

On a Mission from God

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[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 24th of January 1999.

The preacher is Ian Wockart. His sermon is entitled On a Mission from God and is from Acts chapter 13 verses 1 to 12.

Our loving Father, we ask for that wonderful work of your Holy Spirit that brings your word to bear in our minds and our hearts and drives our actions.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, this evening, as I speak from this reading from Acts 13, the way I'll do it is this.

I'm first of all going to tell you about the context of this narrative and why it is the way it is. Then somewhat of what the narrative is saying to us as Christian believers, then I'm going to conclude with an encouraging true life story, a kind of an update of God's activities to do with the people of Cyprus.

[1 : 12] It would be really helpful if you'd continue to have your Bibles open in front of you as I refer to here and there to the first 12 verses of Acts 13.

Now, as you take in a big picture view of Acts, even just going back as far as chapter 11, you'll see the church in Antioch, right, a trip to Jerusalem by Barnabas and Saul, and then chapter 12, which Phil preached on this morning about the jailing and release of Peter and so on.

And suddenly we're back to Antioch. When I was a boy going to matinees at the local cinema, that's before there were TVs and when dinosaurs still roamed the earth, one of the lines in the Western movies was, meanwhile, back at the ranch.

These days it would be, meanwhile, back on Luke Skywalker's spaceship. Because that was said because suddenly the scene had shifted.

But that's what's happening here. The scene is on the move through chapter 11, 12 and 13. I want to put it to you that that is because God is active everywhere.

[2 : 37] And we human beings can be hard put at times to keep up with what he's doing in various places. And that's because he is God and we are human.

And because he is God, he's not limited to doing only one thing at a time. He's not limited to being in one place at a time as we are. And so while he had an angel busy in Jerusalem releasing Peter, at the same time, God was blessing and growing his church in Antioch.

And so we come to verse 1 where we have in just one verse a description of a thriving nest as a church.

This was a church which really had leaders to spare. Okay. They had Barnabas, Simeon, Lucius, and Menaean, and Saul.

Five of them. And into that situation, in verse 2, God is virtually saying, you've got two to spare. So send them out. Now churches always need to be open to the possibility that they've got more resources than they need.

[3 : 51] I remember when Worm and I were seriously thinking or began the serious thinking that eventually led us to leave St Luke's Vermont and proceed to ordination training.

I said to the then vicar, who's a very good friend so I won't name him, I said to him, you know, I think one of the reasons God's moving us out because this joint is overstocked with Christian leadership.

And the then vicar said, I don't think so. But I believe God said, well, I think so. And move the white carts on. Now out of that sort of thinking comes the question, how does the church become so spiritually powerful that there is leadership to spare?

There's people to confidently send out as mature Christian people. Well, the other thing is that this is a church that was so spiritually sensitive that when the Holy Spirit spoke, he was clearly heard and understood.

That's evident in verse 2. The Holy Spirit said, while they were worshipping and fasting, set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.

[5 : 11] Prepare to have a farewell, a valedictory service. I remember hearing once about a church that obviously wasn't really listening to God, particularly on areas of social justice.

A church in the deep south of America some years ago where an Afro-American man and his family moved into this town and saw the church not far from home that looked like it was lively, so the next Sunday they went to church.

And when this unfortunate family got to the church, there was a white man at the door. He said, sorry, the Negro church is up the road. And they went home very distressed.

Second class Christians was the way they'd been treated. As they were on the way home, the husband had the distinct impression that someone to join them was walking with them and someone said, won't they let you into that church?

And he said, no they won't. And the figure said, they haven't let me in for years either. Not listening. But the church in Antioch is the opposite.

[6 : 17] This is a church where the Holy Spirit wants to make something known it is heard and understood. Now the answer to the question, how does a church become powerful and sensitive? It does so from the teaching of God's word.

That's it. The roots are in the teaching of God's word. Paul knew that later in life when he was, he gathered the church leaders of the church in Ephesus for a special meeting and you can read about it in Acts 20.

One of the things he said to them was, I commend you to God and the word of his grace which is able to build you up. So the answer is not in more and more U-beaut programs.

The answer is not as in some Anglican churches where they put more paraphernalia out for communion services and so on and believe that's the way of the holiness. No. Derailed.

It's the word of God. The word of his grace which is able to build you up. Listen to Jesus praying for us in John chapter 17 what's sometimes called the high priestly prayer.

[7 : 28] Just before the crucifixion he is praying for us and as he prays for us he asks his father for his people father sanctify them that is us believers sanctify them by the truth your word is truth and one of the things that's saying is you cannot separate the spirit of God from the word of God.

to be sanctified which literally means to be made truly holy a truly spiritual person can only happen through taking in the word of truth.

It doesn't come any other way. It certainly doesn't come by any clever religious technique as some people have found out they've accepted a mirage and been left with the desert.

