

Acts chapter twelve and thirteen deal with the story of the calling of Paul and Barnabas. They were called by God to the mission of sharing the good news about Jesus around the world. As we've journeyed through the Book of Acts, we have looked at the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the early church, and we've seen that the power of the Holy Spirit's power is vital to the church; then and now. The Holy Spirit gave the early Christians confidence as well as power and courage. God's Spirit worked through Peter and John in the healing of a lame man, and then in standing up to the Chief Priests who were persecuting them. We learned that it was through the power of the Holy Spirit acting in the conversion of Paul.

But this morning we're changing tack. We are looking at the role of Prayer in the calling of Paul and his companion Barnabas. As we think about the part prayer played in their story, we will hopefully see a pattern for prayer in our own lives. The central lesson for today is simply this: ***In prayer we make ourselves accessible and available to the Lord for His use.*** As we look at the prayer in this story I'd like to focus on how prayer makes us available to God. From the first mention of prayer in the passage, it's clear that to pray is to communicate with God. Verse two of Acts 13: *While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.* Now while verse two doesn't specifically mention prayer, the very next verse links prayer with fasting, as does chapter 14 of Acts. From the beginning of the church, prayer was a central feature of the early Christian's worship, and it was prayer that led to this direct message from God. It's clear that prayer, along with Scripture are our main means of communication with God.

Prayer is one of the primary ways that God breaks through background noise of our lives to communicate His call to us. I believe that God still speaks to us and that He speaks to our specific and individual needs. We are into September and I arrived at Thornliebank at the end of September two years. At that time I wondered what I was letting myself in for although, I was certain that my coming here was as a direct result of God calling me. I had no great desire to want to leave Clincarthill, but God made it clear that the work He called me to in that church had been completed. It can be difficult to discern the will of God, but through prayer God will make it clear what He wants from and for us. The past two years have been amazing and my prayer is that God will continue to inspire and enable people, that God will give us vision to take Thornliebank church forward and we will continue to build God's Kingdom in this place. I have learned much over the past two years and before, but one important lesson I've learned is that when we earnestly seek God in prayer, He will answer. However, the answer we receive may not always be what we want to hear; but be assured that God will answer our prayers. Its not just the clergy or those in leadership that hear from God because He has a plan or wants us to carry out a special task. God's call is for each of our lives and He has a plan for every one of us. For us to be obedient to God's call we need to hear Him. And for us to hear God, we need to make ourselves available to communicate with Him and we do that through prayer.

***Next, I believe that Prayer makes us available to God through Consecration.*** Verse 3: *So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.* Consecration means being set apart for a special purpose. In the Old Testament the tools that were used in Jewish temple worship were consecrated. You couldn't take the bowls and cups used in the temple worship home so you could use them there. I listen to the radio a lot in the car. Sometimes I find myself listening to BBC Scotland's gardening programme on Sunday's after the service. I don't know why I listen to it as I can't stand gardening! People call into the show asking questions about their gardening questions. I recall a question about setting apart a watering can to use with weed killer, and marking it with a big red X so you wouldn't use it for anything else in the garden. The presenter actually used the term *consecrating the watering can* for weed killer! Consecrating means setting apart for a particular purpose and in Acts 13 through prayer and fasting, Paul and Barnabas were marked with a big red X, they were set apart for God's use.

Paul later wrote to the church at Rome that we should *present our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God which is our act of worship*. Paul was telling us to set ourselves apart for serving the Lord. So what does Paul mean in setting ourselves apart for God? Implied here is an expectation that we live by Biblical standards, and make ourselves available for God's service wherever and whenever He might call. Both of these actions are founded upon a life of prayer. It's in prayer that we offer ourselves as living sacrifices, and it's in prayer that we gain the spiritual strength to live it out. Which bring us to the final point.

***Prayer makes us available to God through commitment.*** If we read onto chapter 14 of Acts we'll learn that Paul & Barnabas followed God's call and they shared the gospel and as a result, saw many people accept forgiveness and salvation in Jesus Christ. And the early church grew in numbers and strength as a result of these new Christians. As churches are established in the towns that Paul and Barnabas visit, we see how prayer continues to be a vital and active role in God's calling leaders for these new churches. Part of Paul and Barnabas' mission was to appoint elders in each church, and through prayer and fasting; commit them to the Lord in whom they had put their trust. It was important that Paul and Barnabas having established these early churches, chose leaders to take them forward. And through prayer and fasting they committed these new leaders to God. Clearly, the message for us is about our need to commit others into the Lord's hands, trusting in the Lord's faithfulness. Of course, this is a two-way process: While Paul and Barnabas commit these leaders to God, the people called to leadership have to commit themselves to God's plan for their lives. We can see that Paul and Barnabas led by example with lives of commitment. Despite the many hardships and dangers they endured, they remained committed to the mission they had been set apart for. So when they *committed* those others to leadership in the early church, they were expecting no more from them than they themselves had demonstrated in their own lives: In other words, no less than total surrender to God's will and guidance.

***Commitment: An uncompromising loyalty to God's plan. Consecration is offering yourself to the Lord. Commitment is living for the Lord!*** Consecration is truthfully saying: *Show me your guidance Lord, because I live for you alone*. Commitment is when God answers: Okay, I want you in South Sudan to support other Christians and you go! Consecration is promising to witness to friends you had before you came to Christ. Commitment is doing it! I don't think it's possible for us to be consecrated to God, and then be committed to His purpose for our lives if we don't have an active prayer life. It's through prayer that we make ourselves available to hear God's call, and then to follow through.

There is an old story about a king who sought the contemplative life so he could better serve God. His priest said to him: *Your Majesty, do you understand that the pledge here is one of obedience? That will be hard because you have been a king*. The king replied; *I understand, for the rest of my life, I will be obedient as Christ leads me*. The priest said: *Then I'll tell you what to do. Go back to your throne and serve faithfully in the place where God has put you*. When the king died, a statement was written: *The King learned to rule through obedience to God*.

In prayer we make ourselves available to God when we give ourselves to Him for whatever purpose He chooses. And as we give of ourselves, which is the most we can give, then we experience an abundance of life. It may be that God will call you to serve in the place He has already placed you at the moment; and perhaps your calling is to be a good employee or neighbour or parent or friend. Or perhaps God will call you to a specific ministry in His church, or to serve a world from here. The question is: *Are you available?* William Booth who was the founder of the salvation army, when asked the reason for his success in ministry replied: *I said to the Lord: You can have all there is of William Booth.* ***Are we available? Amen***