

The Task of Mission

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Preacher: Mark Chew

[0 : 00] it's hard to exaggerate the impact of the missionary movement on the church as we find her today. Everywhere you look, whichever continent you consider, the church would be what it is today were it not for men and women missionaries willing to leave their homes, set by their home churches, to take the gospel to a foreign land.

That's true even here in Australia, even here at Holy Trinity. Now it may have been decades ago, but were it not for missionaries coming firstly to Australia and then up here to Doncaster, this church would not be where it is.

I myself remember my parents speaking fondly of a couple from Adelaide and another single lady from South Africa who came to their local church in Singapore where they became Christians and helped build it up.

And because of that, here I am in Doncaster, Christian. Well in a sense it all started here, didn't it?

As in here, not in Doncaster, but in Antioch, in the book of Acts. Yes, there had been exponential growth in Jerusalem, in the church there, but they had grown by attracting people like a magnet.

[1 : 24] Yes, the gospel did spread out from there, but not by missionaries, but initially by scattering through persecution. Even recall last week Barnabas, who was sent by the apostles to Antioch, was responding to conversions already taking place there.

But now here in Antioch, we're about to see the church sending out missionaries on their own initiative. Yes, by the direction of the Holy Spirit of course, but going out.

Still, what I want to do firstly, as we look at the first section in your handout, is to consider some of the ingredients that were present here in the church in Antioch that allowed this to happen.

So, resuming in chapter 12, verse 25, we read, When Barnabas and Saul had finished their mission, they returned from Jerusalem, taking with them John, also called Mark.

So, the first mission, of course, was to deliver the gift to the Judean brothers and sisters in the famine. So, really, for Barnabas and Saul, this was not their first mission, was it?

[2 : 33] The first mission, though, was more about delivering food rather than preaching the gospel. It was still worthwhile, though, as an outworking of the gospel, because the church had been blessed with the word of God, and they wanted to respond by giving and serving.

Well, this is the first ingredient, that the church in Antioch was a giving church, standing ready to be a blessing to others. Now, I think, too, that the church in Antioch was probably a well-resourced church.

Saul and Barnabas had taught large numbers there, so it was sizable as a church. They had grown in faith to the point that we see in the next verse, they were also resourced in godly leadership.

So, verse 1, Now, in the church at Antioch, there were prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon, Colt, Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manian, who had been brought up with Herod the Tetrarch, and Saul.

Quite a few names there, but if you count, there are really only five prophets and teachers in total, which, in a church which is really no more than two or three years old, it's actually pretty impressive, pretty good.

[3 : 47] Luke doesn't distinguish between the prophets and the teachers, and Saul, perhaps, was both. But whether they were prophets or teachers, these were meant to be the leaders of the church, because they were the ones that the church looked to for God's teaching, for God's word.

Remember, a year or so back, they had heard from another prophet, from Agabus, word, which then mobilized them to send Saul and Barnabas on mission. So, I don't think it's unreasonable to imagine that now, they're standing ready yet again, to see what the next mission might be.

And so, here they were, worshipping and fasting, which, fasting normally goes with praying as well, and both of them indicate that they were waiting on the Lord. And as they were doing that, the Holy Spirit responds in verse 2, and he says, Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul, for the work to which I have called them.

Now, I'm not sure if the church would have been surprised by this. After all, it was Saul and Barnabas that went on that first mission, and they had returned. But still, these were the leaders of the church.

They were the original OG leaders, weren't they? They were key to the initial growth of the church, teaching them for a whole year. So, what God was asking this church to do was costly.

[5 : 17] The church was being called to step out in faith, and, you know, release 40% of their leadership group, as it were, to a destination unknown.

Did you notice? Spirit didn't really say where they were going, and also for how long. Now, also, I think it's worth pointing out that it was both Barnabas and Saul that were set apart.

We put a lot of attention on Saul as the missionary to the Gentiles, but let's not forget Barnabas as well. And so, hearing the Lord's call, the church again fasted and prayed, and then, in obedience, commissioned them, laying on of their hands, verse 3, and then sent them off.

Well, it wasn't long before the Spirit reveals to them, because He's the one leading them, reveals to them their first stop, Cyprus, verse 4. 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. So, I've got another map. There's going to be a few maps in Acts.

[6 : 31] But you see that Seleucia, very close to Antioch, still in the Middle East. And then Salamis is on the island of Cyprus itself. Now, Cyprus, if you recall, was also one of the places mentioned last week as a destination where the believers were scattered too.

However, we don't read of any of these believers, either in Salamis or Paphos later. Doesn't mean they were there, but they weren't there, but they're not mentioned. The other thing to notice, of course, is that John Mark was with them as their helper.

