

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Acts 13:1-3 – The First Missionary Call

Whenever a baby is being born, every mother, every midwife, waits for the child to cry. Here is the wonderful confirmation to all present that this small creation has life. It is a testimony to the Creator Himself that new life is throbbing through that baby. The same is true of the new creation - the spiritually new born babe. We are entitled to look for the first signs of new life in the new believer and, if it is not so, how can we know that person has new, eternal life? A hymn writer once wrote, and the words would echo the thoughts of the newborn young believer, 'I feel like singing all the time'.

GENERAL COMMISSION.

Before looking specifically at Acts 13 we will refer to the testimony each believer can give to the power of the Lord Jesus in saving souls. We can call this the General Commission.

As true believers who have received salvation, we each become a witness of that new life received and a testimony to the work of the Lord Jesus Himself. Let us see some examples in the Scriptures.

1. In Mark 5 we have the incident of the healing of the man called 'Legion'. Here was a man indwelt by many demons, acting like a maniac and uncontrolled by the chains with which the people tried to hold him. The Lord Jesus simply said, 'Come out of the man, thou unclean spirit'. When the local townspeople came to see what was done they saw this man 'sitting, and clothed, and in his right mind'. What a transformation! When the man wanted to be with the Lord Jesus, we read, 'Jesus suffered him not, but saith unto him, Go home to thy friends, and tell them how great things the Lord hath done for thee', verse 19. He was sent home to witness to the power of the Lord Jesus. The effect is clear from the Gospel of Mark. In 5:17 the people asked Jesus to 'depart out of their coasts' and so He left them. But when we come to 6:55, on His return, 'straightway they knew Him and ran through that whole region round about'. They brought sick people, pleading for healing. The work of one man, sent in service, was most effective.
2. In Matthew 28:19-20 and Mark 16:15 we are given the general commission of the Lord to all believers to go forth in service day by day. It is of great importance that every true believer is active in testifying to the Lord who saves.
3. We see the way this is carried out when we come to the book of the 'Acts'. When there was persecution through the work of Saul, who later became the beloved apostle Paul, in 8:4 we read that 'they that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the Word'. Ordinary people were active in serving their Lord, even in persecution.
4. We might argue that we are not all cut out for the same thing. So when we come to the further reference to this persecution in chapter 11, we find four different words used to describe the methods used. First in verse 19, 'they which were scattered abroad...travelled...preaching the Word...' The word 'preaching' has the colloquial meaning of gossiping. Every one of us has this interesting opportunity to speak to a fellow traveller as we go forward!
5. In the next verse, verse 20, we also read of some men 'preaching the Lord Jesus'. This is a different word and the force of it means 'evangelising'. This is more than gossiping; it brings to the fore those who were anxious not only to tell the story, but to convince men of the truth of it.
6. In verse 23, Barnabas was sent from Jerusalem to Antioch to see what was going on and, seeing what was taking place, we read, he 'was glad and exhorted them all, that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord'. This brings us to the third word. He exhorted - he encouraged them. There is always need to encourage others.
7. Lastly, in verse 26, we find both Barnabas and Saul, who 'assembled themselves with the Church, and taught much people'. So now we find a definite move to full and helpful teaching.

Let us be clear then, that the Lord has a work for everyone to do. We each can be servants of the same Lord, using what He has given us and in the place in which He has put us.

Today we are thinking about Acts 13:1-3. This brings in another distinct aspect of work for the Lord. In the beginning of Acts we have seen how the disciples, or followers, became apostles, that is those 'sent out' by the Lord. They were

instrumental in originally telling forth the Gospel and bringing together new believers. The apostles and prophets were responsible for the establishment of the Church under the guidance of the Lord, Ephesians 2:20. But was this to be left only to those Apostles? Apart from their every day work we have already been speaking of the way every believer can work for the Lord. In our chapter 13, we have a specific call to service for the progress of the work of the Lord and we learn, in these verses, some things which are applicable to this special calling.

THE CHARACTERS.

First we can note The Characters. They are Barnabas and Saul. Both men were active in serving their Lord in the usual events of every day. Barnabas had, perhaps, been a believer longer than Saul. It seems, in the earlier chapters of this book, he was placed first and had, indeed, visited Tarsus (chapter 11) specifically to find Saul because he believed him to be helpful for the needs of Antioch. Barnabas' name was really Joses, but evidently the believers of his day noticed that, particularly when help was needed, this man readily came alongside and helped. So those believers called him Barnabas - the son of Paracletis, obviously because he reminded them of the way the Holy Spirit - the Paraclete - could always be called alongside to help the believer in his need. What a lovely character! Like Saul, his work for the Lord was paramount.

