

Resolved to Live – As a Witness for Jesus

“...about all that Jesus began to do and teach” (Acts 1:1).

R₂L – Resolved to Live: In the Heart of God’s Will

Acts 13:1-5

1 Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. 2 While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” 3 Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away. 4 So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus. 5 When they reached Salamis, they began to proclaim the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews; and they also had John as their helper.

My goal this morning is pretty simple – to get through these five verses of Acts 13 that, up to this point, has taken us two weeks just to work through and apply the first two verses. But for this I must not apologize as we have been noting how the early church immersed herself in, continued to learn of, and consistently applied the will of God in their midst.

In contrast to the way the early church sought the will of God, so many today seek it by getting their big toes wet with it to check its temperature, to see if the will of God it is too hot or too cold; they grow satisfied or smug with what they know of God, will thinking there is nothing more really needed to learn, and, perhaps most detrimental, what they do know of the will of God, they loosely apply, mostly when it is convenient and most appealing to the flesh. Unless the mother bird pushes the chick out of the nest, forcing it to fly, the chick will be quite content to stay in the nest and be feed by its mother. The early church was flying to the glory of God. Too often we are content in the warmth and safety of the nest, too afraid to fly, or not realizing we were saved to fly (if you are following my analogy).

So, how do we fly to the glory of God? How do we know the will of God, learn the will of God and apply the will of God as we have been seeing the early church doing? In a phrase, the best way to know, to learn and to apply the will of God is by “doing the will of God.” If you will concern yourself with doing what you already know to be God’s will, then you are in the right position to learn and know more of God’s will. And conversely, and beloved, there are too many of us even in this place this morning of whom this describes, you cannot determine to know an unknown or grey area of God’s will if you are not actively, purposely, intentionally, relentlessly engaged in what you already know God’s will to be. Be busy about what you know God wants you to do and He will let you know about the other areas in His time.

So, how do we know that we are in the midst of God’s will, in that position to both do and to learn more of God’s will? From our text we find the church poised to embark on God’s greatest mission, the reaching of the Gentiles with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Up to this point, the gospel had been spreading throughout Judea and Samaria. There had even been pockets of people reached beyond the geographical regions of Israel. The church was right in the middle of all this, preaching the Jesus, ministering to one another, fulfilling the will of God. But now God will, in the midst of their continued faithfulness, reveal more of His will and purpose. How did they know they were in the midst of God’s will? They knew as they committed themselves to four key values are revealed in our text, the first two of which we have already examined, so I will just briefly mention them here.

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Value #1: The Importance and Influence of the Word of God (1)

The church is to value the importance and the influence of the word of God. The church had both faithful men who were prophets and teachers as well as faithful hearers and doers of the Word of God as evidenced by Luke’s placing this resolve to the Word of God first. ^[slide 06] And all of this reminds us; if *we cannot justify an action, behavior or attitude based upon the word of God, we have no business indulging it, engaging in it, or entertaining it.* And thus, to serve as a safeguard against such things, God has given to the church prophets and teachers, proclaimers and explainers of the word of God, So that, in the words of 1 Timothy 4:16, we might watch our life and doctrine closely.

Value #2: The Implementing of God’s Revealed Will (2)

While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”

This second point is closely related to our first point. We are to implement – that is to fulfill or carryout the will, the purpose, the revealed plan of God. But we cannot implement, bring into use, and live in the heart of God’s will apart from knowing this will of God apart from plunging ourselves into the Word of God. And, as will come to see from our text in just a moment, the early church busied herself doing what she knew to be God’s will and thus did not concern herself so much with those things of which she was uncertain. God would reveal those things in His time. This brings us to the third value of the early church...

Value #3: The Intense Commitment to Prayer (3a)

Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them...

I would like to remind you we noted last week that in order to “do” the will of God, there must be a “denial” of our own wills and purpose and plans. We were reminded that if we are left to ourselves, we will choose our flesh over the Spirit, our ways over God’s ways, that which most seemingly benefits us rather than that which brings most glory to God. That is the battle, the struggle with implementing the will of God in our lives, our flesh, our feelings, our wants, our desires, our comforts all want to stand in the way of progressing in the will of God. Thus, fasting, as we see in our text, the denying of the flesh, our bodies of something good, like food, for the purpose of focusing on something better, the heart of God, is a way to battle this default tendency we have to focusing on self.

Now, as we move to this issue of prayer, of communicating with God (and notably communicating with God as a congregation), I would have you notice that there are three connections being made for us here. They are easy for us to miss, so let us consider these carefully.

