

In our passage last time we read about the death of Herod Agrippa I. A lifetime of sin finally caught up with him when he received the praise of the people for being a god. Since he did not recognize the One True God, but instead offered himself to the people as a god, an angel of the Lord struck him down. The bible says that worms ate him, and Josephus tells us that he died in agony five days later.

I want to draw your attention to a pattern in Luke's account in the book of Acts. Great strides in spread of the gospel are followed by persecution of the church, or key leaders in the church. Over and over we see how God worked in all of these circumstances to fulfill His will. Herod Agrippa killed James and imprisoned Peter, but God delivered Peter and then killed Agrippa.

This pattern of persecution followed by victory, and victory followed by persecution, continues through the rest of the book of Acts. It is helpful to remember this pattern when we face spiritual challenges. In chapter thirteen there is a shift in the central theme of the text. Paul, and his ministry, takes on the primary focus of the author. In the opening verses, we see the local church in Antioch set apart Barnabas and Saul to prepare them for the mission field. Let's see what insights we might gain for the church today by reading together, Acts 13:1-3.

The first thing we notice in the text is a list of leaders in the local church at Antioch where Paul and Barnabas served as pastors, and teachers. Antioch was truly a cosmopolitan church as can be seen from the names in this list. We know that Barnabas was Levite from the Island of Cyprus. Simeon was a man who had a nickname, Niger, a name that in no way was meant to be derogatory, but referred to his dark skin. Lucius the Cyrenian was a Gentile, Roman citizen from North Africa. Manaen, in his youth, was chosen to be a companion for then Prince Herod the Tetrarch. This Herod, by the way, is Herod Antipas, the uncle of Herod Agrippa I that we read about in chapter 12.

These men were prophets and teachers in the church. While we think of the prophets of the Old Testament in terms of warning the people of God's coming judgment, the role of the prophet in the New Testament is more akin to those who expound upon scripture, as a preacher does in our day. Because the bible mentions these men in the context of the evangelistic efforts of the church in Antioch, it is likely that they were candidates, along with Barnabas as Saul, for the first missionary journey.

This diversity in the church at Antioch is a good model for a healthy church today. The church should never become clannish, or exclusive. Just as the gospel is for everyone, our church doors must always be open to anyone who comes seeking the Lord. Everyone is welcome who comes with the right heart. While it is true that any local church tends to attract people who live in the immediate community, we exclude no one, and welcome all who come seeking a place to worship the Lord Jesus Christ.

Notice, verse two indicates that they were ministering to the Lord. Often we think of the church as a place where we go to be ministered to, but equally important is the concept that we are all in service to the Lord. We exalt, worship, and praise the Lord in all of our services, and any of the activities of the church. Our focus is on Jesus Christ, His revealed will, teaching and preaching His word, and sharing the love of Christ through the gospel message with everyone God sends our way. The church family ministers to each member. God speaks to us through the preaching of His word, in the power of the Holy Spirit, but the ministry we receive is to be balanced with the service we provide, as led by the Holy Spirit. A major part of our ministry to

the Lord is pure worship that comes from our hearts, and the love of Christ that is in us shown to others.

As the church focused on their ministry to the Lord, the bible says that they also fasted. Fasting is not as in vogue today as it was in the early church. We don't hear too much about fasting, and I fear there may be misconceptions about what it really is. Fasting is more than not eating. When we deprive ourselves of some of our physical needs, in order to weaken the body, so that we are more sensitive to the Spirit, then fasting can be a valuable tool when trying to discern the will of God.

Fasting is not a quick weight loss diet. A person who fasts may lose weight, but unless there is a change in eating habits, they will quickly regain whatever pounds they may have shed. It is also not a way to make a person look super-spiritual. The biblical model for fasting is that it is something that we should do, just between the Lord, and us, not to put on a show. So our hearts have to be right. We fast, because we seek a word from the Lord on an issue that weighs heavily on our hearts.

The church in Antioch fasted because they had a vision for missions. In fact, they were on the cutting edge of missions. The church in Jerusalem still struggled with the idea that the Gentiles did not have to become Jews in order to be saved, but the church in Antioch understood that nothing mattered apart from faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and His sacrifice on the cross. God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life. The church had the vision that the gospel must spread to the whole world, but they needed a word from God as to how to go about it. So they fasted and prayed, and waited upon God's answer through the Holy Spirit.

The church today needs to have the vision of sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ with everyone that God sends our way, and taking advantage of every opportunity to share the gospel with as many people as possible. We serve the Lord in our worship, and our ministries within the church, but it is equally important that we reach outside these walls with the love of Christ.

