

## REASSIGNMENT ACTS 13:1-3

We live in a culture that places more emphasis on personal freedom and personal choice than any other culture in the history of the world. The chief end of man, in our culture, is to be able to do what we want to do, go where we want to go, have what we want to have, be our own boss, and march to the beat of our own drum. So, we spend our lives acquiring the means to do whatever we please.

Sadly, Christians have been greatly influenced by this creed. Many of us make decisions and plans—*major* decisions and plans—without even consulting the Lord. We ask Him to bless *our* decisions and plans, but only after we've already made them. So, we decide where we want to live, where we want to go to college, who we want to marry, what we want to do for a vocation, where we want to go to church, how we want to spend our money, when we want to retire, what we want to do in our spare time...and it may never even cross our minds to ask, "Lord, what do *you* want? What is *your* opinion?"

In other words, we live as though we have the right to do our own thing, and that while it might be a good idea to consult the Lord it's no big deal if we don't.

Not surprisingly, many Christians in America actually believe that the statement, "God helps those who help themselves" is a Bible verse. But it's not in the Bible. It is a quote from Benjamin Franklin that was published in *Poor Richard's Almanac*.

The Bible says that we are not our own, we've been bought with a price, the precious blood of Jesus. The Bible says that we are to trust in the Lord with all our hearts and *not* lean on our own understanding; that we are to acknowledge Him in all our ways and let *Him* direct our paths (Prov. 3:5-6). The Bible says that we are to live as free people, but that we are not to use our freedom to do whatever we want, but rather live as *servants* of God (1 Pet. 2:16).

The Bible also tells us that it is through humble, willing servants that God accomplishes His eternal purposes in this world. So, when we, His servants, don't live like servants, when we do our own thing independently of Him, we forfeit the opportunity to fulfill our destiny and to be used by Him.

You say, "Okay, but how do I know what God wants me to do? I've never heard the Lord say things like, 'That's the man or the woman I want you to marry,' or 'That's the college I want you to go to.' How does He make His intentions known?"

The passage we're looking at this morning gives some insight into the matter of hearing from the Lord and following His direction. **Verses 1-3.** *<sup>1</sup> Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. <sup>2</sup> 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." <sup>3</sup> Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.*

You may recall from chapter 11 that the Spirit of God established a thriving church in Antioch through ordinary Christians who loved Jesus so much that they could not help but talk about Him with others. They proclaimed to both Jews and Gentiles that Jesus was God's Son who became a man and lived among us, who died on a cross for *their* sins so that they might be forgiven and have eternal life, who conquered death by rising after three days, and who ascended into heaven after forty days. They proclaimed this good news throughout the community, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

We are also told that the church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to Antioch, and that Barnabas brought Saul from Tarsus, and together they provided pastoral leadership so the

church could grow and mature. The Spirit of God also sent prophets and other teachers so that the Antioch church could be thoroughly equipped to do the work of Jesus.

I want to emphasize that God did *not* send prophets and teachers to Antioch so that the people in that church could attend a service on a Sunday morning and be blessed by an eloquent, well-crafted sermon. He did not send prophets and teachers to the church to do the work of the ministry. He sent them, as Paul would later say, to equip the people *in* that church to do the work of the ministry (Eph. 4:11-12). And the work of the ministry had nothing to do with running an organization, establishing church programs, or evolving into a mega-church. The work of the ministry means *reaching the rest of the community and beyond with the good news about Jesus*. That is God's agenda.

And God revealed that agenda to the leaders of the Antioch church as they spent time seeking Him. Verse 2 tells us that at least five of these leaders were worshiping the Lord and fasting together.

The Greek word that is translated "worshiping" in my version (the ESV), does not refer to the kind of activity we typically associate with worship, like singing praise songs and hymns. It was most commonly used with reference to performing an official duty. It's the word used in the Greek version of the Old Testament (LXX) to describe the work that priests did in the temple, like preparing sacrifices or cleaning the utensils. In fact, it is a compound word comprised of two words, one of which means, "to work" (ergon). And so, it might be better to translate verse 2 "While they were *ministering* to the Lord and fasting..."

As these men were gathered, they were performing a service to the Lord. They were ministering to Him. How? The text doesn't say. But I think it is reasonable to assume that it involved performing a new kind of "priestly duty," which Paul specifically described when he wrote the epistle to the Romans many years later. "*In view of God's mercy offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God, which is your spiritual service of worship*" (12:1).

