

FOLLOWING INSTRUCTIONS

A LOOK AT THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

Acts 12: 25 – 13: 52

Barnabas and Saul are sent out. Acts 12:25 – 13:4

We have reached a decisive point in the story. We have already met the first Gentile converts. Now the gospel is about to take off in a new, exciting direction. The scene changes: Antioch, in Syria (today the south easternmost tip of Turkey), rather than Jerusalem becomes headquarters. The cast list also changes. Peter has almost made his final appearance (he appears briefly in chapter 15). The believers in Jerusalem no longer hold centre stage. From now on, it is Paul who dominates the story, along with his varying band of supporters. In Antioch, a decisive decision is taken to share the gospel in a new direction – first to Cyprus, and then on to Asia Minor.

But first, Paul and Barnabas must be commissioned, and sent. So we learn that, 'it was while they were worshipping and fasting that the Lord said to them, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for that work to which I have called them.' (13:2)

What do we learn from this verse?

They are sent by the church, in obedience to God's will. This reminds us that mission is not some private activity, but part of God's will for the whole church. We are still following the Acts of the Holy Spirit. It is God who calls Paul and Barnabas to this work. Those who are sent, as well as those who remain behind, are all answerable to God. The whole church was of a common mind. Paul and Barnabas are commissioned by the whole church.

But, although the call is clear, the nature of the work involved is not, in fact it is quite deliberately ambiguous, rather like the call of Abraham in Genesis. This is God's work. There must a willingness to engage with God, and step out in faith. Often, God does not show us the long view, but calls us to trust him, day by day.

So, Paul and Barnabas are sent by the Spirit, with the support of the church. This balance offers a good model for us as we seek to discern God's will for ourselves and our church. Easily, we can fall into one of two traps. We can think of God's guidance as being purely individualistic. 'The Lord speaks to me without any reference to the church.' Or else we can make our decision making process so institutional that it is all done by the church without any reference to the Spirit. Like Paul and Barnabas, we must seek to discern what the Spirit is saying to us as

individuals, but test that discernment within the church. Do others agree with us? Do they think that the Spirit is directing us in a certain way?

It is the responsibility of the local church to be sensitive to the Holy Spirit, in order to discover whom he may be gifting and calling.

In Cyprus (Acts 13: 4 – 12)

St. Luke gives us a very selective account of the mission activities of Paul and Barnabas. They sail first to Cyprus, then to Asia Minor, modern day Turkey, and travel up through the middle of the country.

Barnabas was a Cypriot, which might explain this first stop on their journey. They travelled across the whole island, beginning in the way which will become their normal pattern, by going first to the synagogue. However, we are only introduced to two of their contacts on Cyprus.

In Paphos, they encountered a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus, and the proconsul, Sergius Paulus. The sorcerer was evidently an influential attendant upon the proconsul. The story focuses upon Paul evangelising the proconsul, who wants to hear more. The sorcerer, however, stands in the way, earning him a rebuke from Paul. The proconsul was clearly impressed, and we read that he believed, and became an early convert to Christianity.

It was a combination of Paul's teaching, and the minor miracle of Paul's handling of the sorcerer (his gifts of discernment and knowledge) which convinced the proconsul that Paul was genuine. This reminds us that as we share the gospel, it is the combination of word and deed that will bring others to faith. Our words must be supported by our actions. Not only must we share the gospel with our words, but demonstrate it in our lives – lives lived to the glory of God.

It was also on Cyprus that Saul's name is changed to Paul. As he begins his work amongst the Gentiles, he's given a Gentile name for a Gentile audience. But he remains filled with the Holy Spirit. Here is the source of his strength and power – it is only through the Spirit of God at work in him that he is able to accomplish anything.

The Gospel triumphs over the occult. Here is the beginning of a new work. The gospel encounters false, occult religion, and it is the gospel which triumphs.

In Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13: 13 – 52)

Leaving Cyprus, the apostles sail to Perga (in southern Turkey), before heading inland to Pisidian Antioch, in the heart of Asia Minor (as distinct from Syrian Antioch, their home base). They are now in Southern Galatia, one of the churches to which Paul would later write his letter to the Galatians.

Here we have the text of Paul's sermon preached in the synagogue. If you think back to the earlier sermons from Acts, you will realise that it is very similar in format to the sermons preached by Peter. Paul gives his hearers a history lesson. He uses the Scriptures, as Peter did, to validate his faith to a Jewish audience. He shows how God has been with His people since the very beginning, how He helped them during their stay in Egypt, how He led them back to the Promised Land, how He worked with his people during the time of the Judges, until sending Samuel to be a great, God-fearing leader. Then He appointed David to be king, and testified that from his descendants there would come one who would be a Saviour to His people. He then tells how John the Baptist came to preach repentance and to prepare for the coming of the One who would bring salvation. He then focuses upon the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Paul is emphasising that throughout the history of Israel, we see God's initiative and grace. It is all God's work. The whole of history has been building up to the coming of Jesus, and now, the moment has come. 'What God has promised to our fathers, He has fulfilled for us, by raising up Jesus.

Paul presents the choice between life and death to his hearers. Through Jesus, the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed. He calls on his hearers to examine the evidence of history and to see that in Jesus, God has fulfilled His promises. He calls us to see that Jesus has completed that which could not be achieved through the Law of Moses.

Paul is preaching to the Galatians, and here we see the main points which he goes on to reinforce in his letter to the Galatians: Christ's death on a tree; the reality of sin, faith, justification, law and grace.

For the Jews, there is a mixed reaction to his sermon. Some believed, and accepted this new way, others doubted, prompting Paul to turn to the Gentiles. He quotes the prophet Isaiah, in a verse that Simeon also quoted in the Temple: Jesus is 'a light to lighten the Gentiles, to bring salvation to all the world.'

So we see a pattern which will be repeated in every port of call – preaching first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles. 'All who were appointed for eternal life believed' (v.48).

The scene ends with persecution for the evangelists, but undeterred, we see them full of joy and the Holy Spirit.