

May 10, 2020

SOVEREIGNTY, RESPONSIBILITY, AND THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

Acts 13:1-14:28

*(11 of 17 in a series through Acts)*

It's not often in Paul's writings that he gets autobiographical, but he does it ever so briefly in 1 Corinthians 15. In verses 9-10 of that chapter Paul tells the Corinthians that he was the least of the apostles in his own mind because he persecuted the church. Then he says, "But by the grace of God I am what I am" before adding, "And his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them."

I've always been fascinated by those verses because they hold together beautifully two things that we're tempted to pull apart or at least hold to one while ignoring the other. On the one hand, Paul acknowledges God's sovereign grace. He wasn't seeking God; he was actually persecuting the church. And he wasn't worthy; it was only by God's absolute grace that he is an apostle, he acknowledges. But on the other hand, Paul doesn't see sovereign grace as a reason to be idle or lazy. Rather, he sees it as a motivation to work hard, in fact harder than the other apostles. In Paul's mind, reflecting on God's sovereignty and grace actually should motivate us to feel responsibility and work hard. And I think Luke would agree because as he writes about the beginning of Paul's missionary journeys (and the beginning of the Gentile mission in an official way), he strings these two threads of God's gracious activity and the church's diligent labor right alongside each other all the way through 13:1-14:28.

So this morning, what I want to do is lay out these two realities before us in hopes that we might feel encouraged, strengthened, challenged, and motivated as a church to exercise diligence in carrying out the mission that Christ has given us. And as I show you these two themes, we'll be able to walk through the text. So, let's first note that God is sovereign and on our side.

**God is sovereign and on our side in the church's mission**

Now, just as a reminder in case anyone is unfamiliar with the term "sovereign," when we say that God is sovereign we mean that he is absolutely in control. He has all knowledge and all power. He directs all things after the counsel of his own will, as Paul says in Ephesians 1:11. Even more simply, Psalm 115:3 tells us that our God sits in the heavens and does whatever he pleases. And the way that Luke presents these opening missionary journeys of Paul and Barnabas, he makes clear that this sovereign God is on our side in the mission. That is, the one who has all knowledge and power so that he controls all things, doing what he pleases, is on our side in the mission he's given us as a church. That's encouraging, isn't it? Let me point out how Luke threads this theme throughout these two chapters by showing all of God's activity. First, Luke opens this section by showing us that it is the Spirit who directs and sends.

*1. The Spirit directs and sends.*

Luke tells us in the first three verses that the church at Antioch was worshipping and fasting when the Spirit said to them, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them” (13:2). In other words, it is God himself who is taking the initiative in calling out individuals to go and serve him in particular ways. And on this occasion he called Paul and Barnabas to go and plant churches. And just in case we’re tempted to think we’re reading too much into the Spirit’s directing and sending, look at how Luke writes in 13:4, after noting in the prior verse that the church had “laid their hands on them and sent them off.” He writes, “So, being sent out *by the Holy Spirit.*” That is, Luke wants us to see that it was the Spirit who directed the church and the Spirit who sent Paul and Barnabas.

Now, let me say something here briefly concerning application. I remember being fifteen years old, sitting in the back pew at church by myself on a Wednesday night, really struggling with whether or not the Spirit of God actually calls us to specific roles in the mission of the church and specifically whether he directs fifteen-year-olds. And so I prayed that night before our Wednesday evening service, and I said to the Lord, “I’m so worn out wrestling with whether or not you are calling me to be a pastor,” so I need you to give confirmation or I’m going to stop thinking about it. I need you to confirm that you still call people to tasks and that you might call someone who is as young as I am. And right after I prayed that, my pastor opened up to 1 Corinthians, read a text about Paul’s calling, and said, “Let me just say before I start my sermon tonight that God still calls individuals to tasks and it doesn’t matter how young or old they are.” Of course my mouth fell open and here I am.

But I want to say the same thing to us. It is not beyond the Spirit to call or direct us to specific roles in fulfilling the Great Commission. He may be directing some of you to go and plant or pastor, others to great sacrificial giving, others to pick up and move to be part of a team, others to a role of more diligent prayer, and on and on. But the key is that the Spirit is gracious enough to direct us in this mission as we seek to obey him. He is the one who puts the church together—person by person—and it is he who directs and guides and sends us to our roles in the mission. And it doesn’t stop there. Luke also shows us that the Spirit empowers us for the mission.