We are told a little more of Saul. There was no doubt that Saul was soundly converted, as detailed in Acts 9. He was always most active and energetic in all he did. What a tremendous blessing it is to the Christian church to have believers like this in their midst.

We learn that Saul had a practical job, that of tentmaker, Acts 18:3. If the necessity arose, as it did, this man was prepared to work to maintain himself. Here was a man who did not expect to depend on others although he was most thankful to receive a gift from the Philippians (Philippians 4:16).

We also learn that he was well instructed in the Old Testament Scriptures and, before he was converted, was taught by Gamaliel, a well known teacher of the law, Acts 22:3. He also received special teaching directly from of God Himself, 2 Corinthians 12:4, 7. Clearly, from his writings in the Epistles, Paul had a full understanding of the purposes of the Lord for His Church. The work of the Lord was always at the forefront of his life since his conversion. So, in Saul, we see one whose earlier life had prepared him for greater service.

When Barnabas and Saul were called to a specific work for the Lord, they were not novices, but were experienced servants whom the Lord could use. But more than this, they had been instrumental in teaching the believers in Antioch, 11:26, and were listed together with other teachers in verse 1 of our chapter. Clearly, they were highly regarded there. They were to be sent on a mission which was extremely difficult, preaching, evangelising, teaching and suffering throughout. These men had shown in their spiritual lives that they were consistent, they were dependable, they could be trusted in the work the Lord had for them. It is vital that Christians today, who take up a special calling, are in this category.

THE CALL.

Now let us note The Call. It is, perhaps, interesting to note when this call came. It was of help both to Barnabas and Saul and also to those with them. They 'ministered to the Lord, and fasted'. Simply, fasting is the act of abstaining from feeding the body in order to focus more fully on seeking God's face and feeding the spirit. This is a powerful discipline where an increased sensitivity to God's Spirit is appreciated as we earnestly seek Him. If you have a particular prayer request that you strongly desire God to answer then fasting is a good way to approach it. Fasting helps us to be more sensitive to the voice of the Holy Spirit. It was at this time that the Holy Spirit indicated His mind.

This call was specific. It was from 'the Holy Spirit' directly to Barnabas and Saul and the message was so clear that these men could be in no doubt about it. It was to be a full time commitment from then on. It would be a work specifically given them by the Holy Spirit which none could take away. We are not told how the Holy Spirit made known His mind and this is obviously of less importance. But there was no doubt that it was the Holy Spirit and His call cannot be refused without dire consequences.

It is just as important that each one of us realise that all service for the Lord is not our work but His work. The Lord, through the Holy Spirit, must direct it or it will be of little value.

Apart from His activity among men generally, the function of the Holy Spirit is to support every believer on earth. We learn of the permanent presence of the Holy Spirit to be given to every believer as stated in the Gospel of John: He is 'another Comforter'...who will 'abide with you for ever', 14:16. Although 'another Comforter', the force of the language used is that, essentially, He is the same as the Lord Jesus, the Son of God. 'He dwelleth with you, and shall be in you', 14:17.

We are also told in 1 Corinthians 12 of the various gifts which are given. These are all given by the Holy Spirit. Now, we find the same Holy Spirit actively directing two men, Barnabas and Saul, to a work for which He will be specifically empowering them. Let the Holy Spirit always be your guide. For most of us His help and guidance is so necessary on day by day matters. For a few He calls with a specific work to be done. Let us be sure of His direction. And for the rest of us, let us always keep in mind that the true servant of the Lord must be honoured and supported in his position because He has been called by the Holy Spirit for that work.

THE CONFIRMATION.

But there is a further matter in these verses. It is that of the Confirmation. When the Holy Spirit indicated His mind to Barnabas and Saul, others could well have said 'that is only their idea!' The Holy Spirit also indicated His call to Barnabas and Saul to others in the assembly of believers at Antioch. Three others are mentioned by name. What are they going to say? Would they say that it was not possible or, even, not right for them to go? Here is a valuable check on whether or not the Holy Spirit has made His mind clear or not. It was not an automatic thing for them to immediately assume that it must be 'God's will'. These men were all involved with the care of the Antioch Assembly. They fasted and prayed again!

