

Day Seven

Fasting and Prayer in times of ministry

Reading: Acts 13: 1-3 / 14: 21-28

Church leaders are expected to make informed and wise decisions. Among other decisions, they have to identify new leaders, train and release them into the ministry. Then there are issues of discipline and discipleship in the church. How do we know we are making the right decisions?

Let's look at Jesus and how He made decisions. We should start by looking back, at the beginning of the Gospels, when Jesus is about to start His earthly ministry. Try to imagine that moment and understand its significance. The Son of God is about to announce to the world that God's kingdom has arrived. Jesus is about to call everybody to repentance. Jesus is about to invite His country men and the whole world to believe in Him and His Good News. God's plan of salvation is about to be revealed to the whole world. Jesus is about to claim that He is the Messiah, the Son of God.

The implications of His ministry are going to be cosmical. People on earth will learn that salvation is by faith in Him, and by faith alone. The demons and the devil himself are about to go into a frenzy, trying to interfere and stop Him. The whole of heaven; the angels, Moses and Elijah; is going to be involved in this ministry, one way or another.

Following His baptism, the Bible tells us in Matthew 4:1, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness where He fasted and prayed for forty days and nights. During this time, His earthly body must have become weak and vulnerable. We see the devil trying to use such a moment of physical weakness, to tempt Him with food, power and influence. Each time, Jesus used the Word of God to resist those temptations. He came out of that time of fasting and prayer *"filled with the Holy Spirit's power"* - Luke 4: 14.

I believe Jesus was fully God. He never ceased to be God at any point in His earthly ministry. I also believe He was fully man. As John says in the first chapter of His Gospel, *"... the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son."* - John 1: 14. But I also believe the purpose of His time in the wilderness, His fasting and prayer, was to teach us that ministry must be done in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The same is true for the Apostles. In Acts 11 (beginning with verse 19) we read about the disciples who had been scattered because of persecution. Some of them traveled as far

Fasting and Prayer @ TC 2020

as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch of Syria . Some believers from Cyprus and Cyrene (which was on the north coast of Africa) preached the Good News to the Gentiles of Antioch and a vibrant church was quickly formed.

Barnabas was then sent by the church in Jerusalem to confirm the news coming from Antioch of Syria. Upon arrival, Barnabas saw the evidence of God's grace and power clearly manifested in the church.

Later on, the Holy Spirit got Paul involved. This was the beginning of an amazing missionary initiative that brought the Gospel our way. We should never forget that we received the Gospel because a group of believers in Syria listened to the Holy Spirit and acted in obedience.

In Acts 13 we find the church in Antioch on the verge of a great missionary campaign. The Gospel is about to reach Europe.

The ministry team

The priority of every new ministry should be the formation of a team. In Acts 13 the church in Antioch had a team formed by the Holy Spirit, filled with diversity. Notice the diverse personalities and backgrounds.

Barnabas is known for being gentle. Simeon is known to be black. Lucius is most likely a Greek from Cyrene, eastern Lybia, in North Africa. Manaen spent his childhood in the presence of king Herod Antipas. Saul was a Jew of great spiritual pedigree, a firebrand filled with passion. The collective strength of the team is remarkable. The main spiritual gifts of the team are teaching and prophecy. The common activity of the team is worship. They are actively worshipping God with fasting and prayer.

The team listened to the Holy Spirit

While they worshiped the Lord, with fasting and prayer, they become sensitive to the voice of the Holy Spirit. This is very important. Please note that worship is not just about praying and praising God but it's also about listening. If we do not take time to listen, we might miss what the Lord wants to say.

One day as these men were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Appoint Barnabas and Saul for the special work to which I have called them." So after more fasting and prayer, the men laid their hands on them and sent them on their way. - Acts 13: 2 - 3

Notice how the whole team heard the voice of the Holy Spirit. He made it clear to all of them that Barnabas and Saul are to be set aside for a special work.

The team released a team.

God has never released a "lone wolf" to do any special work. When God called Moses, He also called Aaron. Joshua had Caleb. David had Jonathan. Jesus sent his disciples,

Fasting and Prayer @ TC 2020

two by two, having power and authority. God does that because this is how He works. The work of creation was a team work. The Godhead is a team. If God works in a team, so should we.

Working in a team is never easy. But we must make every effort to let God shape us into team members. Not everyone can be a leader, but everyone can be a team member. One great aspect of working in a team is a growing sensitivity to the Holy Spirit and being able to hear and confirming, together, what God says.

Fast forward a bit and we get to the end of this amazing mission trip in Acts 14. After travelling to Cyprus and preaching the Gospel to the governor of the Island in Paphos, Paul and Barnabas traveled to Perga. From Perga they go to Antioch of Pisidia. God moves among the Jews and Gentiles of Pisidia, with many coming to Christ, but the opposition forced them to flee. They went to Iconium, where the same thing happened. When the mob forced them to leave, Paul and Barnabas went to Lystra and Derbe, in the region of Lyconia. Wherever they went they preached the Good News and many people were converted. During their stay in Lystra, a crippled man is healed. The crowd went ecstatic and began to worship the apostles as gods. This broke their heart, but both saw this as an opportunity to point the locals to Jesus.

As they visited the churches which were formed during their travel, Paul and Barnabas appoint teams of elders. Teams multiply teams. Leaders multiply leaders. The appointment of elders was done with fasting and prayer. *“Paul and Barnabas also appointed elders in every church. With prayer and fasting, they turned the elders over to the care of the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.”*

Chapter Summary

If we are to wrap this chapter up, we find a clear lesson here. Fasting and prayer is the best environment for making God glorifying decisions. It is in the context of worship that we can allow space for the Holy Spirit to speak. Fasting and prayer is the best practice to use in appointing leaders. Then we can leave them in the care of the Holy Spirit.

Every church is faced with new challenges. Every church is meant to go on and continue the mission: sharing the Gospel, making disciples, raising leaders and planting other churches. Taking the time to fast and pray, may save us a lot of pain later on. Having the wrong person released into a ministry, or the wrong person appointed to a leadership position, without the approval of the Holy Spirit can cause a lot of pain in the church and even cause division. Jesus and His apostles, teach us that ministry done in the power of the Holy Spirit begins and is sustained by fasting and prayer. I hope we can learn from them and avoid the pain of making the wrong decisions.

Day Seven

Personal Focus

Set some time aside to reflect on the words of the reading today. It could be that you are facing a crossroad. To some this may be the end of the road. To others it may be the beginning of a new road. Take time to ask God for wisdom in making the right decision.

Write down the decisions that you are asked to make. Pray over each one of them and let God give you insight and wisdom to do the God honouring thing.

Public Focus

Churches often face critical times when together they must decide. It could be the call of a new pastor. It could be the start of a building project, a new church plant or simply a small change that could cause division.

Use the space below to write down those challenges and pray united for God's wisdom. God gives wisdom to those who ask. Fast and pray for the way forward.
