

*This character study / commentary into Apostle Paul is based mostly on Charles Swindoll's "Great Lives in God's Word" series on Paul and FF Bruce's "Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free." Main source materials are based on contents in these books unless otherwise noted.

Sunday April 2, 2023

Lesson 4: The Making of God's Ministry Team

Reference: Acts 10-11; 2 Corinthians 11-12

When we last left Paul, he had just visited apostles Peter and James in Jerusalem, spend a brief time in the area, then went away to Tarsus.

While in Tarsus over the next few years, very little is known about Paul's whereabouts, or of his activities. By Paul's own account, he spent those years preaching and teaching the faith that he once tried to destroy (Gal 1:23). Also during this period, we can infer that he was heavily persecuted by the Jews for his ministry activities when he cited in his letter to the church in Corinth that "Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes" (2 Cor 11:24); punishment so severe that he was "...caught up in the third heaven," referencing an experience he had 14 years before his letter we know today as 2 Corinthians. 14 years from the projected date of the letter of 2 Corinthians would put Paul in Tarsus during this period of his life. The 39 lashes is the maximum lashes prescribed by the written law before breaching the potential for accidental transgression (Deut 25:3), indicating that Paul was punished for going against Jewish traditions. FF Bruce noted how these five lashing occasions were not noted in Luke's account of Paul's ministries, nor by Paul himself in any of his other writings during his missionary journeys, leading to the inference that they must have taken place during this period in Paul's life.

This would mean that Paul spent at least eight years in solitude and obscurity – God's training ground, being reformed by God... three years in the desert of Arabia, followed by at least four to five years in Cilicia, interrupted only by the brief 15-day visit to Jerusalem to meet with apostles Peter and James (Gal 1:18-19 cf Acts 9:26-30).

Events of Acts Chapter 10 – Gospel to the Gentiles...

While God was working on His reformation of Paul, He began laying the foundation for Paul's ministry to the Gentiles (Recall that Paul would be His chosen instrument to bring the gospel to the Gentiles - Acts 9:15-16)

Luke tells us that on one normal day, a generous God-fearing man named Cornelius – a Roman centurion (Gentile) – received a vision from an angel of God to send men to Joppa, and bring Peter to Caesarea (Acts 10:1-8). While Cornelius' men were approaching Joppa the following day, God sent a vision to Peter for him to bring the gospel message to the house of Cornelius – a house of Gentiles – against Jewish laws (Acts 10:27-29). Peter acted obediently, and witnessed the Holy Spirit being poured out on "even the Gentiles" (Acts 10:45). He subsequently ordered that those Gentiles who received the Holy Spirit be baptized. This event would have taken place sometime around AD 38-39.

Events of Acts Chapter 11 – Gentile Revival in Antioch...

Word of this event began spreading throughout the region (Acts 11:1), causing Peter to give an account for his actions to the Jews in Jerusalem (Acts 11:1-18).

As the message continues to spread, the Hellenistic Jews (Greek-speaking / Greek culture Jews) who were scattered as a result of Stephen's death began sharing the message of the gospel to their Greek culture neighbors, informing them that the gospel is available even to them. As a result, a great number of people turned to the Lord (Acts 11:20-21). This led to a great revival in the city of Antioch, sometime around AD 40-41.

In response to hearing about this revival, the church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to investigate, likely because Barnabas can better relate to the culture in that region (cf Acts 4:36). When Barnabas arrived, he acknowledged the work of God in the revival event and encouraged all to remain true to the Lord with their hearts. However, he also realized that the work in that city is beyond his abilities.

Events of Acts 11 - The Makings of God's Ministry Team...

As much as Barnabas was excited about witnessing the work of God in Antioch, he was also wise enough to recognize that the ministering effort to that audience in Antioch is far beyond his personal abilities. Antioch was a city dominated by many religions and cults. The religious influence of other religions is very strong, and as a result, Barnabas knew that he needed someone with a strong Scripture background who is also able to debate and defend the Christ doctrine against the onslaught of other religious influences – a needed skill that he lacks. This recognition likely led him to seek out Paul, rather than to go back to Jerusalem to seek support.

