

The Call of Barnabas & Saul

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[0 : 00] Welcome here for this Sunday, March 23rd. Can you believe the year is almost a quarter over already? Wow. My name is Kent Dixon. It's my joy to be the pastor here on this sunny Sunday morning.

This morning we're continuing in our ongoing sermon series, Acts to All the World. And through this series, we've been exploring the New Testament book of Acts. So our focus passage this morning is Acts 13, verses 1 to 3.

So go ahead and flip to that. It's a shorter chunk than last Sunday, so you get a bit of a breather this week. Acts 13, 1 to 3. Now in the church at Antioch, there were prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, and Manan, who had been brought up with 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. So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

In Acts 1, verse 8, Luke describes the commission Jesus gave to his apostles. He commanded them to be what? Do you remember? Silence.

[1 : 19] Witnesses to him. Witnesses to him in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. And so far in this historical account in the book of Acts, Luke has described how this commission was fulfilled.

In Acts 1, verse 1, and Acts 8, verse 3, we saw that commission playing out in Jerusalem. Then in Acts 8, verse 4, and Acts 8, 12, verse 25, we've seen that commission playing out again, as Jesus wanted, in all Judea and Samaria.

So the rest of Luke's account focuses on the ministry of the Apostle Paul, the rest of Acts. This man who was Saul of Tarsus, former persecutor of the church, was now an apostle, whose ministry was largely focused on the Gentiles.

And it's Paul's missionary journeys that illustrated how the gospel was taken, then, to the end of the earth. Paul's first missionary journey began soon after he returned to Antioch of Syria with Barnabas and John Mark.

And we heard about that last week in Acts 12, verse 25. I felt God's call on my life. I followed my calling.

[2 : 42] I sensed that I was being called to something. Are those familiar expressions that you have heard other people say? Maybe there are things that you have said at different times during your life.

We often hear these words, these kinds of words, associated with someone's job or vocation, right? It's their calling. Someone may have felt called to pursue a certain area of education or training. They may have felt a calling or some sort of a pull towards a particular job or career path. That happens as well. But as followers of Jesus, hopefully we also recognize a different focus or definition for this concept.

One of the ways the Oxford Dictionary defines the word calling is like this. A strong urge toward a particular way of life or career, a vocation.

Such as, quote, those who have a special calling to minister to the needs of others. I also like the Merriam-Webster definition that says, the meaning of calling is a strong inner impulse toward a particular course of action.

[3 : 58] Especially when accompanied by a conviction of, hear this, a conviction of divine influence, Merriam-Webster says.

Interesting. Probably more in line, that second definition, more in line with how we would view it in a God context, that concept of calling.

We're going to be digging into this concept of calling as we explore our passage for this morning more closely. And our sermon is titled, The Call of Barnabas and Saul.

So, we're going to reflect first on the church in Antioch again for a moment. Because that's the setting. That's the anchor point. So, we learn in Acts 11, verses 19 to 21, that the church in Antioch was started by men from Cyprus and Cyrene.

By way of Jerusalem. They began in Jerusalem and came through Cyprus and Cyrene to Antioch. And in Acts, sorry, I got that backwards.

[5 : 00] Came from Cyprus and Cyrene through Jerusalem to Antioch. There we go. Confused? Clear as mud? So, in Acts 11, 22 to 26, we learn that the Antioch church was strengthened first by Barnabas.

And then later, Barnabas working closely with Paul. So, starting to dig into our passage from this morning, Acts 13, verse 1, makes it clear that the church was blessed with a number of prophets and teachers.

And then, fortunately, they are listed for us. So, let's take a look. First, we have Barnabas. And we learned in Acts 4 that Barnabas was a Levite from Cyprus.

Next, we have a man named Simeon who is called Niger. So, the nickname Niger is interpreted by some to mean black, referring potentially to a dark complexion or African descent.

Since Niger, if you didn't know this, is the Latin word for black. Next, is a man named Lucius of Cyrene who is also from North Africa.

[6 : 07] He is also mentioned again in Romans 16. Same man. Then, we have Manan who is described as having been brought up, interesting, with Herod Antipas.