I think these men in Antioch were ministering to the Lord by putting to death their own agendas, ambitions, passions, and priorities. By acknowledging that they were servants of Christ who were ready and willing to align themselves with His plans and purposes at whatever cost. They were ministering to the Lord by consciously laying aside their own interests and their own opinions, confessing, "Lord, we want to be men after your own heart. We want to know what You think and what You want. Not *my* will but *Thine* be done, O Lord, because our lives are all about You."

I believe these men were ministering to the Lord by spending time in God's presence being stripped of self-will, self-reliance, and self-centeredness and becoming conformed to God's mind and heart and will. They were spending time in God's presence listening for God's voice—a voice that can only be heard when you deliberately set yourself apart from the noise and clamor of this world, be still in His presence, and press into His heart.

There is a word that sums up what it means to minister to the Lord like this. It is called "prayer." Prayer is "work" (ergon) because it involves discipline and perseverance and patience and focus and sacrifice, especially when it is accompanied by fasting.

But it is a way we "minister" to the Lord. In fact, I would submit to you that it is the *best* and *greatest* work we do for the Lord. Because it is through prayer that we are able to tune to God's frequency so that we can actually know what He thinks and wants and how we are able to align ourselves with His plans and purposes.

And so, it is not surprising that it was *while* these men were praying and fasting that the Holy Spirit spoke to them and said, "*Set apart Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.*"

Don't forget, Antioch was *the* "happening" place at this time. Lots of people were putting their faith in Jesus, there were frequent demonstrations of the Spirit's power, and the church was experiencing explosive growth. The Holy Spirit had recruited two gifted men, Barnabas from Jerusalem and Saul from Tarsus, to teach the Word of God and provide leadership in order to facilitate stability and maturity, which resulted in a robust, dynamic, vibrant church.

As you know, there is a tendency, when things are going well, to try to preserve and perpetuate that good thing so that it can be enjoyed and experienced as long as possible. There is also a tendency to think that the good things can *only* be preserved and perpetuated if the same individuals who are leading them *continue* to lead. In fact, we mistakenly tend to credit those individuals for the good that is happening.

But these are human tendencies and perspectives, and they do not correspond to the way things really are in the spiritual realm. The truly good things that happen in the spiritual realm are solely the result of the Holy Spirit, who chooses and appoints certain people to lead, and then fills and uses them to do His work. And if that work turns out to be exceptionally effective or dynamic, it is not because those appointed leaders happen to be exceptionally gifted individuals, but because the Holy Spirit has done His extraordinary work through them. Remember, He has given them their gifts and He has filled them with His power and wisdom. The Holy Spirit is sovereign in a church; the leaders are merely His servants.

Which means that if the Holy Spirit wants to remove leaders from a church and reassign them, that is His prerogative. Because don't forget, the Spirit's agenda is never about maintaining; it is about expanding. He is not interested in preserving and perpetuating a dynamic spiritual experience in a particular location; He is interested in spreading the gospel and making disciples throughout the world.

And that always involves change. Change, in a healthy, dynamic church, is constant. Because in such churches people are being equipped for the work of the ministry so that, in His time, the Spirit can tap them on the shoulder and send them to expand His work elsewhere. Healthy, dynamic churches are not inwardly focused; they are outwardly focused.

So it was in Antioch. After using Barnabas and Saul to provide leadership in the church, the Spirit sent them out from the church for the work that He had prepared for them to do elsewhere. And apparently the church and its other leaders were okay with this. Look at **verse 3**, <sup>3</sup> *Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.*

The practice of leaders laying their hands on individuals was common in the early church and was always associated with an *impartation* of the Holy Spirit's blessing and power. In other words, it wasn't just a formality; it was efficacious. The Holy Spirit transferred His grace, His gifts, and His blessing through the leaders to His commissioned ones, enabling them to serve in His strength and under His influence. Beginning next week, we will see just how necessary the Spirit's grace and gifts and blessing for the success of His new assignment for them.

As we conclude, I'd like to state the main idea, and then suggest some practical principles for application. The main idea of this passage is: *While the leaders of the Antioch church were seeking the Lord, the Holy Spirit appointed Barnabas and Saul to a new assignment.* From this main idea I believe we can learn at least three things about the Holy Spirit.

First, since the Holy Spirit is sovereign, He sends His servants where and when He wants them to go. Don't forget, He has an agenda, and that agenda has nothing to do with preserving and perpetuating our comfort and enjoyment. It's about spreading the gospel of Jesus and advancing the kingdom of Jesus. So, He may appoint His servants to do His

bidding in a particular location for a specified period of time, and then reassign them to other locations for however long He chooses. It is His choice and His prerogative to assign His servants whenever, wherever, for however long He wants.