First, there is a connection here between fasting and prayer. That is obvious in our text where we read ***when they had fasted and prayed...*** These were two activities that were intended to go together – the denying of ourselves and communication with God. The idea here is this: as deny the flesh we position ourselves to be more sensitive to the ministry and movement of the Holy Spirit. Thus, if we never fast and pray, if we never or rarely engage in these fundamental revealed purposes of God, we cannot learn more of God’s will. There is an old saying, “It takes money to make money.” Many of you have been or are involved in some kind of retirement or pension plan. Does that just magically appear? No, you invest money over the

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years in the hope that at some point you will not only have the money you set aside, but that it will have accrued interest and grown into something larger. Thus it is with the will of God, you cannot know more of the will of God until you have invested what you already know to be God's will. If you want to know God's will in an area that the Bible does not address specifically, the answer must first be found by doing God's known will. How is your prayer life? How is your prayer life individually? How is it corporately? Do you pray with others as we see the early church doing in our text? This is God's revealed will. How is your intake of God's word? Are you reading, studying, applying, sharing the Word of God? If not, you are not in God's will. What does James 1:21-22 tell us?

21 Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls. 22 But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves.

Notice that the doing of God's will is connected the knowing of God's will and the knowing of God's will is connected to the doing. Put aside the deeds of the flesh and receive the word, then do the word as it is received. How is your ministry? How is your service to God and specifically to God's people as well as the lost? Do you have a ministry? Sometimes we ask each other what is our spiritual gift? Some of us know and say, “I have the gift of pastor,” or “I have the gift of mercy.” To be sure, we may not always “serve” because we feel we do not know what our gift is, but circumstance cannot dictate obedience. Each one of you, if you profess Christ, has a gift and are called to minister, to serve one another with your gift or gifts. As 1 Peter 4:10, clearly states,

As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.

How is your service to God via God's people? You cannot know God's further will if you are not actively involved in God's revealed will. Where will you serve? How are you serving? It is not a question of if, but how. There is a connection between denying ourselves and being sensitive to the Spirit of God to learn more of His will. But there is another connection here...

Second, there is *a connection between our prayer life and our decision -making.* That is almost a scary statement in itself, isn't it? That our ability to make God-glorifying decisions is connected with our participation in the spiritual discipline of prayer and in context here, not just of individual prayer, but of corporate prayer, praying with other believers. Notice that even after the Holy Spirit spoke in verse 2, the church prayed and fasted some more in verse 3. When it comes to God's will, guessing is not an option. Going with what feels right is not an option. We are to be sure. And here, by fasting and prayer, the church was enabled to be sure. I believe it was fasting that helped them to be willing to let go of their choice leaders, Barnabas and Saul Prayer facilitated it. This was not a decision based on feeling, but on fasting, of denying the impulses of the flesh.

Henry Martyn, a missionary to India and Persia in the 1800's, said, “The Spirit of Christ is the spirit of missions, and the nearer we get to Him the more intensely missionary we become.” In other words, the closer “we” as a church, get to Christ, the more intentional we will become in

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making decisions, as a church, as families and as individuals, that point people to Christ, rather than please ourselves or point people to ourselves. The other day I was contemplating that verse in John 3:30 where John the Baptist said, “He must increase, but I must decrease.” Something my wife said to me made me think of this verse a bit differently, but in a way that I believe still captures the point to be made and it is this, “Jesus must increasing APPEAR and I must increasing DISAPPEAR.” We can forget that this life, particularly a redeemed life, is about showing off Jesus. It’s not about us, but about Him and our decisions must make Him APPEAR and cause our fleshly wants and desires to DISAPPEAR. This comes in large part through prayer. Our prayer life affects our decision-making processes.

There is a **third** connection and that is between prayer and power, between our communication with God as a church and our ability to carry out the will of God in His strength. Let me remind you that the Antioch church was relatively young. It would have been filled with a number of young believers. I was trying to imagine what some of these prayer meetings sounded like? I wonder if some of the young believer there said things we sometimes hear today, things like, “I do not feel comfortable praying in public. My prayers do not sound very well. We can quickly forget who we are talking to in prayer. We can forget that prayer is not impressing people but of importuning God; not for receiving praises of men because of our eloquence, or word choice or even length of prayer, but of pleading with God to know Him and His heart. Prayer is a God-commanded opportunity to know and then to advance His work! Listen to the following recent, true story about an African church that discovered the power of prayer:

God sent a young African man named Peter to serve a small church near the lake where only 15 people gathered each week. He was filled with enthusiasm and he had a plan. He organized a door-to-door visitation program and saw many ‘results.’ People came to church once or twice, but they did not stay. Peter brought in preachers who drew large crowds. Forty people professed faith in Christ. They came back once or twice, but two weeks later, the congregation was back to just 15 again.

Peter was discouraged. Something was missing. He decided to stop the big programs and start praying. People began meeting every Friday for an all-night prayer meeting. The tiny 24’ by 12’ church began to fill, then overflow. A witch doctor nearby offered to sell his land to the church. God’s work was gaining ground, literally, in the area of the gods. The more people prayed, the more they saw God work.

