

**Acts 13: 13-25; “God’s Choice of Witnesses”, Sermon #55 in the series –
“Laying the Foundations”, Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall
on March 10th, 2019, in the Morning Worship Service.**

As I begin to lead you through this long chapter in the book of Acts, I want to direct your attention to the fact that the work of the Lord in missions, in the days of the early Church, was something that the God of Israel chose should take place. Indeed the whole witness of the Church, both Old Testament and New, has always been based upon God’s choice of how this good work of witnessing should be done. This is what we need to understand in our days as well, so that we will not grow weary or discouraged in the work of the Lord, but rather always be abounding in it. So, 1st of all – In verses 13-15 I would like to show you that the Lord the Holy Spirit chose the particular men who would do the work of missions; those who would bear witness to His name. 2nd – I would like to show you from Paul’s preaching in verses 16-19, that in Old Testament times God chose the fathers and exalted the people of Israel to be witnesses to the nations in that day and this. And then, 3rd – I would like to show you from Paul’s preaching in verses 20-23, that God chose to give Israel judges and kings to bear witness to the truth of the glory of Christ as Savior and Lord.

In delivering this message to you, I want to show you how pertinent this subject of God’s choice is, in regard to missions. It is my prayer that in hearing these truths you will consider what Christ has called you to do; and, that you will labor for Christ’s kingdom to go forward right here in the place where God has put you. May each of us consider how God would have us to help in the on-going work of missions in the world today.

1st of all – I would like to show you that the Lord the Holy Spirit chose the particular men who would do the work of missions and bear witness to His name.

Verse 13 says – “Now when Paul and his party set sail from Paphos, they came to Perga in Pamphylia; and John, departing from them, returned to Jerusalem.” The work of missions first took place in those days at God’s initiative, and not just by the initiative of men. In these verses Paul and his traveling companions were still on their first missionary journey; having been sent out by the church at Antioch. They did not just undertake this mission on their own, but they were sent out by the Holy Spirit. They were sent out at His bidding. The Holy Spirit spoke to the prophets and teachers who were ministering to the Lord and fasting, that they should separate unto Him, Barnabas and Saul for the work to which He had called them. Now, you probably understand that sometimes people go into missions because they rightly see the need for the gospel to go forth to all the ends of the earth, and they know that they want to be a part of that good work. They have even gone through the proper channels of authority in the local church to have their desires and intentions for their being a part of that work evaluated. But then they get on the field itself, and they realize that they really haven’t been called of God to that particular work.

This was what happened with John Mark here. We find it recorded in verse 13. “Now when Paul and his party set sail from Paphos, they came to Perga in Pamphylia; and John, departing from them, returned to Jerusalem.” We see here that John Mark did not think that he could hang in there for the long haul; he felt that he must return to Jerusalem. There is no explanation given of this, here in this passage, but over in Acts chapter 15, when Paul and Barnabas were beginning their second missionary journey it says in verse 37 – “Now Barnabas was determined to take with them John called Mark.” “But Paul insisted that they should not take with them the one who had departed from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work.” This shows us the importance of having a call to the work of missions; not simply having an interest to help in a general sense. It is not as though missionary men do not need helpers; they do. It

was not as though John Mark had not been a help. I think that he had been. But from Paul's standpoint he had left them at a critical hour in their work. And Paul knew that he needed someone in their future work who would be steadfast as a helper; a man who was committed to staying with the work, no matter what happened. He needed a man who would not bail out, when the need for his personal faithfulness would be so very great. This is something that has been very much needed in every generation since the Great Commission was given. It is needed in regard to the work of missions today, and it is something that is needed in the work of building and strengthening the local church, also, in relation to its work of evangelism.

Sometimes Christians do not understand the Lord's choosing of men to the particular ministry or good works that He would have them to do, either within the local church, or in relation to missions. They do not consider what the Lord the Spirit is doing, or what He is looking for, from them, in relation to a their particular involvement in relation to missions or evangelism. They seem to forget that it is the Lord who has purposes, and it is He who has designs, in what every Christian does in ministry. It is the Spirit who chooses men to their work. It is He who has given them their gift and abilities. It is He who raises up certain persons to be involved in missions or church planting, or even the work of the pastorate. Sometimes, I am saying, neither pastors nor the people, seek to understand the significance of the Lord's choice in regard to particular persons, or particular works of evangelism that might be done. They should understand that a general interest or desire is not enough.

There is a great need to count the cost and ask – Has the Lord chosen me for this work? If He has, I will be able to do it to His glory and for the right reasons. An individual believer may want to be involved in missions and evangelism, and yet they may only think of it in an idealistic way. They may not be thinking about what the Lord the Spirit might be calling them to, in their particular work; to give of themselves unstintingly, (unreservedly) even if persecution or opposition comes. The work of the Christian ministry, whether it is in the local church, or whether it is on the foreign field, is something that involves a call to be faithful in regard to it, for it is a particular work to a particular people who they will be led to minister to, by the Lord Himself. Certainly there are principles here which apply to every Christian who would be involved in the work of the Lord, whether in a primary or supportive role.