Remember Herod from last week? One of the Herods? Herod Antipas ruled Galilee from 4 BC to AD 41. That's quite a stretch. That's quite a span of 45 years.

And some translations even use the word foster brother, the words foster brother, to describe this relationship between Manan and Herod Antipas.

It suggests a close suggestion of some sort of a bond of upbringing or certainly friendship. And then, last but not least, we learn that Saul, who came from Tarsus in Cilicia, is also included in that group, that early Antioch teacher and prophet group, Antioch Church.

Enter the Holy Spirit, as he often does in stories in our lives and in Scripture, certainly. We read that as these men are worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit makes his presence known.

[7 : 23] The Spirit instructs this group to set aside, some translations say set apart, Barnabas and Saul for the work that the Spirit has for them. So, to be set apart means, I think we all can understand this, it means to dedicate something or someone for a special purpose.

Is that how you understand it? So, we see this play out in how clergy are ordained for ministry. They are set apart or called. So, this is not to say, definitely, speaking from my own experience as well, not to say that someone chosen by God for vocational ministry is better than anyone else.

In seminary, my classmates and I would often say, you are meant to be a pastor. I am not meant to be a pastor, but here I am, right? There were conversations like that.

God calls people for a specific purpose. So, when someone is called to ministry, whether it's vocational, pastoral ministry, or something else, it means that God has that purpose in mind for them.

So, missionaries and other Christian workers are also set apart for a specific purpose. Each of us can also set apart some of our time, some of our money, some of our gifts and talents for God's work.

[8 : 50] And we all do that in some ways or other ways. And often, in church settings, we take time to focus on that, to draw attention to those things and setting apart some of what God has given for his use.

So, next we read that that group of men continue to fast and pray after the Holy Spirit has directed them. So, why do they do that, right?

I think sometimes we think, fast and pray, God answers prayers, done. Well, I believe they were continuing to submit themselves to God. Continuing to submit to God's will, even though God had sent the Spirit, they're intentionally humbling themselves before the Lord for what God will do next.

So, after being directed by the Holy Spirit to set aside Barnabas and Saul, and then spending time in prayer and fasting, we learn that the men lay hands on Barnabas and Saul.

So, I believe we often assume that the laying of hands in church is intended only for healing. Right? I think that's often how we tend to think about it.

[10:05] And certainly, the laying on of hands is associated with healing the sick. Especially, Jesus did that during his ministry. We see it and read about it over and over.

But, that's not the only meaning that it can have. In a broad range of Christian traditions, the laying on of hands is both a symbolic and a formal method of invoking the Holy Spirit.

Primarily during baptisms, confirmations, child dedication, healing services, blessings, things like that. But also in the ordination of clergy, elders, deacons, other church officers.

Along with a variety of other church sacraments and ceremonies. We see that happen. And that's what we see happen in these events here.

The Holy Spirit directs the leaders to set Barnabas and Saul aside. To bless and commit them to God's service. And then, send them on their way. So, next week, we're actually going to be looking at Barnabas and Saul as they journey to Cyprus.

[11:13] They hit the road together, right? That's next week. So, what can we learn from all of this? What can we learn from this passage this morning and the events and details that they describe?

Well, first, believe it or not, in these three short verses, we've learned about the diversity of the church. Did you notice the racial, cultural, social diversity of the five prophets and teachers that we met today?

Two were from North Africa. One was from Cyprus. One was from Cilicia. And one was from Palestine. One was raised with royalty.

He had royal connections. Another was wealthy. And another was a Levite. A rabbi. It's quite a broad range of people there, right?

Quite a diverse group. Romans 10, verse 12 says, Galatians 2, verses 26 to 28 says, So, in Christ Jesus, you were all children of God through faith.

[12:31] For all of you were baptized into Christ, have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free. Nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Colossians 3, verse 11 says, Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free.

But Christ is all and is in all. Scripture makes it clear over and over that as the family of God, churches should reflect the oneness, our oneness in Christ.