## *2. The Spirit empowers us.*

After the church at Antioch sends off Paul and Barnabas on their first church-planting journey, they go to Cyprus, and begin preaching to the Jews in the synagogues. And ultimately they get word that the proconsul (i.e. something like a governor) wanted to hear the word of God, but there was a false prophet and magician named Bar-Jesus, who tried to convince the proconsul not to hear and believe. After all, he probably thought that if the proconsul was converted, he might hurt the business of a false prophet/magician like Bar-Jesus. But when Paul saw this, Luke says, “But Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him and said, ‘You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord? And, now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and unable to see the sun for a time’” (13:9-11) and sure enough the man went blind for a while, and the proconsul believed.

That is amazing, but did you notice the phrase? Luke says that Paul was “filled with the Holy Spirit.” Now, I’m not suggesting that you and I, empowered by the Spirit, are going to be equipped by him to go around and make people blind. But I do want to suggest that the Spirit didn’t fall on the church on the day of Pentecost and then repeatedly fill and empower the church during that time simply to get the mission of the church jump-started. No, he will fill and empower us as well as we seek to obey. So, let’s be a people who pray and ask for greater filling and empowerment of the Spirit in our lives as we seek to obey the Lord. But let me add more about the Lord’s work in the mission. Luke also reminds us that the Lord has given us his Word.

### *3. The Lord has given us his Word.*

The next place Paul and Barnabas go is to Antioch in Pisidia. In other words, this isn’t the same Antioch that they came from. And as they go to the synagogue, the rulers of the synagogue sent word to Paul and Barnabas saying, “Brothers, if you have any word of encouragement for the people, say it” (13:15). Well, you can’t get a gospel-preaching opportunity served up any better than that, so Paul stands up (“motioning with his hand” (v. 16) and authorizing hand gestures in the process!) and preaches the gospel to them in a sermon recorded in 13:16-41.

But if you read the sermon, you’ll note that Paul isn’t coming up with some creative message. He’s simply walking through the Scriptures, concluding with the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, calling these people to repent, believe, and be freed from their sins.

Brothers and sisters, God has given us his Word. Too many times we can stifle our own boldness by thinking we don’t know what to say to someone, when we simply need to make sure we bear witness to what God has told us in his Word. We simply need to tell people what the Bible tells us—that Jesus lived, died, and was raised so that sinners can repent, believe, and be forgiven of their sins and have eternal life. He’s equipped us with his Word as we consider the mission. Even as people believe and are baptized, we teach them to obey all that Christ commands by teaching and preaching his Word. So commit yourself to reading his Word, learning his Word as you sit under preaching and teaching, and then teach others to obey his Word. Our God has given us his Word. And yet there’s more. We’re also told that the Lord brings people to salvation.

### *4. The Lord brings people to salvation.*

Luke tells us that the trip to Antioch in Pisidia wasn’t as smooth as we might hope. It starts off well enough. After Paul and Barnabas preached in the synagogue that people begged them to come back and teach them the Scriptures the next Sabbath, and sure enough that next Sabbath “almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord” (13:44). But then Luke tells us there was opposition. Here’s what he writes: “But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began to contradict what was spoken by Paul, reviling him. And Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, ‘It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to

the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, “I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth”” (13:45-47).

But more importantly at this point is how the Gentiles responded to this. We read in 13:48, “And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.”

Now, notice the language there. It doesn’t say that they believed and were consequently then appointed to eternal life but rather that those appointed to eternal life believed. In other words, this is a text that falls in line with other texts that speak of God electing, choosing, calling, and the like. And as much as some might struggle with these concepts, they’re given to us to encourage us in the task of gospel preaching. They’re there so that we might remember that the Lord is on our side in this mission, calling people to himself even as we preach the gospel. The sovereign Lord is on our side. Why be paralyzed by anxiety when the Lord is the one directing and sending, empowering and filling, giving us his Word, and bringing people to salvation?

And that’s how our text ends. As Paul and Barnabas return to Antioch Luke writes, “And when they arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles” (14:27). Again, do you see it? All that *God had done with them* and how *he had opened a door of faith*. In other words, they came back and expressed how God was on their side—directing, sending, empower, filling, giving his Word, and bringing people to faith. Let’s never forget this as a church. Otherwise, we might be tempted to be overwhelmed or feel discouraged and hopeless. But how can we feel discouraged and hopeless when the sovereign God is on our side?

But there’s also another thread here. We also see that the church labored diligently in fulfilling its mission.