One night the police came to a meeting where youth had gathered to pray. The young believers were beaten and told to stop praying. The following night was the usual Friday night prayer meeting. Would anyone dare to come? Forty people arrived. This time, police officers and soldiers came. “Stop praying,” they commanded. Peter stood his ground; he was ordered to report to the authorities the next morning.

After a night of prayer instead of sleep, Peter arrived before the local officials. “Who told you to pray at night?” they asked roughly. “There is no law which refuses to allow me to pray,” Peter answered calmly. When Peter and the church would not agree to stop praying, he was ordered to go into the capital city to obtain a letter of permission to hold prayer meetings at night. Peter went to the right place and asked the right people, but they could not give him a letter, they said, because there was no law against it. Peter returned and explained this to the local authorities. “Are you sure?” they asked. Peter was sure. The local authorities were disappointed. “Okay, if you insist on praying, could you pray quietly?” The little church on the shores of the lake,

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once a church of 15, is now a church of 500—700. Not because of programs; because of prayer. The policeman who led the persecution against them is now a believer. He preaches the faith he once tried to destroy.”

This was a church that valued an intense commitment to prayer. Do we believe that God’s kind of church gives attention to prayer? Do we believe that prayer and the power of God go hand in hand? Beloved, there is only one valid test that reveals whether we really value corporate prayer. It is not what we say but in what we *do*. Do you realize that there are some here this morning who have never been to a prayer meeting. Most of us have not been to one in years. Now, I am not here to lay a guilt trip on you or myself, but the fact remains, we cannot be in the heart of God’s will as a church without prayer as a church. And, additionally, we cannot move ahead in a God-glorifying way without prayer. And, finally, we need everyone to become participants in the intense ministry of prayer. If we desire for Hope to be God’s kind of Church, then it needs to be filled with God’s kind of people and God’s kind of people are people who pray together for God’s will to go forward; for God’s will to be known, for God’s will to be realized. Isn’t this what Jesus taught in Matthew 6:9-10, in speaking to the disciples, speaking to them as a body, a gathering of followers, He said,

9 Pray (literally, “You all pray...”, then, in this way: ‘Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. 10 Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

So, a church that is in the heart of God’s will, values the importance and the influence of God’s Word, implements God’s revealed will, an intense commitment to prayer and finally...

Value #4: The Intentional Purpose of Going Out (3b-5)

3 Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away. 4 So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus. 5 When they reached Salamis, they began to proclaim the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews; and they also had John as their helper.

In short, we see there the beginning of the final phase of Acts 1:8, the taking of the gospel to the remotest part of the earth. It is God’s time to reach the nations. Here we learn six truths about the very heart of what we call missions. I am not big on that word “missions” as it makes us think of something to be done out there, over there and by someone called a missionary. I have a word for that kind of thinking. “Blah!” The word “missions” is truly shorthand for fulfilling the Great Commission of Matthew 28 which is to be the heartbeat of EVERY believer, the making of disciples or followers of Jesus Christ. This is what “missions” means – the making of followers of Jesus and we have six truths about missions we can glean from the example of the Antioch church.

First, missions is required of every local church (3b) Notice in verse three “*when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.*” Let me ask you, who sent Barnabas and Saul away? It was “they” – them, the early church! It was not a mission agency, not a Bible college. The local church did. Beloved, with the complexities of getting people to the far distances needful to reach the unreached, we may indeed need help of mission agencies in that matter, but that is not the whole of missions. It is our job to make sure that Jesus is proclaimed right here in Northwest Arkansas. This means that it is your job to make

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sure that Jesus is proclaimed in your sphere of influence. Don't shy away; don't assume; don't make excuses, tell people about Jesus.

Second, missions requires people. To be successful in making disciples of Christ anywhere requires the faithfulness and willingness of God's people in any given church. Notice, that the early church **“laid their hands on them and they sent them away.”** Beloved, it takes people to reach people and every week we need to be sending one another away on this mission of reaching people for Jesus.

The **third** truth; **missions requires sacrifice**. Again, in verse three we read, **“when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.”** . The Greek verb for “sent away” literally means “to set free” or “release.” It is a strong word and is used elsewhere of divorce, where a man “dismissed” a wife from his house. It was also used to describe a captive being “loosed” from his bonds.

The idea here is that the church recognized God's call on the missionaries. It means they were willing to let them go from their current ministry to begin a new one. It implies that they gave these men not only their blessing, but also prayer and financial support. This was a church alive! A church resolved to be in heart of God's will. And this we must know, that we cannot give to others what we ourselves do not possess. A dead church cannot reproduce living churches.

