

## SET APART BARNABAS AND SAUL

Acts 13:1-13

Key Verses: 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, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.*

The book of Acts can be divided into two parts: Peter's ministry in chapters 1-12 and Paul's ministry in chapters 13-28. Alternatively, we can divide it into three parts based on geography: the ministry in Jerusalem (1-7), in Judea and Samaria (8-12), and to the ends of the earth (13-28). Either way, chapter 13 marks a new beginning. In today's passage, the Antioch church obeys the Holy Spirit and sends out Barnabas and Saul for their first missionary journey. May God help us to learn world mission vision from the Antioch church!

### I. THE ANTIOCH CHURCH (1-3)

Look at verse 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.* We learned earlier that the Antioch church had several special characters (11:19-30). The ministry began when some unnamed Christians from Cyprus and Cyrene came to the city and shared the good news of Jesus Christ with Greeks there. It was a historic moment. For the first time, the gospel was preached to non-Jewish population. The Lord was pleased with this. His hand was with them and a great number of people turned to the Lord (11:21). This was how the first Gentile church was born, some 300 miles away from Jerusalem.

When the church leaders in Jerusalem heard about the work of God in Antioch, they sent Barnabas to the city. He encouraged the new believers to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. Under his leadership, a great number of people were brought to the Lord (11:23-24). As the ministry grew, Barnabas saw a need for Bible teachers. He traveled to Tarsus to search for Saul. When he found him, he brought him to Antioch. And for a whole year, Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called "Christians" first at Antioch (11:26). When a severe famine arose, the church decided to collect a relief offering for the brothers and sisters in Jerusalem.

From the beginning, the church in Antioch was exemplary. They studied and shared the word of God as of first importance. They broke down cultural and ethnic barriers to preach the gospel to Gentiles. They had leaders who co-worked together humbly. They had a spirit of giving. Today's passage teaches us about other exemplary characters of the church.

**First, there were prophets and teachers** (1). God raised many spiritual leaders for the church. Luke lists only five of them here, but surely they had other Bible teachers. The first on the list is Barnabas. We will talk about him later in more detail. The last on the list is Saul. His name was changed to Paul in the second part of this chapter. In fact, Acts chapters 13-28 are mostly about how the Holy Spirit used Paul to advance his gospel to the ends of the earth. Then there were three leaders in the middle of the list. Simeon called Niger was probably a dark-skinned believer of African descent. Lucius was from Cyrene in Libya. Perhaps he was one of the men from Cyrene who first brought the gospel to the Greeks in Antioch (11:20). Manaen was a childhood friend of Herod Antipas, the one who killed John the Baptist. (Jesus was tried before this Herod before he was sent to Pilate.) Manaen was from the privileged class of the Jewish society. It is interesting to note that the two boys grew up together, but one became a murderer and the other an evangelist. These leaders had diverse background, racially, culturally, ethnically, and also socio-economically. The leadership of the church was diverse. This was important in that the church served a diverse population. It was also important for the world mission purpose.

Again, Barnabas is listed first in this passage, confirming the fact that he was a well-respected leader in Antioch and Christian community at large at that time. It is also interesting to see that Saul is listed the last. We can see that Barnabas was a spiritual mentor for Saul at this point. He was the one who gave Saul the benefit of doubt when no one would accept him as a true Christian because of his past as a notorious persecutor of the church. Barnabas was the one who brought Saul from his hometown to join the church in Antioch. Saul owed a lot to Barnabas. Of course, we also know that during their first missionary journey, the order was reversed. Luke the historian began to call the journey team “Paul and Barnabas.” I think this fact positively speaks of both of them. Barnabas was a humble servant who helped Saul to become the greatest evangelist in Christian history. He could have made himself the focus of the Antioch church. But he didn’t. For the sake of the gospel ministry, he brought a great Bible teacher to the ministry. At the same time, Saul was also a humble servant. He was willing to learn and grow under Barnabas, even though he had a Ph.D in theology (22:3) whereas Barnabas only had a high school diploma, so to speak.

From this, one character of the Antioch church I see is that it had no dominant leader. Today, when we think of a great church, we usually think of a great pastor of the church. Great churches are usually known for their pastors. But the Antioch church was not like that. They had several great leaders, prophets and teachers. The church was not known for its pastor. Rather, it was known for the whole congregation and a group of leaders. I think this is an ideal church. Such church would flourish even after their leader is gone.

Still, if we have to pick one leader of the Antioch church, it was Barnabas. He was a Hellenistic Jew, born a Levite in the island of Cyprus (4:36). His birth name was Joseph, but the apostles called him Barnabas (which means “son of encouragement”), because he always encouraged others. This nickname stuck. Barnabas loved God and his people more than money (4:36-37). Even the Hebraic Jewish apostles respected him

(11:22). Most of all, he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith (11:24). Barnabas was a good example of someone whom God can use in his redemptive history.

**Second, they worshiped and fasted (2).** Look at verse 2. *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.”* What were they doing when the Holy Spirit told them to set apart Barnabas and Saul for world mission? They were worshiping the Lord and fasting (2). Verse 3 says that they also fasted and prayed before sending them out. Let us think about fasting prayer, something that not many of us practice today. In the Old Testament, Queen Esther declared a three-day fasting prayer as the Jewish people faced annihilation (Est 4:16). On Mount Sinai, Moses fasted for 40 days before receiving the Ten Commandments (Dt 9:9). He smashed the stone tablets when he saw his people worship the golden calf. And he fasted again for 40 more days to pray for them (Dt 9:18-29). Jesus fasted 40 days before his temptation (Mt 4:2). Later, however, when some people criticized his disciples for not fasting regularly, he said, “How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast” (Mk 2:19-20). Jesus did not approve of their fasting because they practiced it as a religious ritual. He taught us that fasting can be done to consecrate ourselves to seek the Lord (Mt 6:16-18).