And John Mark, if you again remember, his mother's house was the one that the church was praying at when Peter was arrested in Jerusalem. So, I don't know whether you know, but I picked up all these little connections, don't you see?

That really, this is God's universal church. It might be in different locations, but they're all connected. And sort of incidental connections here working together for the gospel. But now, moving on to section two, we see that wherever the location, the basic task of the mission team was clear.

And that was to preach or proclaim the word of God, the gospel. This, we read, is what they did from one end of Cyprus in the east to the other, the west.

[7 : 54] So, on the next slide, they traveled through the whole island until they came to Paphos. There, they met a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus, who was an attendant of the proconsul, Sergius Paulus.

The proconsul, an intelligent man, sent for Barnabas because he wanted to hear the word of God. Now, this is the first recorded exchange or dialogue between Saul and others on mission.

And through it, though, what we're given is an insight into what is a common pattern in mission work, which we'll see Saul go through again and again. So, as we already said, the basic task is always to proclaim God's word.

But now, we also see the usual context of the mission field. Often, what we find in the world are hungry souls like the proconsul, eager to hear God's word.

And yet, side by side, with this hunger for the truth, are often competing lies, vying for attention, behind which sits, as we shall see, the hand of Satan.

[9 : 07] Now, this is true wherever we go and whatever age we live in. People everywhere have a deep thirst for the truth. You, I'm sure, have a deep thirst for the truth to search for purpose and meaning, right?

We're always asking questions about what are we doing in this world? Where are we headed? Why are we here? I'm sure you've asked those questions. And we all feel, don't we, that history has to be going somewhere.

That's why we often talk about making history. Now, that's a really odd phrase, isn't it? To make history. Because, in a sense, history is being made all the time.

We're making history right now. Can you believe it? Just by sitting here, passing time, as events happen, history is being made, right? But that's not what we mean by making history, do we?

Rather, when we say that, our desire is to give meaning to these events, right? To make our involvement count for something in this world.

[10 : 17] Have a lasting impact. Serve a higher purpose. And so, that was the pro-council search as well, I think. And so, he's drawn to Saul's teaching.

It's interesting that Luke records him to be an intelligent man. That is, he sort of knew that what Saul was saying was worth listening to. That there was truth in what he had to say.

But lo and behold, standing in the way is Bar-Jesus, the sorcerer. Now, he's Jewish, but he's not on the side of the God of Israel.

Instead, he's working to protect his own self-interest. Now, think about this. Sergius Paulus was a prized benefactor for him.

He may be a false prophet, but I'm pretty sure Sergius was hanging off his every word as though from God. And you know, as long as that continued, as long as Sergius didn't tweak that he wasn't saying things that were not from God, Bar-Jesus was on a good wicked, don't you think?

[11 : 25] But now, his little racket was being threatened. Gospel truth was being, was putting his profitable business at risk. And again, we often see this in the mission field, don't we?

When the gospel meets people hungry for the truth, there are often competing structures and power forces already in place that many people want to keep perpetuating.

And these may be whole cultures and traditions of an entire country, and we see that, don't we, when Christians are persecuted in certain nations? Or locally, it could occur just with individual families where the hierarchy of a family is threatened if one of the members of the family become a Christian.

And you yourself may have experienced this, and you might wonder, you know, why is it that my family, they're just so unreasonable about things? I just want to go to church. Why do they make it so hard for me?

Well, it's because there are spiritual forces at work behind the scenes. And so it means that reasoning alone is not sufficient to make people believe the gospel.

[12 : 41] It doesn't mean you have the right or the best argument. That means people will believe you. Rather, a true turning to the Lord requires the work of the Spirit to open their eyes.

And we see that, don't we, in this passage. And we will see it again throughout Acts. And so here, Paul, filled with the Spirit, knew that he had to confront the sorcerer, who is the mouthpiece of the devil's lies, in order to free the proconsul to hear God's word properly.

So verse 8, we read, But Ilimus, the sorcerer, for that is what his name means, opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith. Now, we're not sure how he's doing it, probably using magic to distract the proconsul, something like that, keep him entranced to his words.

But Saul responds with the power of the Spirit. Then Paul, Saul, who is also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Ilimus 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.

[14 : 01] Immediately, mist and darkness came over him and he groped about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand. So as I said, Paul boldly names the power behind Ilimus.

It's the devil. It's described as the enemy of everything that is right. That's a pretty apt phrase, isn't it? And I want to say that the devil is working even when there might not be anything overtly demonic that's happening.