At some point, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work that I have called them to." Notice that God called these men to this service. When I was in seminary, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary was at a crossroads. The trustees had to choose a new seminary president, whose leadership would determine the future of the school, and the training of pastors, missionaries and church leaders of all kinds. Whoever they selected needed to be God's choice. The trustees first chose a man from outside the campus. Everything was set to proceed, when the man chosen declined to come, and the trustees were at a loss as to what to do.

They called upon the students to fast and to pray. I fasted and prayed for five days and the Holy Spirit clearly spoke to me that Chuck Kelly, the Professor of Evangelism, was His choice for the position. I made an appointment with my student advisor and shared with Him what the Lord spoke to my heart. His face lit up and he said, "You just keep praying that way." In just a short time, the trustees announced that Dr. Kelly would be the new President. What is remarkable about that experience is not that God spoke to me so directly, and revealed his will, but that he spoke to scores of other students with the same revelation. In fact, almost everyone who sought the Lord's will on this matter, at that time, came to the same conclusion, and Dr. Kelly, who has preached in this pulpit several times, remains the president of our seminary to this day.

God had a plan to evangelize the whole world, and He chose Barnabas and Saul to get the effort started. The church did not choose them, God did. The church sought God's will, and then

got on board with God's plan. This is the biblical model for the church today. We seek God and His will, and then joyfully move forward with whatever God reveals.

One might ask, "What about all of those other men listed in verse one? They were potential candidates, why not send them too?" The other qualified men were not God's choice for this missionary effort. God had other plans and purposes for each of them. So far as we know, they continued to serve in the church at Antioch, and we may assume that if God revealed something specific, that they followed the Lord obediently.

I have often told you that I believe that I am doing exactly what God has called me to do. So long as I have that certain knowledge, and God does not clearly call me to some other purpose, I am happy, and content, to serve Him and you, here at Hickory Hammock Baptist Church, as Senior Associate Pastor. This is why I can say with confidence that there is no better place to be than in the center of God's will, because to the best of my ability I am living this way.

On the one hand I believe that the church at Antioch rejoiced when God revealed His will to them, but on the other hand, it must have been difficult for them to send away two of the primary leaders in the church. Think about how hard it would be for our church family to lose two of the pastors at one time, in order for them to go and minister somewhere else. While it would be difficult, and perhaps wrench our hearts, God's will is what is most important. If we always move forward according to God's will, He will take care of the details. He will not leave us, or forsake us, and He will provide whatever we need to continue in ministry according to His will.

Once God revealed His will, the church sent Barnabas and Saul on their way to evangelize people in places where the gospel had not been preached. They did not dispatch them however, until they again fasted, and prayed, and laid their hands on them.

The church fasted and prayed the first time to discern God's will as to who to send out as missionaries. They fasted and prayed again to cover these men spiritually, and to secure God's blessings on their efforts. Only after they had the affirmation of the Holy Spirit, that these were the men, and that this was all a part of God's plan, did they commission them for service, by laying their hands on them.

Laying on hands is not a magic trick, or a way of twisting God's arm to bless something that we might attempt to do. When done in a commissioning service, where all the people are in one accord as prompted by the Holy Spirit, it is deeply symbolic, and spiritually significant. In our church when we have an ordination service, whether it be related to full time ministry, deacon ordination, or we send someone from our church off on a mission, when we lay on hands, we agree with the Holy Spirit that this is being done in accordance with God's will. As a church family we testify that God has set apart this person for this ministry, and we agree to pray for, encourage, and support them as they take the steps of faith necessary to fulfill His will. It is good for the one being sent, and it is good for the church that sends him or her.

This passage marks a significant change in Luke's account of the early church. The evangelistic focus is on all people, but the great movement of God becomes reaching gentiles who have no ties to Judaism, and who have never heard the gospel. To this point the bible speaks of Barnabas and Saul, giving Barnabas the priority as the leader, but from here on out, Luke shows Saul to be the primary leader, and starting in verse 9, Saul takes the Greek equivalent of his name, Paul.

We will see, in Paul's ministry, a seemingly endless stream of victories and setbacks. Some receive him, and his message, and become brothers and sisters in Christ. Others set out to destroy him and his ministry. The same challenges that the gospel faced with the Jews are seen in

the reaction of the gentiles to the message of salvation by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Today we see the same resistance as we seek to share the love of Jesus with a lost world.

The promise of the gospel is a message of forgiveness, hope, love, and eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ. If there is anyone here who has questions as to how to be saved, please come and speak to one of the pastors, or to someone setting close to you. We would love to help you to see how to apply the love of Christ in your life and circumstances.