M. Deborah and I fast twice a week, but not for religious reasons. We do it to give breaks to our stomachs. Should we fast together as a community? Perhaps we should when we want to seek God’s direction with consecrated hearts and devotion. That is what the church in Antioch did. So why did they worship the Lord with fasting? Was there a pressing matter for the church? Was the church in a crisis? Actually, things were going very well for them. Many people were joining them. Luke does not tell us the number. He only says that a great number of people joined the church. Many Bible teachers were being raised. But they did not become complacent. They were looking for a direction for the church. The church was getting big, but they felt that being a mega church was not their goal. So they came to God together to ask him some questions. What kind of questions? Given what the Holy Spirit said, we can say that their questions were not about construction of a new church building or a charity project. Perhaps their questions were something like: “Where do we go from here as a church?” “What kind of church should we be?” “Should we focus on church growth or should we obey the world mission command of Jesus?” “If we are to send out missionaries, whom should we send?” To find answers to these questions, they did not seek human wisdom. They did not form many committees to discuss the topics. They were not asking what made sense in their minds. They were interested in what God had in mind for them. So they turned to God with total devotion and consecration. They fasted and prayed. They pleaded with God to guide them through the Holy Spirit. They prayed to God with a sense of urgency.

**Third, they obeyed the Holy Spirit (3).** What was God’s answer to their sincere and urgent prayer? *The Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”* The Holy Spirit told them to send out two most important servants of their ministry. Perhaps this was not the answer they had expected from God.

Barnabas and Saul were seasoned, respected, proven servants of God. They were the best Bible teachers they had. Who was going to fill their big shoes if they left? But God's direction for them was clear. Do not send any leftovers. Send your best.

How did the Antioch church respond to the Holy Spirit? Look at verse 3. *So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.* They obeyed the Holy Spirit. Luke the historian makes a connection between their fasting prayer and the work of the Holy Spirit. We all agree that the missionary sending by the Antioch church was a historic moment in Christianity. God used St. Paul, Barnabas and other evangelists to plant many churches in Asia Minor and Europe through their missionary journeys. These missionaries changed the course of world history. And this great missionary movement began when the Antioch church obeyed the Holy Spirit with their fasting prayer!

## II. IN CYPRUS (4-13)

Look at verses 4-5. *The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus. When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues. John was with them as their helper.* Barnabas and Saul left Antioch (sent on their way by the Holy Spirit) and went down to Seleucia (or "Seleucia on sea" which was the port of Antioch; today's Antakya in Turkey). They sailed from there about 100 miles to Cyprus, arriving at Salamis (located on the east coast of the island). Cyprus was a Roman province and the hometown of Barnabas (4:36). It appears that Barnabas wanted to share the gospel of Jesus first with his hometown people. They proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues. Luke says John had joined them as their helper.

Then they traveled 100 miles from the east of the island to the western end until they came to Paphos. There the mission team was summoned by Sergius Paulus, the island's Roman proconsul. He wanted to hear the word of God. The Roman governor was an intelligent man who was seeking God. At the same time, he was unsure about himself that he hired a fortune-teller named Bar-Jesus, aka Elymas. This man was a magician and Jewish false prophet. He contradicted the gospel message and tried to keep the proconsul from believing in the word of God.

Then Saul, who was now called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, "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 for a time, not even able to see the light of the sun" (9-11). Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he groped about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand. When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord (12). It was the work of God! A Roman governor became a believer when Paul shared the gospel with him boldly, despite the devil's opposition.

Where did the journey team go from there? Look at verse 13. *From Paphos, Paul and his companions sailed to Perga in Pamphylia, where John left them to return to Jerusalem.* They reached the port city of Perga to enter the vast territories called Pamphylia and Galatia that are in today's Turkey. This was where John Mark left the journey team. Why? Luke does not elaborate. But we can find a clue in chapter 15. Luke says that there was a sharp disagreement between Paul and Barnabas. Sometime after their successful first mission trip, Paul proposed to Barnabas a second missionary journey together. Paul's plan was to return to the cities and churches they had visited to see how they were doing (15:36). Barnabas agreed and wanted to take his cousin John Mark (Col 4:10). "... but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work" (15:38). They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and headed to Syria and Cilicia. From this, we can deduce that John Mark did not have a good reason to abandon the mission.

We know this is the last account of Barnabas in Luke's narrative, as the historian recorded only Paul's ministry. But this is not the last account of John Mark. In fact, his name is mentioned several times in the Bible. In Philemon, Paul called Mark "my fellow worker" (24). He also said to Timothy: "Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry" (2Ti 4:11). Mark became an interpreter for St. Peter who called him "my son" (1Pe 5:13). Above all, he wrote the Gospel of Mark to bless us to learn the life and mission of our Lord Jesus.

At the same time, his abandonment of the mission journey tells us how difficult the mission was. They had walked 100 miles in the island of Cyprus. Mark's sandals were worn out and he had many blisters on his feet. They had sailed almost 300 miles on the sea in a small sailboat. Mark was seasick and threw up many times. When they arrived in Perga, he saw the rugged terrain waiting for them. They would have to hike through many tall mountains. He could not take it anymore. The young Mark returned to Jerusalem. Barnabas and Saul, however, would travel more than 1,200 miles to several cities for two years.

We learned today that when the Antioch church worshiped the Lord with fasting prayers, the Holy Spirit told them to set apart Barnabas and Saul to be missionaries for his purpose. The church obeyed the Lord, and a new era of evangelism began in Christian history. May God help us to seek and obey his will so that we may be history-makers in his redemptive work!