Not the divisions that we see in society. The playing field of God's family is a level one. That's how it was always intended to be. And it sure seems like diversity and equity, equality within the church is what God always intended.

Isn't it? Second, this morning we've learned about the principle of synergy. For science-y people.

[13:47] But what the heck is that, right? What is synergy? Well, synergy means things that work together to produce a greater overall effect. or result in the sum of their individual effects.

So the expression we all know, greater than the sum of their parts. Two or more people working together can accomplish more than if they work separately or in isolation.

Mark 6, verse 7 says, Calling the twelve to him, he began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over impure spirits. Luke 10, verse 1 says, After this, the Lord appointed 72 others and sent them out two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go.

Jesus believed in the principle of synergy. Acts 11, 25, and 26 says, Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul.

And when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So 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.

[15:00] Barnabas believed in the principle of synergy. Acts 13, verses 2 and verse 4 says, While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, we heard this, The Holy Spirit said, Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.

The two of them sent on their way by the Holy Spirit went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus. The Holy Spirit believes in the principle of synergy.

So there's wisdom in supporting teams of two or more wherever we can. Not just individuals working alone. Third, this morning we've learned about the practice of fasting.

Fasting isn't something that we should suddenly think about January 1st. After Christmas, time for me to lose a bunch of weight. I'm going to go on a big fast.

Different. Very different. Matthew 9, verses 14 and 15 says, Then John's disciples came and asked him, How is it that we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?

[16:16] Jesus answered, How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them. Then they will fast.

Matthew 6, verses 16 to 18 says, When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting.

Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your father who is unseen.

And your father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. Jesus said his disciples would fast, and he taught them all about it.

We know that the church in Antioch fasted. We just heard about it this morning. Acts 14, verse 23 says, Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church, and with prayer and fasting committed them to the Lord in whom they had put their trust.

[17:33] Elders were appointed with prayer and fasting. Paul wrote about, writes about, spouses fasting and praying during periods of separation.

Fasting in conjunction with prayer is suitable and significant in the life of the Christian and the church. Maybe we'll do a series on fasting one day.

How about that? Fourth, this morning we've learned about the laying on of hands. Acts 6, verse 6 says, they presented these men to the apostles who prayed and laid their hands on them.

As we heard in Acts 13, verse 3 this morning. So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off. The laying on of hands was often used in the appointment to or dedication of service.

We see it often. It's also often used to indicate the acceptance and approval of individuals who've been selected by the congregation, such as clergy. There have been lots of times where we have had a service at our church and we've had people stand and put a hand out.

[18:49] That's a way of blessing, a different kind of laying on of hands. When I was brought as your pastor, there was a group of people, elders and leaders of the church, and denominational leaders who came forward and put their hands on Michelle and I to set us apart.

The laying on of hands is also a means of asking God's blessing, asking God's protection on people that he has called to serve.

So this is how it happened. Barnabas and Saul are sent out on their missionary journey. They're separated and sent out by the Holy Spirit himself for a task that he had planned for them.

With fasting and prayer and the laying on of hands from their brothers and sisters that they were leaving behind, people were sending them with God's blessing.

And we're going to see how Barnabas and Saul will come to return to the church of Antioch in Syria, how that place will serve as the point of departure eventually for Paul's missionary journeys.

[20:04] Antioch is a significant place, as we've talked about. Paul obeys his calling from there, and he plays his part in fulfilling the Great Commission to all the world.

Folks, here we are, thousands of years later, thousands of miles away, benefiting from the obedient work of those who are willing to go, those who are willing to send.

May their example encourage us to do our part today in spreading the good news of Jesus. This morning, through the story of Barnabas and Saul, we've seen how someone may be called by God for a specific purpose.

But no matter where we find ourselves in our lives, all of us have been called by God. He has chosen us for a purpose, to share the truth of what he has done for us.

How his deep love and a deep relationship with him is available to anyone who believes in his son. I have some homework for you this week.

[21:20] Take some time this week and ask God, to what are you calling me right now? What are you calling me to set aside for your use?

Here I am, God. Use me according to your will and for your purposes, and to God be the glory.
Amen.
Amen. Amen.