And so I say again a well endowed church a church that knows these things in its life that's sensitive to the spirit of God and is growing and growing Christians has got good leadership I believe is usually expected by God to be ascending church to be giving away.

Now a comment about another comment about verse 2 a lot of us a lot of Christians have looked at verse 2 and said what what was happening what's the detail what happened so that the the Holy Spirit spoke and the church heard it all we're told was they were worshipping and fasting well the lack of detail makes it intriguing but as the Bible says speculation about things where the Bible is silent is not just helpful it's also ungodly but I suggest what God wants to take from this statement is the fact that the Spirit of God can make himself heard in a well taught biblical church okay if we take care as God's people to cultivate the environment the Spirit of God will have ways of making himself heard so it was in the early 1980s at

[9 : 54] St Luke's Vermont a retired minister for whom I had immense respect because of the kind of ministry he conducted he and his wife retired to Melbourne and they attended St Luke's and Alex got on my will that he felt that God was showing him that I was destined for full time ministry and I won't go into all the details but I thought I convinced him otherwise and then God started work on me and I think the late Alex was very pleased to hear it what had happened there was that it was a well taught church where there was a Alex as one man of God there who was sensitive and hearing what God was saying and it happens in all kinds of ways now to verse 4 Barnabas and Saul are on the move and the gospel goes overseas not very far but it's across part of the

Mediterranean sea to Cyprus now this is not the first time that God had sent good news overseas I wonder if you can recall the first time that God sent good news overseas any guesses Jonah okay I suspect Jonah was meant to go overland because the direct route from Israel to Nineveh in Assyria was overland but Jonah did it the hard way by boat and by whale I'm sure would rather travel inland by whale way Jonah very reluctant missionary when God said go to Nineveh and proclaim the message I've got for you Jonah said in your dream I'm out of here so I bought his ticket on the boat and took off but despite

Jonah's initial reluctance the fact is that God achieved a massive work of grace in Nineveh through Jonah's preaching a repentance so authentic and obvious that Jonah was scandalised that God would allow the Ninevites to repent of their sins God has not changed in his gracious purposes Luke chapter 1 in the lead up to the birth of Jesus has a reminder about why God sent his son in the words of Zacharias the father of John the Baptist who said that the son of God was coming to shine upon those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death you know part of Paul's commissioning from God God's original commissioning statement to him when he was converted near Damascus was that he was sending him to open eyes to turn people from darkness to light from the power of

Satan to God that they might have an inheritance with all those who have faith in Jesus now particularly turning someone from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God that's what happened in Cyprus as you read down the verses you'll see in verse 4 they sail the Cyprus move down the island and come to Paphos and meet the false prophet and also Sages Paulus the pro-consul who in those days was a kind of vice-regal person the governor on behalf of Rome on the island a man of some authority and usually of considerable administrative ability when you look at the structure of the first 12 verses of Acts 13 you'll see half of this section is given to this encounter at Paphos on Cyprus and that's the only ministry that's seriously mentioned the only personal one and I'm quite sure that a lot of people got converted on Cyprus as they moved down the island until they come to this town and what happens then is an episode of muscular

Christianity some very powerful things happen first thing to learn from this narrative is that Paul was empowered by the Spirit really because the work he was in was work into which the Holy Spirit had directed him there's a very important lesson there excuse me when people rush off on their own sake thinking they'll do something great for God and I mean Christian people there's sometimes they're picked up in an untidy disillusioned heaped further down the track and the reason all too often is because they were tearing off onto some enterprise that God had not called them to but not for Paul the second lesson is an important lesson for all of us is there's a lot of people in every generation there are a lot of people like that pro consul

[15 : 25] Sergius Paulus people who are intelligent and he's named here as being an intelligent man spiritually hungry he asked Barnabas and Saul to come to him to explain what Christianity was about the new testaments got several examples of people who were intelligent and were prepared to look at the evidence and come to some sort of conclusion the centurion at the cross truly this man was the son of God Cornelius that godly centurion in Acts chapter 10 the centurion who sent a message to Jesus because he had a sick servant he knew enough about Jesus to know that Jesus had the power to heal he'd seen the evidence and he's prepared to act on that well I say there are always people like that I want to tell you about Rosemary from Tacoma Rosemary is not a real name young married woman living in

Tacoma and attending the Anglican church in Bellroaf Heights when I was vicar there Rosemary came from a quite world church family background and came to church fairly regularly partly I think to please her mother who was the organist at the Selby church when we had a Christianity explained course Rosemary thought this would be a good opportunity to brush up on the basics so she came along and she had a lot of questions so one day after the course I went to visit her and I said you've got a lot of questions she said well I have I've written them all out in the list so I said well there's too many questions for one day there how about we have a cup of tea now we work as far as we can down through the questions and a couple of weeks time I come around to then we have another cup of tea and we work down the other half this is a woman with two degrees married to a fellow in software engineering quite an intelligent couple and so we worked honestly through

