

MISSION MAN

Acts 13

I think if you'd asked Paul to sum up his life he might have described himself in two ways: as someone who had been saved and as someone who had been sent. We looked at his conversion in Acts chapter 9 last week and the circumstances in which he was saved. This week we're looking at chapter 13 and the way in which he was sent. We have thirteen of Paul's letters and in nine of them he introduces himself as 'an apostle,' an emissary, a special envoy; in other words, someone who had been sent, sent on a mission, sent with a message.

Paul's testimony is recorded three times in the book of Acts and each account gives us important details. In chapter 26 verses 16 to 18 we read these words spoken by Jesus to Paul on the Damascus Road.

'I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you.' Then we have an indication of the dangers that Paul was to face. 'I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles.' Then there is this commission. 'I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.'

'I am sending you.' This commission was to take Paul all over the world but it was not a desire for world travel or a dissatisfaction with home that drove him. It was his sense of mission, his awareness that he had been sent by the Lord.

We have a team in Romania at the moment and this is a good time to think about the meaning of mission. Perhaps today you will hear the call of God to be a missionary. I hope that today you will be more aware that you can be part of Christian mission even if you are not called to be a missionary yourself.

Here's a quotation from John Stott's commentary on Acts chapters 13 and 14. '[Luke] portrays Paul evangelizing the proconsul and confronting the sorcerer in Paphos, the provincial capital of Cyprus, preaching the gospel in the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch in south Galatia, and addressing a pagan crowd in the open air in Lystra. They illustrate the extraordinary versatility of the apostle in adapting himself to different situations; he appeared to be equally at ease with individuals and crowds, Jews and Gentiles, the religious and the irreligious, the educated and the uneducated, the friendly and the hostile.'

FIVE PHASES OF PAUL'S MISSION WORK

The first phase takes us back to Acts chapter 9 verse 20. The newly converted Saul was still in Damascus. What did he do? 'At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.' As soon as he was converted he began to tell people about Jesus. And it wasn't a safe option. He marched into the very venues that had been booked to hear him speak *against* Jesus, the very places that were least sympathetic to his new message.

We've seen this past week the dilemma of Israeli soldiers. Having been assigned to protecting Jewish settlers in the Gaza strip, they now have to eject them. Passions have run high. It would be like that when Paul took the message of Jesus to the Damascus synagogues. But he went because he had been sent in a very direct way by Jesus.

Each of us has a personal responsibility to witness for Jesus, to spread the truth about Jesus, in those very places where we once denied him.

The second phase of Paul's mission work is in Acts chapter 11 when Paul and Barnabas were working with the young church in Antioch. Verses 27 to 30:

'During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them,

named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.) The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea. This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.'

On this occasion Paul was sent by the church. It was a mission of mercy. It was a mission of very practical support, bringing a gift to enable poor people to buy food. For Paul there wasn't any conflict between gospel preaching and social concern. They both flowed from the love of God in Jesus.

This year has seen a concerted campaign to rid the world of poverty, to make poverty history. It's ironic that in the aftermath to the G8 summit and all the pressure surrounding that event we should have the situation in Niger where starvation and disease have devastated the population and shocked the world again. Praise God for Christian agencies that are in the thick of addressing those needs. We have the opportunity to be part of that response. This is also mission.

We find **the third phase** of Paul's mission work in Acts chapter 13. Verses 1 to 3: '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. While they were worshipping 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, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.'

On this occasion Paul was sent, with Barnabas, by the Holy Spirit. We don't know exactly how the Holy Spirit made this clear but we do know that it was in a context of worship and fasting: seeking more of God and seeking less of the world. In what was already a multicultural church the Holy Spirit chose Barnabas and Saul for a cross-cultural mission.

Let's think for a moment or two about those who went. Why were they chosen? I think part of the answer is that they had already proved themselves in less spectacular tasks. How can you prepare yourself to do great things for God? Try tidying the hymn books, sweeping the floor, washing the cups, visiting someone who's shut in. God's looking for servants, not superstars.

