

SET APART-START OF FIRST MISSIONARY JOURNEY

Acts 13:1-12

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God is calling. Will you answer? He is calling you to believe Jesus is his Son, who died and rose again to bring reconciliation. Have you answered that call? Yes? Then, here is another calling. It's to minister in his church and the community. It's a calling to witness about Jesus and his resurrection. Are you answering that call? I am part of a significant cohort of ministers in our denomination who will retire in the coming years. Who will answer the call to pastoral ministry to replace us? Our Leadership Council needs those who will serve as elders, deacons, congregational reps. Who will answer the call to lead this church? And what vision is God calling our congregation to? If God were calling you to some ministry how would he do that? How do we recognise the will of the Holy Spirit? That is something we will learn about here in Acts 13.

What we have in Acts 13 is another special 'turning point' in Luke's book. You will remember that in Acts 1:8 we have the outline of the whole book of Acts. Jesus said: *"...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."* We have seen the wonderful witness in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. We have seen the witness go out to Judea and Samaria after Stephen's death. The persecution that followed, drove the Christians into exile away from Jerusalem. We have seen the paradigm shift when Peter was at Cornelius' house in Caesarea. He then realised that the gospel was for the Gentiles as well as the Jews. We have seen the Greek Jews sharing the gospel at Antioch and a whole new church start up. Now, in our text, we are on the brink of the gospel going out *"...to the ends of the earth."* The gospel will be shared overseas and over land to the ends of the Roman empire. Throughout history all over the world, we are still sharing in that task now.

Let's see how God goes about getting it going. (Acts 13:1) *"Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. ..."* Here we have a list of prophets and teachers. They are doing what they are gifted in. Barnabas we already know. Then there is Simeon called Niger which means 'black', so a black African. There is Lucius of Cyrene, so he is from north Africa. Then there's Manaen, who grew up with King Herod the Tetrarch. He is a different person to Herod Agrippa we saw in Acts 12.

Manaen was a foster brother to this Herod. He was very well to do and knew about life at the highest political levels. And then there was Saul of Tarsus. Interestingly, he is only listed as a teacher. His status as an apostle is not confirmed yet. All sorts of men, from all sorts of racial backgrounds and social levels. But that was the church at Antioch.

Now as they go about doing what they are gifted at, as they are together in worship and fasting, the Holy Spirit speaks to them. Now this is significant. It's essential we see how the Spirit guides them. Sometimes people think that God calls them to some ministry by an internal feeling or dream. But God's call usually comes to us as we are already busy doing what we are gifted at. I first encouraged to consider a call to ministry when I was a 20. I was busy doing lots of youth work, training others how to run youth groups. I was simply doing what I enjoyed and was good at. But time and again people came up to me and said 'You are good at teaching. Have you ever thought about studying for the ministry?' We see in our text that these people were busy using their gifts as prophets and teachers. Amid their activity, the call of the Spirit came.

It's not clear how the Spirit spoke to them. Was it through one of the prophets? Or was it through a deep conviction by the church that God was leading them in a certain direction. Many of the folk would have sensed a prompting by the Spirit. This is often the way God works. He speaks to those who are already doing what they are gifted in and passionate about. God then extends that further as he calls them to a new work. You can steer a ship or a car if it is already moving. It is very difficult to steer if it is standing still. God loves to see people at work doing what they are gifted in and he then gives them further direction. How might we as a church discern who God is calling to ministry? Look at those who are already demonstrating the character and gifts. Who are the ones already showing potential in leadership, teaching and caring? Think about it. Who would you suggest in our church is already showing the early signs of someone who could be trained for ministry? The call to ministry is not just an isolated, individual thing. It is something that the church does together. We are all encouraged to do our part in teaching and caring and witnessing. As we do, we notice who is particularly committed and gifted. It is the Spirit who prompts us to a ministry and then the whole church confirms that call.

Notice the two elements of the Spirit's sovereign choice. He chooses the men, and he chooses the work. (Acts 13:2&3) *"While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.'* So, after they had fasted and prayed..." There we see the church's involvement. The church didn't just vote. It prayed and fasted over the matter. Their fasting meant

they were deeply spiritually involved in the matter. In the Bible God's people would go without certain things so that they could concentrate on discerning what God wanted. There needs to be more of that in our church. It's good to get our teaching right. And develop a church vision and strategy. But there comes a time we all need to be praying, asking God what he wants from our congregation. What is our purpose for being here? What ministries should we develop and who should do them? That's what the church at Antioch did. They were on the brink of the most amazing missionary work ever. They experienced the movement of the Spirit and so they were together in prayer and fasting.

They discerned that Barnabas and Saul were to be sent off to commence this work. So (Acts 13:3) "*...they placed their hands on them and sent them off*". The church discerned God's call. It confirmed it and commissioned Barnabas and Saul. That is how people come into ministry. It's not about one person getting an idea into their head and doing their own thing. It's about the Spirit calling certain persons, which is confirmed by the church. A person on their own, is not accountable to anyone. But someone called, and commissioned by the church, is accountable to God through his people. The church is also committing itself to support those called to the work. It's a commitment of prayer, every day holding the gospel workers before God, asking him to provide strength and guidance. It's a commitment of financial support and nurture. Ministry is never about what one person can achieve in their own strength. It's about what God does, through his servants. And that support of God is expressed through his people.