A call to evangelistic service involves the Lord's leading you to pray to understand what He has chosen for you specifically to do in evangelism. You do not necessarily have to be, or see yourself, as the leader of an evangelistic outreach or mission in order to be faithful to the Lord. You may indeed begin by being called to a supportive role, like John Mark was. But still, you must learn to pray and ask the Lord to show you what He would have you to do in terms of evangelism and service in the church, beginning with the idea that you will help people around you, both inside and outside of the church. You convey your desires to the pastor or other delegated leaders who have this same desire. A call to service begins with seeing the commands of the Lord: "Go and preach the gospel to every creature." "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations." This command was given to the apostles first, but in connection with them, it was also given to the church and all Christians since.

A personal call to service in relation to missions begins right where you are. Your eyes do not have to be on the ends of the earth to be involved in missions. Proverbs chapter 17, verse 24 says – "Wisdom is in the sight of him who has understanding, but the eyes of a fool are on the ends of the earth." You see, oftentimes you just need to see what is right in front of you; what the Lord by His providence is showing you, by His Spirit; the real spiritual needs of particular people around you. Do you pray and ask Him what He might have you to do to reach out to particular people who need Christ outside of the walls of this church? Sometimes Christians do not see right away where they would be the most effective and useful to the Lord for service. It may be the case, that you will need to fast and pray in order to see it. Sometimes Christians do

not think to pray about what specific work they might do in relation to the work of evangelism. How do I know what I specifically should do?

Well, let's go back over to Acts 15, and verse 36 once again, and look more closely at what happened there. It says – "Then after some days Paul said to Barnabas, 'Let us now go back and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they are doing.'" This is called follow up. They had preached the word to these cities, and they now wanted to see how the Lord's work fared in those places; what the Lord had done by His grace in the hearts and lives of these new believers. Verse 37 says – "Now Barnabas was determined to take with them John called Mark." "But Paul insisted that they should not take with them the one who had departed from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work." It goes on to say – "Then the contention became so sharp that they parted from one another." "And so Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus; but Paul chose Silas and departed, being commended by the brethren to the grace of God." "And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches."

Here we find Biblical proof for what I am trying to say to you. Barnabas was determined to take John Mark with them, and Paul was just as determined not to. What was the problem? There was no problem with the call of either of these apostles to the work. But there was a problem in their being able to recognize whether John Mark was called to this work with them. Both of these men had ideas about whether John Mark could be faithful in regard to his future ministry with them, and each man as he evaluated John Mark, was holding to an important aspect of truth. This is why these two godly men had this contention. They both were right in their evaluation, and at that time, neither felt that they could give any ground to the other.

Barnabas thought of it in this way – Yes, it is true that John Mark had left them in the work before, but he knew that sometimes a man might indeed have the gift for missionary service and yet be unsure of his own abilities to minister. He may be unsure whether he can suffer for the sake of the gospel. He does not want to disappoint others or fail to live up to what the Lord is calling him to do, and so he bails out, and he says in effect – Let someone else who is better than I am do this good work. Barnabas thought that John Mark just needed more exposure to the work in the right way, and this would come by those who were leading him, being patient with him, and giving him the right kind of opportunities to serve which would not put him in the front of the battle from those who were opposing the truth. Barnabas thought that there were many things that John Mark could do to be a helper in the work, without having to preach, as of yet.

Paul on the other hand, knew by the Spirit, that real opposition to the gospel had already come on this first missionary journey, and it was even more likely that they were going to see much more yet, on this next trip out. He knew that this opposition would not be simply to his preaching, but it would come to all those who were supporting his preaching. It would come to all who were with him, and it would require that every single man in the company would be willing to suffer alongside of him, and not bail out when the opposition heated up. He would give this admonition to Timothy, his coworker in the gospel in 2nd Timothy 1: 8 – "Therefore do not be ashamed of the gospel of our Lord, nor of me His prisoner, but share with me in the sufferings for the gospel according to the power of God, who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began." Let us remember that since it was God who chose us and called us to salvation, that it is also God who has chosen the works that He would have us to do; works that He prepared beforehand that we might walk in them.

2nd – I would like to show you from Paul's preaching that in Old Testament times God chose the fathers and exalted the people of Israel to be witnesses to the nations in that day and this.