Second, since the Holy Spirit is sovereign, he does not suggest, ask, consult, or negotiate. He tells His servants to go and expects them to obey.

Furthermore, when He does tell His servants to go, He may not provide much detail to fill in the blanks. There is no indication in Acts 13 that the Holy Spirit told the leaders in Antioch *where* He wanted Barnabas and Saul to go or even *what*, specifically, He wanted them to do. All He said was “set them apart for me for the work to which I have called them.”

I don’t know about you, but had I been Barnabas or Saul, I probably would have said, “Lord, would you mind telling me where I am going and what this assignment is before you set me apart? I’d like to know what I’m getting into here. And if I’m not thrilled with the assignment, I’d like to reserve the right to decline or consider another option.”

But there is nothing in the text to suggest that either one of them made any protests or even had any questions. Which proves that Barnabas and Saul were not Americans. Because Americans would like verse 2 to say, “While they were praying and fasting (actually, we’d like to leave out the word ‘fasting’) the Holy Spirit said to Barnabas and Saul, ‘Hey guys, would you consider volunteering for a job I’d like you to do?’” As Americans we want to be asked...or consulted...or given the right-of-refusal...or at least the opportunity to negotiate. As Americans we think we have a right to be part of the decision-making process.

But that is not what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. He’s the Master; disciples are servants. A master doesn’t ask His servants what *they* want to do; He tells them what *He* wants them to do.

Is that okay with you? If not, then you probably haven’t really grasped who you are as a follower of Christ. Or who *He* is as your Lord. You probably still have a view of yourself that is shaped by our culture rather than the Bible. Because “*Lord*” means “Master”, and followers of the Lord Jesus are *servants* who do whatever He says.

Third, when the Holy Spirit removes His servant leaders from a thriving church, He intends to replace them with other servant leaders so the church can continue to thrive. The key word (which I do not have in your sermon notes) is *intends*. Some of us have been in thriving churches that have struggled immensely or shriveled spiritually when there is a leadership transition. That is not to be blamed on the Holy Spirit, but rather a faulty selection process or a search committee that is not in step with the Spirit. If a church keeps in step with the Spirit, listens to His voice, follows His lead, and follows the Scriptural guidelines for leadership, then He will ensure that it continues to thrive. After all, it is His church, and no one cares more about its health and well-being than Him.

That is true for Emmanuel Bible Church. What is happening at EBC is eerily similar to what happened at the church in Antioch (though I think I’m quite a bit older than Barnabas and Saul were). Please be aware that the Antioch church continued to thrive after Barnabas and Saul left. But please also note that one of the reasons they thrived is that they did not view the new assignment that the Spirit had given to Barnabas and Saul as a separate, independent ministry from their church. It was more like the global arm of their church. Barnabas and Saul were still part of them, and their ministry was an extension of the church’s ministry. It was also their home base—the place to which they returned after every missionary journey.

I sincerely hope and expect that this is how it will be with Mindy and I and Emmanuel Bible Church.

## Reassignment Acts 13:1-3

**Main Idea:** While the leaders of the Antioch church were seeking the Lord, the Holy Spirit appointed Barnabas and Saul to a new assignment.

The Church at Antioch (1)  
Its beginnings (ch. 11)

Its leadership

The Spirit reassigns some servants (2)  
The receptive posture of church leadership

The specific instructions from the Holy Spirit  
“Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul”

“For the work which I have called them”

Cooperating with the Spirit (3)  
Praying and fasting

Laying on of hands

Application:

- Since the Holy Spirit is sovereign, He sends His servants where and when He wants them to go.
- Since the Holy Spirit is sovereign, He does not suggest, ask, consult, or negotiate. He tells His servants what to do and expects them to obey.
- When the Holy Spirit removes His servant leaders from a thriving church, He intends to replace them with servant leaders so the church can continue to thrive.

## **Application Questions**

### **Acts 13:1-3**

What are the challenges for disciples of Jesus living in a culture in which we are encouraged (and conditioned) to do what we want to do, go where we want to go, have what we want to have, be our own boss, and march to the beat of our own drum? How have you been able to overcome the temptation of reverting to self-interest and independence?

Are you prepared to do whatever the Holy Spirit asks you to do...even if you don't know what that assignment involves? Even if it means you have to be uncomfortable or do something new or different? Even if it means going to difficult or dangerous places?