For Paul this mission was a life-changing experience. Up to now Luke has always referred to him as 'Saul'. But from here on he consistently calls him 'Paul'. It was a turning point, not just in Paul's life but in the way he was perceived by other people. Sometimes we have to wait for that kind of acceptance and integration.

Something else that was significant is that chapter 13 begins with references to 'Barnabas and Saul' but by the end of the chapter it's 'Paul and Barnabas'. There has been a change of command. Barnabas is no longer the senior man. He's clearly second in command now. I wonder if he found that hard. Someone once said the hardest instrument to play is second fiddle. It's a further testament to the character of Barnabas that he was able to accept that new role.

Before we leave this phase of mission I want you to notice not just those who went but those who stayed behind. Only two were chosen to go. That means that the vast majority of the church didn't go. But they were still part of the mission. They were partners in prayer. And when Paul and Barnabas eventually returned we read that 'they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles'.

We may not be on the team in Romania but we are very much a part of the mission, through prayer and practical support.

The fourth phase of Paul's mission work is found in Acts chapter 15. Paul and Barnabas were once more envoys of the church at Antioch, representing them on a mission to Jerusalem, not this time to take aid, but to settle a doctrinal dispute. Some Jewish believers were insisting that circumcision was an essential element of Christianity and that Gentile

Christians had to be circumcised. There was a debate and God led them clearly to see that salvation was through faith in Jesus, not faith in Jesus plus circumcision or plus anything else.

I think this is relevant for the era of church history that we are living through in the western church of the 21st century. There is an emphasis on experience and a distrust of doctrine. There is the idea that doctrine is dry and dull and off-putting. Sadly, some churches and some preachers have confirmed that pessimistic view. But in reality Christian doctrine, Christian truth, is the backbone of the body of Christ. We neglect it at our peril. Paul knew just how important it was to define Christian truth and defend it against those who would distort it or deny it.

The fifth phase of mission comes at the end of Acts chapter 15. Their earlier missionary journey, which had taken them all over the mediterranean, was in the past, as was the great Jerusalem conference, and the two missionaries, Paul and Barnabas, had returned to their own church in Antioch where they took up their role of teaching and preaching again.

What was the trigger for this fifth phase of Christian mission? Was it a fresh exceptional appearance of the risen Christ? Was it a request from the Antioch church? Was it a special intervention of the Holy Spirit? Was it a doctrinal crisis? No, it was none of these things. What was it then?

Verse 36: 'Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.'" It seems rather mundane, doesn't it. Let's go back and see how they're getting on.

As we get older we can get a bit nostalgic for the fervour we felt as younger Christians. William Cowper put it in words that have found an echo in many a heart.

Where is the blessedness I knew when first I saw the Lord?
Where is the soul-refreshing view of Jesus and His word?

It often takes a lot to turn us in the right direction. But once we're heading the right way we don't need that kind of push. Experience brings wisdom and insight. That's how it was for Paul. He didn't need a special commission. He had already got it. It was a case of doing the obvious thing.

I love the story of the woman who wrote to CH Spurgeon saying that she felt a call to preach but she had 12 children. Spurgeon replied, 'I'm delighted to hear that God has called you to preach and also that he has given you a congregation.'

When God called Moses he said, 'What is that in your hand?' (Exodus 4:2). Sometimes we agonise over guidance when God is simply saying, 'Do the next thing; do the obvious thing; do the right thing.'

There's an irony in the fact that after years of partnership and co-operation in Christian work this was also the occasion when Paul and Barnabas fell out and went their different ways. Luke records it without comment or criticism. Strangely enough, the Lord used even that split to expand the work and create two teams where there had only been one.

Five phases of mission and there are lessons for us in all of them.

- Personal witness in obedience to the call of Christ.
- Practical concern for those who were in physical need.
- Response to a special call of the Holy Spirit to an adventurous evangelistic journey.
- Concern for the integrity of the gospel and purity of Christian truth.
- Common sense follow-up to contacts and ministries already established.