### **The church is responsible to labor diligently in fulfilling its mission**

Now, just as I traced the theme of God’s action in this section—beginning with the Spirit directing and sending and ending with Paul and Barnabas declaring all that God had done with them—so you can trace a thread of the church responsibly and diligently laboring to fulfill its mission in these chapters as well. Let’s just note the labors of the church here. First, they faithfully worship, fast, and pray.

#### *1. They were faithful to worship, fast, and pray.*

I noted that the Spirit directed them to send Paul and Barnabas to plant churches at the beginning of chapter 13, but it’s worth noting what the church was doing when the Spirit directed them. Luke tells us that the Spirit spoke to them, “While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting” (v. 2). Then, after the Spirit spoke to them (perhaps through one of the prophets mentioned in v. 1), they fasted and prayed again. Luke writes, “After fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off” (v. 3). Also, when Luke tells us that Paul and

Barnabas appointed elders in every church they planted, he writes, “And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed” (14:23). It seems, doesn’t it, that prayer and fasting and worship was a common reality in the church at Antioch?

I’ve noted prayer much the past few weeks, but let me note the reality of fasting here. Fasting is an expression of our earnestness and longing. If you feel a lack of zeal, it may well be that fasting is a weapon to employ alongside your prayers. John Piper wrote a book on fasting called *A Hunger for God*, and in the introduction he noted that he wrote this book to awaken a hunger for God, saying, “[Fasting] is an intensifier of spiritual desire. . . . It is the physical exclamation point at the end of the sentence: ‘This much, O God, I long for you and for the manifestation of your glory in the world!’”<sup>1</sup> Charles Spurgeon once said about the church where he pastored, “Our seasons of fasting and prayer . . . have been high days indeed; never has Heaven’s gate stood wider; never have our hearts been nearer the central Glory.”<sup>2</sup> To be nearer the central glory. Isn’t this what we want as a church? Isn’t this what we want as individuals? Let us labor as diligently as these saints at Antioch, even in prayer and fasting for greater empowerment and a clearer comprehension of the glory of God. They were faithful to fast and pray, and they were faithful to keep preaching, despite opposition.

## *2. They were faithful to keep preaching, despite opposition.*

The missionary journeys of Paul include a lot of opposition. We’ve already noted that in Antioch in Pisidia, the unbelieving Jews were attempting to contradict what Paul said when he was preaching in the synagogue. But it gets worse. Luke tells us in 13:49-50, “And the word of the Lord was spreading throughout the whole region. But the Jews incited the devout women of high standing and leading men of the city, stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district.” So what did Paul and Barnabas do? Luke tells us, “They shook off the dust from their feet against them and went to Iconium” (13:51), and they preached there so that “a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed” (14:1). Persecute them and they keep preaching.

In fact, look at the logic of 14:2-3. Luke writes, “But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. So they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord.” They face opposition, and they keep preaching. Then, they get word they’re going to try to kill them, so they just move on to the next city and keep preaching.

Now, in Lystra, things get bad. It starts out with the healing of a lame man that led the crowds to try to worship Paul and Barnabas as if they were the gods Zeus and Hermes. Paul and Barnabas put a stop to that, but then we read in 14:19, “But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and

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<sup>1</sup>John Piper, *A Hunger for God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1997), 22

<sup>2</sup>Quoted by Piper, 52.

having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead.” In other words, they attempted to kill him the way Stephen had been killed, and they apparently came quite close. In fact, they thought he was dead.

But look what happens next. “But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city, and on the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe. When they had preached the gospel to that city and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (14:20-22). He’s almost dead, so he gets up and preaches more and then decides to go strengthen the believers in the very towns he’d been persecuted.

They faithfully labored in the face of persecution. And I want return to 14:27 again and note something different. That verse tells us, “And when they arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.” Now, the first time I noted that God had done this. But now I want to note that God had done this “with them.” In other words, God sovereignly and graciously acts through his responsible and obedient children.

I remember Paul Washer telling a story of being in Peru, watching a man preach when a man grabbed a jar, urinated in it, and poured it over the man’s head while he was preaching the glory of Christ. And the man just kept preaching. That’s the kind of diligent earnestness we see reflected in these chapters, and don’t we want this to be true of us as well. The sovereign God is on our side, so let’s labor in diligent obedience. May we say, “By the grace of God we are what we are, but we labored more than all other churches.” Amen.