Ministry is always a mysterious blend of God's sovereign will and our human responsibility. It's a partnership of God with his people. We see this blending as we read (Acts 13:4) "*The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus.*" It was the Spirit who led them to go on their missionary journey. It was their decision to go to Cyprus. Why there? Well Barnabas was originally from Cyprus. Many of the Greek speaking Jews who started the church in Antioch were from Cyprus. So, they had lots of contacts there. God sent them on their way. But they used their sanctified common sense to see that Cyprus was a very good starting point. They went with the confidence that God was in that choice. That, again, is a way to be led by the Spirit. You sense the call of God to do develop some ministry. An opportunity opens for you. Where do you start? With what is most natural, with those you already know. You start with the contacts you have, which will lead you to the next. We see for example that on arrival in Cyprus, (Acts 13:5) "*...they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues.*" The Jews had the scriptures, the culture and background that Barnabas and Saul had. It was a natural starting point. And it was

clearly God's way. As Paul wrote (Romans 1:16) *"the gospel is ...the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jews and then for the Gentiles."*

Now, it is interesting to note a little side remark Luke makes at the end of the verse (Acts 13:5): *"John was with them as their helper."* This was John Mark. He was the son of Mary in whose home the Christians were praying for Peter's release. He was the Mark who wrote the Gospel of Mark. He was the son of a rich family and had his own support. He had potential but, at that point, had lots to learn. Paul and Barnabas, you might recall, had a 'sharp disagreement' over whether to take him on a later journey (Acts 15:36-41). Why chose John Mark? He was Barnabas' cousin. Barnabas was that 'son of encouragement' who saw potential in others and developed it. Mark came along as an intern. As he observed Barnabas and Saul, he learned much about ministry. That is an important approach for our church as well. Those involved in the various ministries of our church should have someone they are discipling and mentoring. It should be part of succession planning. Those with potential, those sensing God is stirring their hearts, should have the opportunity to see ministry in action. They should have the opportunity to having a go at ministry. Then they can see whether they have what it takes. They can see the church confirming their gifts.

Now, it's interesting that Luke only tells us about one incident out of all Barnabas and Saul did in Cyprus. Luke tells us (Acts 13:6) *"They travelled through the whole island until they came to Paphos."* They went everywhere and over months preached to anyone who would listen. Nothing is said about all that, except for the one incident with the Jewish sorcerer (Acts 13:7-12). The reason the incident is mentioned is because we see 'Saul' become 'Paul'. We see Saul, noted as a 'teacher' in verse 1 become the apostle with all the authority that went with that office. Great leadership does not develop overnight. It was at least 12 years between the time Saul was converted on the road to Damascus and now going to Cyprus. Mature ministry leadership comes through God taking us through the stuff that humbles us. It's the difficulties that has a leader learn to rely on God's strength rather than running on their own abilities. In this incident we see a Jewish sorcerer who tries to stop Barnabas and Saul from bringing God's Word to the proconsul, the governor of Cyprus. We see that Saul looks him in the eye and says (Acts 13:10-11) *"You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord? Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind, and for a time you will be unable to see the light of the sun."* Paul here speaks with that same authority that Peter did in Acts 5 against Ananias and Saphira. Before this Saul was a very good teacher. Now he has the authority of an apostle. Here is the one who would write many letters that form part of God's Word. We see this change in the fact that when the

'Barnabas and Saul' get on a boat to go to the next stage of their work, we read (Acts 13:13) *"Paul and his companions sailed to Perga in Pamphylia..."* No longer is he called 'Saul' but 'Paul'. No longer is Barnabas mentioned first but Paul.

One last thing we learn here. Barnabas and Saul had an opportunity to share the gospel with the governor of Cyprus because he asked for them (Acts 13:7). You see, the Holy Spirit had already been at work in this man, preparing him to be receptive. Whenever God calls us to a ministry or a mission you can be sure that he has already been at work in that place for a long time preparing the people. Ministry is not just about us making big plans. It is about us discerning where God wants us. It's discerning where God has already been softening people with his Spirit. God may already have been at work generations before, setting in train events and attitudes for the moment he calls you to speak for him. And when we minister, what do we do? Many things: listening, caring, helping. But what underpins it all is speaking of Jesus, especially his death and resurrection. (Acts 13:12) *"When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord."* He didn't believe because of the miracle. Paul's power over the sorcerer confirmed the power of what he taught. The heart of ministry, of any outreach work, is bringing the message of good news of what God has done through Jesus. So, let's together as a church, pick up that call of the Spirit for the work of this unstoppable mission. The story of Acts continues. It's now our turn. Let's be in prayer to see what God wants of us. Let's look at what gifts we have and are using. Let's encourage each other for ministry. Let's see where the Spirit has created openings. Let's humbly and fearlessly tell the story of Jesus and his resurrection.