It is not only because Ilimus was using magic that it's the devil's work. Rather, the devil is described as the enemy of everything that is right.

In other words, he stands behind all attempts to pervert the right ways of the Lord. Lord, isn't it? As long as there's an attempt to keep people from the truth, ultimately, whether there's any demonic manifestations or not, that is the work of the devil.

It could be magic or sorcery, but sometimes they're just very mundane distractions, you know, with sports or relationships. The devil even used so-called signs, hasn't he, as a weapon to stop people from believing in God.

[15 : 30] As long as he can stop people from hearing God's word and finding faith and eternal life in Jesus, then he will use any trick, whatever guise it comes in.

And interestingly, you know that actually the judgment that comes on by Jesus is actually very similar to what Paul himself encountered on the road to Damascus, right? Like Ilimus, or like Saul, Ilimus is blinded for a time.

He was also needing to be led by the hand. And I think that's to suggest that really, whether it was Saul persecuting the church or Ilimus doing it through sorcery, both are really in one sense something that the devil was working to pervert the work of the Lord.

But thankfully, like Saul, I think it also suggests that here, repentance was open to Ilimus. He was only blinded for a time, it says. We don't know if he did repent, but I think he could have.

Ultimately, though, I think this little encounter demonstrates that the work Paul is doing is actually identical to Jesus' own mission. Because again, when Jesus came, he himself declared, didn't he, that he was here to fulfill the prophecy in Isaiah 61.

[16 : 56] So that was read today by Julia, where we read, being anointed by the Spirit, Jesus came to proclaim good news to the poor, bind up the brokenhearted, set the captives free, and release prisoners from darkness.

Now, Jesus here is not talking about the miracles, the physical healings and all that, that he was doing. Not primarily. The captivity he was thinking about is that of bondage to sin.

And freedom only comes through proclaiming the good news, the gospel, that Jesus died for us, that we are forgiven through faith in him. And so you see, this is true for all of us without exception, isn't it?

Whether you're physically blind or not, all of us are spiritually blind until the gospel frees us. Whether we're rich or poor, slave or free, only the truth of the gospel can set us free.

And so today, if you're here today seeking, the thing that will set you free, that will give you sight, spiritual sight, is the good news of Jesus. This was the work that Jesus was doing when he was on the earth, but afterwards, after he had ascended to the heaven and the promised Holy Spirit was poured out, Jesus continues to do this work through his disciples, and Paul is doing just that in this chapter.

[18 : 24] And it's only once the sorcerer has been neutralized and stopped from continuing the lies of the devil, that verse 12, the proconsul is able to believe the truth.

So verse 12, when the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord. That something symbolic has happened in this whole encounter.

The spiritual blindness of the proconsul is now being transferred to the physical blindness of the sorcerer. And as a result, the proconsul for the first time can see, not with physical eyes, but spiritual eyes, and therefore he believes the truth.

But notice what Luke says, it's not the miracle itself that amazes the proconsul, is it? No, the proconsul was amazed at the teaching about the Lord.

He was drawn by the truth in Paul's teaching. True faith, then, is not believing in the dazzle of miracles, but is actually believing in the word of God.

[19 : 30] There's a difference, isn't it? To be attracted and impressed by the miracles are different to actually coming to God's word and believing and being amazed by the teaching about the Lord.

Now, friends, I'm pretty sure it wouldn't surprise you to say that these very forces are still at play today, isn't it? Whether it's here in Australia or overseas, millions still don't know Jesus.

And that means they are living in darkness. As you look around the world, even some places like in Europe, that used to be rich in the gospel, are in relative darkness now.

Yes, the cathedrals, the churches, they're all still standing, and some very impressive, but the spiritual lights are dimmed, aren't they, in these places.

Elsewhere, like in the parts of Central Asia, the gospel has never really taken hold, not yet. And yet, at the same time, throughout the world, people are still thirsting for the truth, they're still hungering to find meaning and purpose in life.

[20 : 36] You probably have friends in uni or at work that are still searching, even though they may not have found it yet. At the same time, there are also churches like the one in Antioch, that by God's grace are well resourced, with members that love the Lord Jesus, want to serve, want to see people come to know the Lord.

And I think our church here, at HDD, at St. John's, is one of those. Even when we compare ourselves to some of the other churches in Melbourne and Australia, we have to count ourselves blessed, don't we?

So here's the thing that I think we need to ask ourselves. What do you think the Lord would want us to do with it? What do you do we to keep the blessings of the gospel to ourselves?

Or maybe spend our time going deeper and deeper into God's word, only to debate the finer points of reformed theology? Keep strengthening our faith so that we can comfort one another as we wait for eternity in heaven?

