness of the “servant songs” of Isaiah 42 and 49 (Acts **13:47**).

While the Jews responded to the word with blasphemy, the Gentiles responded with great joy (v 48). In this narrative account, it is the Gentiles, not the Jews, who receive the word with gladness and bring glory to God as they respond to his word with repentance and faith.

Shaking Off the Dust

Verses 49-52 mark the close of the narrative. God spread his word throughout the whole region (v 49). As happens so often in the history of the church, great spiritual advancement meets with an equally great spiritual hostility (v 50). In this case, the crowds drive out Paul and Barnabas from the entire district. Paul and Barnabas, however, “shook off the dust from their feet in protest against them and went to Iconium” (v 51). To shake off the dust from your feet was an act of protest and a physical demonstration of disgust.

Paul’s actions in Acts 13 indicate that sometimes in our gospel ministry, we might have to shake off the dust from our feet and move on to other people. Later in Acts, Paul will endure and continue to preach in certain regions even though he will meet a more potent hostility than that which we see here in chapter 13. When, then, should you “shake off the dust from your feet”? That is a question between you and the Spirit of God. This passage does make clear, however, the horrifying consequences which befall those who reject the gospel of Jesus Christ.

How do Paul and Barnabas and the new disciples respond to this persecution and hostility? **Verse 52** says they were filled with joy and the Holy Spirit. They counted it an honor to endure persecution in the name of the gospel. Even in rejection, the gospel was proclaimed.

Modern Western Christians might find it difficult to count it a joy when faithful living provokes persecution. Those who live in faithful obedience to God might think they deserve a better life—a life which rewards their efforts and obedience. When suffering comes, a Christian who genuinely desires to glorify God may still experience deep discouragement and bitterness toward God. The Bible, however,

reveals how God uses the suffering of his people to accomplish glorious purposes. Indeed, the history of the church has chronicled a myriad of stories in which, when God's people suffered greatly, God grew his church and his people bore tremendous fruit. Believers can count their suffering as joy because of the God they serve. God does not abandon his children and leave them in the hands of the enemy. God never loses his **sovereign** grip over the lives of his people. While God may bring his people to a season of suffering, he purposes suffering for the expansion of his church. As Paul says in Colossians 1:24, "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is the church." Paul knew that his suffering was joined together with the sufferings of Christ to advance the gospel. That is why he could live joyfully in the midst of suffering for Christ. So can—and so should—we.

Questions for reflection

1. How would you define "fellowship"? What part can you play in your church enjoying the kind of fellowship we find in Acts 13?
2. Acts 13 reveals the significance of our response to the gospel. How might this affect your evangelism and your presentation of the gospel?
3. When might it be time to "shake off the dust from your feet" and proclaim Christ to another person or people? How might you discern the right course of action as you encounter hostility?