Verse 14 says – “But when they departed from Perga, they came to Antioch in Pisidia, and went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day and sat down.” “And after the reading of the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent to them, saying, ‘Men and brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say on.’” “Then Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand said, ‘Men of Israel, and you who fear God, listen: The God of this people Israel chose our fathers, and exalted the people when they dwelt as strangers in the land of Egypt, and with an uplifted arm He brought them out of it.’” “Now for a time of about forty years He put up with their ways in the wilderness. And when He had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, He distributed their land to them by allotment.” The leaders of the synagogue had probably had some word concerning Paul and Barnabas and wanted to give them opportunity to share anything that would be profitable spiritually. Paul stood up and addressed the congregation very respectfully.

We should always remember in our preaching and sharing of the gospel of Christ to attempt to gain the good attention of those who are listening to us. We want to win people to the truth, as witnesses for our Lord, not beat them over the head with it. We do not need to harangue them or criticize them. We need to make an appeal to them. We want to be good ambassadors for Christ, showing them the love of Christ which constrains us. We need to commend ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God. Well, Paul began by addressing them as brethren. He was not addressing them as brethren in the Lord, but brethren as they were his kinsmen according to the flesh. Let us remember that we do have something in common with all the people that we might preach to, and share with, and that is that we are all offspring of God. It is God who created us, and we are all descended of the one man Adam. We should not think of ourselves as better than others. Rather let us think of what we might have in common with them. We need to convey the truth that it has only been by the grace of God at work in us which alone has made the difference in us, and that is the very thing that we want to be able to tell them about, and so let us be bold, but let us also be filled with love for our fellow mankind.

Paul made his appeal next to those who feared God among them; that they would listen. It is the fear of the Lord which is the beginning of wisdom. It is only fools who despise wisdom and instruction. Those who had a regard for God would consider what Paul was saying. If they had a holy regard for God, they would have a holy regard for his words to them. The first thing that he talked to them about was the history of their nation. As a nation it all began by God’s choosing Abraham. Abraham was the first Hebrew. And God not only chose Abraham, but He also chose Isaac and Jacob. And this line of the fathers was given the precious promises of the Messiah, the Anointed One, the Promised One who would be their Savior and their Lord. But Paul does not mention this quite yet. He wanted to tell them of the works of God in relation to the history of Israel. He would do this as a witness to them.

You should understand that when you would talk about Christ and the gospel to people that a good lead in to that, is to speak to people about the great works that God has done in history. This will begin to show them that salvation is based upon what God has promised to do, and what He has done for others. And He also may do that for them if they will listen and consider. This is the fear of God; to have regard for God to consider what great things He has done, and then to appeal to people, to believe in Him. He who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. Paul said to them that they needed to understand that in Old Testament times God chose their fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and exalted them as a people in the land of Egypt during the time of Joseph. This was a great witness to the Egyptians and to the whole world of that day. It is still a witness even to our own day.

Paul, you can see here, was relating the history of Israel in a brief compass, as part of his sermon to these Jews in the synagogue in Antioch Pisidia. He did this as a witness to what God

had done for them as a people, even from the earliest times of their nation. He knew the history of their nation well, from the Scriptures, and he wanted to show them what a privilege it was for them, that they came from a godly lineage. God had chosen their fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and He had exalted their whole family in those years when Joseph became second in command to Pharaoh. Joseph's brothers had meant their actions to be evil toward him, but God meant them for good. Brethren, it is these kinds of stories that are a good witness to people around you. Joseph's brothers had sold him into slavery out of envy and malice, and they thought that they would never hear of him again. But then a great famine took place which so affected Canaan, the land of Egypt, and all of the surrounding countries, that people came from everywhere to obtain grain from Joseph, who had stored it up for 7 years like the sand on the seashore.

This was the fulfillment of the dream which Pharaoh had, and which he didn't understand the interpretation of it, until Joseph was brought before him. Joseph had this gift given to him by God that he could tell the interpretations of dreams, and so he told Pharaoh that there would be seven good years followed by seven years of famine, and so he must store grain up in the seven good years so that they would not starve but have food for the lean years. Pharaoh put Joseph in charge of the whole operation of gathering the grain and distributing it at the right time when the famine came. This became a witness to many people beginning with Pharaoh himself, and many in Egypt, and eventually to Joseph's whole family; Jacob and his brothers and others. Eventually Joseph revealed himself to his brothers, and Pharaoh told them all, Jacob and all the family to move down to Egypt and live in the land of Goshen. This was the rich blessing of the Lord to unworthy sinners, but it made for great witnessing material for the apostle Paul that day. God had sent Joseph before the rest of his family in order to preserve life.