What do we see at the church in Antioch? We see a church where teaching God's Word was a priority, where worship and service was a natural part of its life; where a group of people are sensitive to the Spirit's leading; where generosity is evident, for they were not only willing to give their money but also their best leaders and teachers to help others. I have heard it said that too many churches today are near-sighted. They can see up close; they can see themselves, but they cannot see anything beyond themselves. And this is because the Christians who make up the near-sighted churches are themselves near-sighted, for they do not see beyond themselves. Beloved, this is a tendency we must resist. We can so readily begin to think that God blesses us so we can be *comfortable* so that life can be easy. This is never the reason, for God blesses us so we can serve Him in greater ways. We must never see ourselves as the masters of what is in our possession, but as the managers. We are not permanent residents of this world, but sojourners passing through. And the poem writer penned,

*There's only one life, 'twill soon be past,
Only what's done for Christ will last.*

This was the belief of those in the church at Antioch. They were not just far-sighted, they saw all things in 20/20 vision. I believe they must have relished sitting under the teaching ministry of Paul and being encourage in their faith by Barnabas; yet here they were willing to send their choice teachers away so that others might come to know the truth they had learned to cherish.

The **fourth** truth is that **mission requires going**. We read in verse 4, **So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus**

From now on, the early church would begin to look a lot different. For the first ten to twenty years of her existence, the church was primarily quiet and rural, located throughout Israel. But as soon as the gospel reached Antioch and missionaries went forth, the church became more

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cosmopolitan. Some forty cities are mentioned in the book of Acts. In less than twenty years from the crucifixion of Jesus, the village culture of Palestine had been left behind, and the Greco-Roman city became the dominant environment in which Christianity flourished.

Barnabas and Saul went down to Seleucia, a port city sixteen miles from Antioch. From there they sailed to Cyprus, an island sixty miles off the coast of Syria. Why go to Cyprus? Remember that that is where the missionaries came from that evangelized Antioch. It was the homeland of Barnabas. But remember also that they were sent “by the Holy Spirit.” This teaches us that it is God who determines our areas of service. He has put us where we are to do His will. And if we can remember this, we can stand firm when things get rough in our service. And I promise you, things will get rough at times.

The **fifth** truth we glean is that ***missions requires proclamation***. Notice in verse five, ***When they reached Salamis, they began to proclaim the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews...*** I love this statement because it appears to be the thought behind something Paul would write later to the Romans, namely in Romans 10:17 that ***“...faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.”*** Here we see that the goal of missions, the goal of being sent out week by week, is proclamation. Yes, we are to be benevolent, and be engaged in ministries of mercy, feeding the hungry, healing the sick, teaching people to read. But our call is proclamation. For if we fail to tell people the truth about Jesus, we may improve their quality of life on this planet but we are certainly not improving the quality of life for the next in hell. We have a message to deliver; namely that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners! That He died for sinners! That He rose again. And that whoever believes in Him and His message receives the gift of eternal life! Missions is all about proclaiming this hope-giving message!

The **sixth** and final truth we glean from the church at Antioch is that ***missions requires assistance***. We see this at the end of verse 5 when we read, ***and they also had John as their helper***. Remember that John Mark was Barnabas’s cousin. Luke says that he joined the team as their “helper,” a term *huperetes* which means “underrower” – the guy beneath the deck rowing the boat. To fulfill the Great Commission requires all kinds of people, some who speak, some who encourage and others who row the boat to get them there!

Now, they were headed to Cyprus. Let me tell you something about Cyprus. In the ancient world, Cyprus was viewed much like we might view Hawaii or the Bahamas. Some at that time called it Makaria or “Happy Isle” because its climate was so perfect and its resources so abundant. John Mark appears to be the ministerial intern. If you know the rest of the story, you know that Mark later defected from the journey, leaving his Saul and Barnabas at Paphos in Asia Minor. This may be reading a bit too much in, but there may be a connection. It is one thing to serve God on “Happy Isle” where the sun shines and you feel good. It is altogether another thing to serve Him when the glamour is gone. I can tell you that there is nothing glamorous about ministry in general or of Hope CBC. But it is not about such things.

I have sought to challenge you with what you value. We have learned that if we want to be in the heart of God’s will, we must value the importance and influence of God’s Word, of the implementing of God’s will, of an intense commitment to prayer and of intentionally going out. Do you value these things? Are they priorities in your life?

Let me close by asking you two questions that have to do with commitment. These are two most fundamental commitments. In other words, you cannot please God if you lack either. The Antioch believers modeled both.

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1. *Are you committed to Christ?* It is all about Jesus. He must increasingly APPEAR to be all in all and you must increasingly DISAPPEAR. Do you know Him and love Him?

2. *Are you committed to the local church?* The Lord Jesus loves His church. How do I know? He died for the Church! He does His work through His church, through local churches like the one in Antioch and the ones here in Rogers, Arkansas. Are you committed to your church? I urge you to love what He loves.

Soli Deo Gloria

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