Or perhaps, just like God was doing in Acts, perhaps our rich blessings in the gospel here is for us to then, in turn, serve those who need it, particularly in the countries that are gospel poor.

[22 : 15] Now, friends, you might be thinking that, you know, I'm just going to apply this passage by saying, application, let's send some people to Blackburn next year. If you thought that, then I think we're severely limiting God's view about mission.

It's like reading in Acts that the church prayed and fasted and the Spirit told them, set so and boundaries apart so that they can go across town to Antioch and plant another church.

That would be to belittle God, don't you think? Now, I think God would like us to lift our eyes further. And to see the need in the gospel poor countries around the world and maybe in other parts of Australia as well.

And then to ask, God, how can we be used to meet that need? And you know what? I think if we did that, we will simply be continuing what this church at HCD has already had a track record of doing.

That is raising, sending, and supporting missionaries from our midst. You know, as I look up, there are actually returned missionaries in our midst, sitting here today.

[23 : 30] There are children of missionaries. You know who you are, third culture kids. At least one vicar, one past vicar of HCD has become a missionary himself.

And so somehow, I don't think God is just going to stop there today. Do you think? As long as the needs exist, then I think we ought to be praying and thinking of asking God to raise up more among us to go.

So, will you make that a prayer for our church? I know the Global Prayer Mission Group, have I got that right, in the right order? They meet every third Wednesday before TYA to pray for other missionaries.

Well, if you go to that, will you pray that God might raise missionaries from our midst? If you don't go, can you go and pray with them? And also, as you pray, will you be open that it might be you?

Now, I know already that some of you are thinking about this, so that's great. Please keep thinking, come talk to me, keep asking the Lord to open doors for you. But some of you, probably it has not crossed your mind.

[24 : 48] Or you may have considered it briefly and then sort of dismissed it as being too hard. You know, you may think, I'm already on a certain trajectory here.

You know, career as a doctor, lawyer, dentist, data analyst, I think that's quite popular nowadays. You've bought a house, you know, you're settling down.

You know, we've got plans. Well, we all do. I did as well. And it's also tempting to see, you know, there's already a few others that are interested.

You know, God, just choose them instead. I'll be the one to, you know, pray for them. Or perhaps you think, I'm not good enough. I don't fit the mold of the missionary type.

Well, one thing I wanted you to notice as we read was that that's not how it worked in Antioch. It's not individuals saying, I'm going. Rather, the church prayed together, they were open to the word of the Lord, and they were told as a church, set apart Saul and Barnabas.

[25 : 56] Barnabas. Now, we don't know exactly how the Spirit did that, but I think because elsewhere Luke specifically mentions visions and casting lots, I think here it was a bit more maybe mundane even that there was a discernment process that happened and then they discerned that this is what the Lord was telling the church to do, to set apart Saul and Barnabas.

However it occurred, the important point was this, that Saul and Barnabas were willing and open, they submitted themselves to that process and then afterwards it was the church that made that judgment.

And so likewise today you as an individual, you don't have to decide for yourself if you are suited or not. The most important thing is willingness to go.

Then there's training and equipping and then the church will discern with you whether or not it is the right thing to do. And of course there are missionary societies that do that with you as well.

But the most important thing is not to close our hearts or the door to God saying yes, send me. Now friends, I know you didn't come expecting to be in a missionary conference today.

[27 : 10] It's just a normal Sunday service. Yes, it is. And yet, because this is the text, that is still the challenge, isn't it? The mission task is as great as it was in Saul's day.

The good news still needs to be proclaimed so that people can be set free from sin. And we at HDD, we're a church that has been blessed. So we ought to be a giving church, a sending church.

All of us can play a part. Some of us will stay, some of us will go, all of us will pray, everyone will support. So let's do that.

Let's keep our eyes on mission, and in particular, mission to gospel-poor areas. Now if you want to talk more about this today with me, please do, if you've been prompted to do that.

God may be just planting a seed, and with time and prayer that might become clearer, but if God has indeed planted a thought and a seed in you today, then don't let it disappear.

[28 : 18] The harvest is plentiful. God is still raising workers for his field. Let him do it among us. It would be such a joy, isn't it, for God to do it among us, and for us to be able to send people that we love into God's mission field to do his work.

Let's pray. Father, we thank you for raising up men and women across the ages to take the good news of Jesus across the world.

Thank you that you have set us free by the power of the gospel, that our blindness is taken away through faith in your son Jesus. Stour hearts so that we desire to see this work continue.

Raise up more missionaries in our midst. If, Lord, you are calling us individually, then give us the courage to say, Lord, I'm willing, send me.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.