This call by the Holy Spirit was not to be taken lightly. They were so careful that they must fast and pray. In spite of the fact that they were present when the call came, these men still needed time to satisfy themselves as to the mind of the Holy Spirit. In fasting and praying again we see these men expressing their desire that God would confirm His mind. When they were certain they were ready to add their confirmation for these men to go forward. In the wisdom of the Lord, it is of practical importance that those of known spiritual wisdom are able to confirm the call of the Holy Spirit. I remember a time when a person announced that he had a call to a particular mission. None of those around him felt they could confirm that call but this man went anyway. How sad that he went without support! Within a short period he had returned home with the statement that the Lord had brought him home. How could this be but that he was not meant to go in the first place? He had not been effective and had only followed a whim, not a call. The encouragement and prayers of local believers is, after all, of great value. As to Barnabas and Saul, surely they rejoiced that the assembly in Antioch was ready to confirm their move, stand behind them and encourage them on their way.

We also find that these men who took the lead in confirming the call of the Lord were also experienced. They were used to the ways of the Lord and of life. We may wonder how they came to their decision. Apart from the vital necessity of confirmation of the mind of the Holy Spirit, surely the character of these men, already known and described earlier, would have had a place in their thoughts. It is not the idle, uninstructed person who is called to a sacrificial work for the Lord, any more than a promotion in a secular job. They also were men who had learned that to know the will of God needed some sacrifice and prayer and should not be an automatic assent. This responsibility is not for the novice to undertake. Nor, it seems, is it a responsibility for the whole company of believers. Yet all can rejoice that the Lord has called some specifically to His service and all can encourage the servant. In the end, all understood that this was the Lord's work and not just the work of Barnabas and Saul.

Having satisfied themselves that this truly was the mind of God, it was time for happy action. 'They laid their hands on them'. In doing so, they indicated that they were satisfied that the call was truly that of the Holy Spirit. They were united with Barnabas and Saul in this special work which had been indicated by the Holy Spirit and they agreed that they would give their full support to this venture of faith. These two men must have rejoiced for the unity of support of many others, particularly in prayer, as they went to their new service.

Then we read that 'they sent them away'. The better rendering of this verse is 'they let them go'. Some would have said, 'We cannot spare them'; others may have felt the great gap that would be left in the help and affection which had been shown to this assembly. It was a difficult moment for them all. Perhaps reluctantly, 'they let them go', knowing that the Holy Spirit had called them to other work. We will find that it is those we appreciate most in the assembly, those we would gladly retain, that the Holy Spirit calls to a greater work. Barnabas and Saul had proved themselves, by their work at Antioch, to be ready for the call of the Holy Spirit to more intense labour elsewhere. So it was a sad moment when they came to the point of having to 'let them go'.

There is a further matter which would obviously arise. The believers at Antioch would look forward to the return of Barnabas and Saul, if that would be possible. How they rejoiced to hear of the wonderful way the Lord led them in their journey and the spiritual blessing brought to many others, Acts 14:27. The Gospel brought many into the knowledge of salvation; the door was opened for Gentiles also to be saved, companies of believers were established; the Good News was more widely made known; the Name of the Lord Jesus was magnified. How much there was to be thankful for. Let us also thank the Lord for all He has done.

THE CONCLUSION

The calling of the Holy Spirit has continued right up to this present day. Maybe we have heard of Hudson Taylor, the missionary to China, and the work he has done in bringing many to the Lord; of George Muller, who founded children's homes in Bristol and was of great blessing in the care he gave and, in our generation, of Billy Graham whose Gospel campaigns have covered the world to bring many to know salvation. We can be thankful that the Lord has called and used servants like this.

Even today the Lord calls. For specific tasks, He calls those who have demonstrated a readiness to put His interests first in their lives, who have learned the truth of His Word and who are consistent and dependable in their way. For some the Holy Spirit will call with a special work. Are you ready for a further call?

For most, He will not call to a full time specific work. Yet, there is still much to be done, every day. A real work awaits all believers to testify to the knowledge of salvation from sins and to the truth of the Word of God. May we, each one, seek to give the Lord first place in our lives and be ready to be real and true witnesses for Him.

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