

THE CALLING AND THE MESSAGE

Acts 13

Intro: As I said in an email on Friday, I'm not going to read all of Acts 13 today. It's 52 verses long for one thing, but also because I trust that you did as I suggested.

F. B. Meyer makes the claim, and I agree, that this is one of the greatest chapters in the New Testament. He writes the Church was ". . . *making a new departure in the ministry of the Gospel, which henceforth begins to pass out to the uttermost parts of the earth*" (which, you remember is what Jesus's instructions were in Acts 1:8). He goes on to say, "*It is likely that the mother church at Jerusalem was too conservative to lend herself to the pressure of the Holy Spirit urging worldwide evangelization, and that he had to employ the more mobile church at Antioch, which was more susceptible to the passion for humanity since it stood on the edge of the great heathen world, like a lighthouse on the shore of a desolate sea.*"

You see this in the opening verse of the chapter. Listen, *Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. 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." Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.* Acts 13:1-3 (ESV).

Acts 13 gives us . . .

The first recorded dream team

- The 1992 Olympics was the first time that professional basketball players were allowed to compete in the Olympic Games. The USA team was stacked with the best in professional ball with eleven of the twelve players from the NBA. You would recognize most of them but I'm sure that names like Michael Jordan, Patrick Ewing, Magic Johnson, and Larry Bird are especially familiar to you and this team was the best of the best. They were quickly dubbed the Dream Team, and they lived up to the name in that they played well together, and won because each one knew their part and each one executed perfectly.
- Acts 13:1 lists a similar dream team of people of prayer. Meyer tells us "*This momentous prayer meeting had apparently been convened to discover the Lord's will as to further developments. As the names indicate, it was composed largely of Hebrew Christians. Note that the Holy Spirit speaks with authority as Christ's viceregent. Modern missions are his work, and he selects his own agents. We should ever seek to cooperate with him in discovering and setting apart chosen men and women for his work.*"
- Look at this dream team: There's Barnabas, a Jewish man from Cypress, whose very name means Son of Encouragement. Then there is Simeon, from Northern Africa. He is referred to as Niger which means he was likely a dark-skinned man. Next there's Lucius, a Roman, also from northern Africa. And Manaen, who is a foster brother of King Herod Antipas, which indicates that he was from high social standing. Finally, there was Saul, a Pharisee from Asia Minor, and as you remember, a former voracious persecutor of the Church – but now a zealous preacher of the Good News. Bruce Bickel and Stan Jantz call them a Rainbow Coalition because of their cultural, ethnic, and geographic diversity. They go on to point out that the church at Antioch was a model for what the Church should look like because the body of Christ is open to all. I agree, but I like dream team better . . .
- One thing that sets this dream team apart is they were seeking the Holy Spirit first. This should always be the case, and we do well to emulate it. As they are praying, the Holy Spirit tells them, "*Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.*" so they did just that. Any one of this dream team would have been wonderful for this first missionary journey, but Barnabas and Saul were the best of the best, and the best were sent out. I love how Albert Winn puts it: "*These were their most two most able leaders. How natural it would have been for them to select men whom the home church could more easily spare! But the Spirit had spoken, and they obeyed without question.*" After further fasting and prayer, they laid their hands on them and sent them off. Remember this Church, we don't hold back the best of the best. We send them out!
- So Barnabas and Saul departed and their first stop was . . .