Luke tells us that Barnabas *sought out* Paul, and after finding him, brought him to Antioch to minister together (Acts 11:25-26). This informs us that Paul was not out there looking to get involved. He was likely still humbly staying out of sight, recognizing that his reputation may still precede him, becoming an obstacle to the gospel message. Barnabas recognizes that Paul has the skills and background that match the need in Antioch. The two of them ended up teaming up and minister over the Christians in Antioch for a whole year, teaching them the proper understanding about Christ. This would have taken place sometime around AD 41-42.

Events of Acts Chapter 11 – Famine in Judea...

After a year of team ministry together, a prophet by the name of Agabus brings a prophecy of a severe famine that will hit the entire Roman empire. Luke added that this took place during the reign of Claudius (Acts 11:28-29), who reigned from AD 41-54 according to historical records. Moreover, FF Bruce noted that Caludius' reign was marked by various succession of bad harvest, leading to scarcity throughout various parts of the empire – Rome, Greece, Egypt, and Judea. Josephus recorded in *Antiquities* about a severe famine in Judea sometime between AD 44 and 48. The merging of these and other details helped scholars to narrow down the year for when Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem with the collections gathered in response to the prophet's prophecy, estimated to be AD 44 – three years after Paul and Barnabas began working together, and two years after the prophets shared the prophecy.

Swindoll's Principle for all ages

This Lesson focuses on the Sovereign work of the LORD to concurrently set in motion three events that would merge in Antioch: (1) the reformation of his future servant in Paul, (2) laying the foundation for Paul's ministry team member who would be used by God to call Paul into ministry in Barnabas, and (3) initializing Paul's ministry to the Gentiles through Peter.

Swindoll's principles towards the end of Chapter 8 of his book highlights the dynamics of ministry teams, noting that "In every ministry, there are at least three essentials that produce an atmosphere of joyous cooperation: Objectives, People, and Places

- Objectives – Whatever God plans, He pursues. Antioch was not what Barnabas or the apostles in Jerusalem had imagined. Ministry teams have a tendency to focus too much on mission, vision, or strategy for what we want to do. What ministry teams should focus on is what God is doing, and adjust accordingly. This is what Barnabas did.

- People – Whomever God Chooses, He uses. Barnabas' and Paul's past encounters were not incidental or coincidental. Barnabas had the humility to acknowledge his weakness when he sought out Paul – whom God had reformed with the same attitude; which is to be Christ centric. God forms or reforms His leaders towards His objectives. Ministry team leaders should constantly be aware of what God is doing with its team members, or with other members who may be able to contribute to the needs of the objectives.
- Places – Whomever God Selects, He sends. Barnabas' roots from Cyprus and Paul's roots from Tarsus – leading to different sets of gift-mix that seemed custom made for Antioch – were also not incidental or coincidental. God's ministry team complements one another. The background to the ministry team is relevant to the places that God will send towards his objectives.

Reflecting Upon the Word

Read Matthew 10:5-33. This is the Chapter where Jesus sends out the twelve in teams of two (Mark 6:7).

1. What can we observe about the attitude Jesus expects from each of his teams of two's as it relates to their objectives, people, and places? As it relates to their position with respect to Jesus?
2. What can we observe about how Jesus prepares them for this ministry task?
3. How can we correlate this team principle to our application of ministry teams?

Reflecting Upon our World

1. How would our world today approach the situation found in Antioch as it relates to the idea of a revival? Consider how the audience is distinctly different from that in Jerusalem
2. How would our world today approach the situation found in Antioch as it relates to leadership teams? Start from the church in Jerusalem, would Barnabas be the best candidate?
3. How would our world today react to the idea of bringing someone like Paul – with his past reputation – to lead a ministry of a new church?

Reflecting Upon Your Spiritual Journey

Reflect on your personal journey, focusing on how God put you together with others in a ministry team setting.

1. Why do you think God put you together with this / these individuals in a team? What was the objective, people, and places?
2. Has God ever used you to recruit others (i.e..God calling certain individual into ministry) for a ministry that He tasked you with? Journal your experience in testimonial form.
3. Has God ever used others to call you into ministry in support of a task He had assigned to others? Journal your experience in testimonial form.