Rosemary's difficult questions on the first day and the next time I went to see her as we sat down for a cup of tea she said Ian I don't think I'm a Christian I thought wow so she said well let's do the first couple of questions and then she said Ian I know I'm not a Christian what must I do to become a Christian so I explained to her how we come to new birth and she accepted Jesus on the spot and you know what God did with Rosemary and her husband he sent them to England the husband's job went to England with Amcor and so they were there for three years and she became I'm sure a valued member of a couple of Anglican churches in the cities in which they lived there are people around like that as I was thinking about this this afternoon I suddenly remembered at times what I would pray at the beginning of the day in the hills was

Lord would you please bring my path across those who need to hear your word and give me eyes to see where the real opportunities are and I think looking back that Rosemary and her husband were one of those opportunities now the third thing from this episode of Paphos is that people who dabble or go pretty hard at the occult people who are into wedger boards witchcraft black magic anything like that are people who really when it comes down to the wire are aligned against the gospel transforming people okay they have various ways to say it sometimes there's outright foul-mouthed opposition when the gospel of christ is mentioned sometimes there are patronising words yes we know about that but Jesus isn't as special as you think okay so there's a sort of wanting to stay friends with you but not admit to the claims of christ and elemus this magician and everyone like him are people who belong to satan as paul says in romans six to christian believers really you're a slave to the one you obey and this man elemus had certainly achieved the reputation and probably a fair bit of money out of serving satan and he was so enslaved by satan that his reaction when the gospel hit the airwaves in paphos was to try and shout it down perhaps not shout but bring in all kinds of intellectual arguments but of course magicians and occultists don't have the last say although sometimes i wonder if some christians think they do they're so fearful of them but here in this narrative we see another magician going down on a screaming heap remember simon of samaria in chapter 8 another magician who was undone by the holy spirit the fact is that god will not endure those who pervert and obstruct the gospel he's already said something about that in isaiah 750 years ago where through isaiah he makes this pronouncement woe to those who call light darkness and darkness light let's just think about it when there's a contest between the spirit of god and the spirit of this world which is one of the names for satan when such a contest occurs as it did this day in paphos in cyprus light will overwhelm the darkness and here in paphos the darkness got moved to where it belonged the magician was struck blind not forever but for a season by the power of god and at the same time sergius paulus moves out of spiritual darkness darkness into god's marvelous light and that's the best bit of that narrative lastly the encouraging true life story this is about another parishioner from belgrove heights parish a lady whose family migrated from cyprus when she was a little girl and i'll call her maria i've got reason to believe she's given her testimony quite fully in many other places but i hadn't asked her permission to do it so i'll use a pseudonym maria first contacted me when having of all things consulted the yellow pages to find a minister and found the anglican church she wasn't real happy about the greek orthodox church and she wasn't real happy about

the roman catholic church and like a lot of other people i suppose she thought oh well anglicans are okay they're harmless so after a almost pointless conversation about baptism for two-step children i said look maria i'll bring the prayer book around with the service and we'll have a cup of tea together and we'll look at the baptism service and that can crystallize your questions on that visit i found that she did hairdressing from home and i decided to give her a try see if she could cut me the way i liked it which she did so once every five weeks i had an appointment there for a haircut and she'd be interested in what i've been doing so i talked to her and when she had spiritual questions which she sometimes did i'd show her something from the bible something from the word of god and when there were problems as there sometimes were in family life i'd pray with her so i went by and one day she said to me what would you think if i told you i thought i was a witch and i said maria nothing would change but what makes you think that and she said well i'm clairvoyant and she told me a couple of episodes which proved clearly that she was clairvoyant and this was something that happened out of the blue to her when she was 14 it was something she'd never sought for and she didn't like it in fact at times her had gotten to trouble where she could see what her situation really was and spoke up and wasn't thanked for it so discussions went on and one day she said to me ian i've had a dream come several times where a young woman in the nurse's uniform appears to me and says i'd like to be your spiritual guide what do you think about that well i said to maria that i was concerned that that's a more spiritual evil and i suddenly thought hold on we can deal with this i'll lead her through a bible study on who is the true spiritual guide so i quickly a couple over the next couple of weeks i penciled out a simple bible study on the holy spirit from john chapters 14 to 16 i sat down with maria we worked our way through that and it came to the point she said well ian how do i get born again and she became a christian and through other circumstances outside my viet environment started a husband and kids as the ministry progressed with maria and i prayed with her one of the things that came out was that her great grandmother was a witch as she told more and more about herself and the background of her family out came to the fact that her great grandmother was a practicing witch on the island of cyprus and it seems and it's documented in other places that this kind of thing can send poison down the family tree and my guess is that that was why maria ended up with a clairvoyance since she didn't want so the story ended marvelously but towards the end of my time at belgrave south i said to maria i said by the way whereabouts on cyprus did you come from do you know what she said pathos would you believe so one more for jesus from pathos plus her family and one more for jesus is what god is on about may we share that desire with our god and father amen is