Familiar Territory

- This is found in verses 4 through 12, but I'll read verse 4 only: *So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus.* Acts 13:4.
- We know they were listening to the Holy Spirit, so it was obvious he directed them to Cyprus. It was familiar territory for both Barnabas and John Mark, his cousin, who was accompanying the expedition. So, they knew where they were going and they knew the customs and culture and, strategically, they knew the officials. As they begin preaching we see the Gospel at work.
- Notice how the gospel is bold. Now, we know this, but it's really evident here. The missionaries encounter a magician and false prophet who was the Son of Jesus (our text says he was named Bar-Jesus which means in Hebrew, the son of Jesus – Jesus being a very common name because who wouldn't want to name their son after one of the most famous Jewish heroes). As the apostles preached the message to the Roman proconsul, this sorcerer tries to discount their message. Saul, never one to back down, confronts him to his face, with, *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? And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and unable to see the sun for a time.* Acts 13:10-11. And it happened – just like that he was blind. Paul was full of the Holy Spirit and full of boldness and as a result his proclamation was powerful and effective. If you want to speak to evil and sin – you have the Holy Spirit to put it to work.
- Notice also that there was a name adjustment here in these verses that shows a change in focus. In verse 9 we read, *But Saul, who was also called Paul* spoke to the magician. This is the very point that we see Saul become Paul and that is his name for the remainder of the New Testament. Saul was a good name but it was a Jewish name. Paul, being a citizen of the Roman Empire, began to use his Latin name and as he does, his mission focus changes. Now, he is speaking to a Roman audience and to a Roman culture so he takes a name that is easy for them to understand. I've had this experience. My name, Keith, is not easily pronounced by one whose first language is Spanish. In 1999, in Nicaragua, I was traveling on a school bus with some high schoolers who were going to assist me and the others in my MCC Study Tour group at a market. Their job, I discovered, was to make sure we weren't ripped off and it worked. As we travelled, I engaged them in conversation and they talked my ears off using their English, which was better than mine, in some ways, and waaaay better than my Spanish. They asked me my name, and they could not pronounce it. They asked me to spell it for them, which I did, and you could see the wheels turning as they try to pronounce it. In the end, the best they could do was something that sounded like Kate instead of Keith, because the two letters, ei, are very hard for them to comprehend. It was an Aha! moment for me as I realized why my first Spanish teacher in 4th grade Spanish used my middle name, Alan, and I became Alano. Paul did a very similar thing: he adjusted his name to fit the culture that he was in.
- Here is another interesting transition that happened on this mission trip: When they left for Cypress and were summoned to the proconsul to preach the gospel, they are referred to as "Barnabas and Saul", but by the time they returned to the mainland from Cypress, recorded in verse 13, it now refers to the party as "*Paul and his companions*". This coincides with John Mark, Barnabas's cousin, leaving and returning to Jerusalem. We will see something about this in chapter 15 as we find that this departure didn't sit very well with Paul, so I'll not say much here; only this, there is conjecture in practically every commentary I consulted that John Mark resented that his cousin, Barnabas, had been demoted by this forceful personality named Saul who was suddenly known as Paul. I point this out only because I want us to see that it doesn't seem to bother Barnabas, but I'm not surprised about that. My impression of Barnabas is that he is the who doesn't care whose the head honcho just so the Gospel is being preached. One commentator writes "*Barnabas himself seems not to have minded; he was an outstanding example of the old saying,*

It takes more grace than I can tell

To play the second fiddle well.

Here's the truth: The Gospel is what is important, not who's presenting it, or who is leading the charge.

- One more point about the message to the proconsul. It says that he was astonished by the teaching of the Lord. It doesn't necessarily say that he was converted, but he was certainly deeply impressed. And I would

like to think that he had become a Christ Follower despite all the discouragement that he had gotten from the magician who was trying to undercut the message of the apostles.

- Moving on, the mission moves back to. . .

The mainland

- Notice that as Paul preaches in Pisidian Antioch, in the remainder of the chapter, that his message is the same old story. By that I mean, his message is a very similar message to what we've heard Peter and Stephen preach numerous times prior to this in Act with a message that begins with Genesis and ends up with Jesus dying on the cross and rising from the grave. It's not word for word but it's close enough. It's the same old story because it is the only story that's important and it's what inspired a songwriter over 150 years ago to begin her sweet song with,

*I love to tell the story
of unseen things above,
of Jesus and His glory,
of Jesus and His love.
I love to tell the story
because I know it's true.
it satisfies my longings
as nothing else can do.
I love to tell the story!
Twill be my theme in glory
to tell the old, old story
of Jesus and His love.*

That's why the Bible doesn't get old even though it's a very old, old story. Because it's all true. Paul was preaching from the Old Testament because that was what he, and all the other apostles, and Jesus, for that matter, had. That's why we can't throw it away saying that the New Testament is all we need. We need the scripture that Jesus used and what Paul proclaimed. It's the same old story and it transforms people.

- We are running out of time, but let me cover, just a bit, the adventures of Paul and Barnabas as they continued their mission in the region that included Galatia. It's like a broken record from what we have heard time and again in Acts: Many people came to hear the word. Here is what our text says, *As they went out, the people begged that these things might be told them the next Sabbath. And after the meeting of the synagogue broke up, many Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who, as they spoke with them, urged them to continue in the grace of God. The next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord.* Acts 13:42-44. People begged to hear the Good News because they were hungry to hear the old, old story.
- This is because it transforms. Like the proconsul they were astonished at how good the Good News was. They saw and experienced the truth in it because the Holy Spirit who called Barnabas and Paul was at work.
- But the Gospel was also a threat. Naysayers who felt their power draining away lost no time as they tried to undermine and undercut the message. The problem for them was – the Gospel had already gone out. Even as they kicked Paul and Barnabas out of town the reality was, it was too late – the Gospel had taken root. Our text tells us in verse 51 that the two of them shook the dust off their feet and they went out to preach the Good News to the Gentiles.
- The Gospel always goes on. Naysayers cannot stop the Good News. The message of Jesus Christ will not be drowned out.
- Barnabas and Paul were set apart in a Dream Team prayer meeting and they were called to take the message to the world. That message prevailed then and it still does. The church grew. We'll hear more about that next week.
- You can read Chapter 14 in preparation for it. Amen.