Paul also preached to them about God's way of doing things in order to provide a land for His ancient people to live in; the land of Canaan. God brought Israel out of the house of bondage with an uplifted arm. He sent great plagues upon the succeeding wicked Pharaoh who would not let the people go, and in doing so, redeemed the people from their cruel physical bondage there in Egypt. He went before Israel and it says that He destroy seven nations in the land of Canaan, and He distributed their land then, to them, by allotment. By these words, Paul was able to witness to God's justice in the destruction of those wicked peoples, to His power in giving victory to Israel's armies, who He told to destroy them. He was witnessing to God wisdom and power when he told them of God's distributing the land to Israel as He had in mind to do. This was a good witness to the people in the synagogue that day. They saw that God was a God of sovereign purposes that He will fulfill in order to bring glory to Himself and great good to His people as they trust in Him and His word.

All of this history was presented to them in order to set the stage for the gospel of Christ that Paul would follow it up with. It should cause us Gentiles to see, even today, the importance of God's having chosen the Jews in Old Testament times to be His only people in those times. He did not set His love upon any other nation of that day. He exclusively focused all of His redemptive activity upon them, and told them that through them would come their Messiah. This should speak to us here today of God's sovereign choice in election of all the people that He will save, and in thinking of it, we should not be offended or stumble over this truth of God's electing love. None of us is worthy of God's choosing us unto salvation. It was sheer mercy and grace that He did so, and so we ought not to be ashamed of this wonderful doctrine, but to tell it like it is. We never would have been saved if God had not chosen us and set His love upon us. We would have been just as resistant as the unbelieving ones were in the nation of Israel, when God decided that He would do this great work for them as a people. Let us glory in the doctrines of grace, for salvation is all of grace, and not of our works. Let us boast in the Lord.

3rd – I would like to show you that God chose to give Israel judges and kings to bear witness to the truth of the glory of Christ as Savior and Lord.

Paul continued relating the history of Israel to these people in the synagogue that day by sharing as it says in verse 20 – “After that He gave them judges for about four hundred and fifty years, until Samuel the prophet.” “And afterward they asked for a king; so God gave them Saul the son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, for forty years.” “And when He had removed him, He raised up for them David as king, to whom also He gave testimony and said, ‘I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after My own heart, who will do all My will.’” “From this man’s seed, according to the promise, God raised up for Israel a Savior – Jesus – after John had first preached, before His coming the baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel.” “And as John was finishing his course, he said, ‘Who do you think I am?’ “I am not He.” “But behold, there comes one after me, the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to loose.”

In relating what he did, about the judges which God gave to Israel, Paul was trying to show them God’s great mercy to them as a people; that when they had gone astray, that He would appoint these judges to be deliverers to them who were men of his choice, men who in certain ways would typify the Christ who would come later. Then he spoke to them about God’s giving them a king when they asked for one. He gave them king Saul who was a man after their own hearts. He was tall, and handsome, and resourceful, and brave as a king, but his heart was not right toward God. He was willing to compromise the word of the Lord to him, and thus God had to reject him. This was showing those people that Paul was preaching to then, how God always knows better than we do, the kind of leader that will be best for us. It will be a man like David, who God chose to replace Saul as king. He would be a man after God’s own heart.

All of what Paul was telling these people that day about these judges and kings was to prepare the way in his message for his telling them about Christ. Yes, the judges were great, and king David was the best earthly king that they ever had. But all of these men whom God raised up were only meant to point Israel on to Christ. It was from David’s seed that God would raise up, according to His promise, a Savior for Israel; the Lord Jesus. And they no doubt had heard of Jesus. Some of them may have remembered the ministry of John the Baptist, whose mission was to go before and point out to them this great Messiah King, who would be their prophet and priest as well as their king. John would not claim to take the title of Messiah to himself, but he would tell them of the One coming after him, whose sandals he was not worthy to loose. This is good witnessing, my brethren, when we can see the greatest of men as only men, and the Lord Jesus as the only One whom we should worship and obey.

All of the great men of Israel, whether they were the fathers in Old Testament times, whether they were judges in Old Testament times, whether they were kings in Old Testament times, or whether it was John the Baptist, all of them according to the will of God did their part to witness to Christ who was coming. And we can learn from them, and we can learn from Paul, how to be good witnesses to Christ. Anything good or great in any man is only a faint reflection of the greatness and glory of Christ. Indeed, if the truth be known, all their power to do what is good and right comes from the grace which Christ as our Savior purchased for them, so that they would be able to fulfill their ministries. May we learn today what makes for a good witness. It is that God must choose us unto salvation, and He then commissions us as His witnesses.

All of this is summed up in Isaiah 44: 6-8 – “Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel, and His Redeemer the Lord of hosts; I am the First and I am the Last; besides Me there is no God.” “And who can proclaim as I do?” “Then let him declare it and set it in order for Me, since I appointed the ancient people.” “And the things that are coming and shall come, let them show these to them.” “Do not fear, nor be afraid; Have I not told you from that time, and declared it?” “You are my witnesses.” “Is there a God besides Me?” “Indeed there is no Rock; I know not one.”

