

Here is a solemn lesson on presumption and punishment. Rebellion and retribution are never far apart. It was a great occasion. There was a great audience, and, as Herod would have the people believe, a great sovereign stood before them. He made an oration to the multitude. We may be sure he was rigorously attentive to all the adjuncts of powerful and influential oratory. Luke tells us that he arrayed himself in royal apparel. From other sources we learn that his robe was of a burnished silver texture. And as the morning sun rose over the Plain of Sharon on the first of August his radiant beams were reflected from the brilliant silver robe, and his majesty must have shown in an aureole of well-nigh ineffable splendor. No doubt the praise-loving monarch had calculated the effect of it all; and he meant to appear to the vast concourse of people as a being of more than mortal power and dignity. It is not unlikely that he had privately arranged with some myrmidons of the palace to start the cry of sycophant adulation,—“The voice of a god, and not of a man!” The words were as sweet music to his ears. He had reached the highest goal of royal Roman ambition—to be deified by the people. He accepted the divine honors and congratulated himself on being really and truly a god.

Then God smote him! The judgment of the Almighty fell upon Herod, not because the deification was thrust upon him, but because he accepted it, perhaps courted it, and gloried in it. Verse 23 says, “And immediately an angel of the Lord smote him, because he gave not God the glory.” With the king it was not an act of ignorance. He knew what it meant. Although he was a puny mortal, he presumed to reach up and grasp the scepter of the Almighty and take the worship and glory which belonged to Him alone.

It was an act of heaven-daring impiety, which merited the sudden and overwhelming stroke of Divine vengeance, and God smote him! His career is cut short. He dies, not as a hero on the field of battle and confronting his foes in honorable conflict, but ignominiously and ingloriously. In the spring Herod was in the full tide of aristocratic power; by midsummer he was rotting in a tyrant's sepulchre.

THE FIRST MISSIONARY JOURNEY

I. The Preparation for the Journey. 13:1-3.

1. The talent in the church at Antioch. 13:1.

This verse informs us about the kind of members that made up the church at Antioch. A church can be no greater than the individuals who make up its membership. Churches are great or mediocre just as the members are great or mediocre. They had prophets in that church. In the New Testament usage the word “prophet” does not always signify a foreteller of future events. The prophets were men whom God could trust as His spokesmen, men who would be faithful in delivering God's Word to the people. Such men would dignify any church where they belonged. It is a credit to any church to have such men in its membership.

They had teachers in their membership. There is no pronounced differentiation between the prophet and the teacher of this passage, although the first may have been regarded as a somewhat higher office than the second. God has given some men the gift of teaching. All such should be ready to use their gifts to the glory of God. There are some members who could teach, but they will not. God has given them the gift of teaching, but they refuse to use it for His glory.

They had some great missionaries in their membership, men like Paul, Barnabas and John Mark. There were doubtless others who were just as missionary in spirit as these men, but who stayed at home and supported them as they went forth to proclaim the gospel.

They had members who were willing to fast for Christ's sake. Their fasting was not done in a perfunctory way, but it was the result of the great interest which

they had in the cause of Christ. It was so great that hunger fled from them. They preferred to fast rather than to feast. They thought more of the cause of Christ than they did of their social life, their business life, their recreational life or anything else.

Five of these preachers and teachers of the Christian faith are mentioned in this passage. They are named as the chief leaders in the growing company of Gospel heralds. They deserve attention and study. That five such men of widest origin and broadest sympathies should have come together just at this time is a suggestive illustration of the leadings of Divine Providence. The Lord was preparing the way and preparing the leaders of his people for a mighty advance in the conquest of the world.

2. The call of Barnabas and Saul. 13:2-3.

In the membership of this church were those who were busy ministering to the needs about them. They sought opportunities to help the distressed, to comfort the sorrowing and to strengthen the discouraged. They ministered to the Lord by ministering to people. That is the only way that men can minister to the Lord. They may worship God in the secret place or in public services, but when men serve the Lord they must serve people.

Ministering to the Lord was something quite distinct from the work of evangelization. The initial step in the foreign missionary propaganda began in prayer.

(1) It was united prayer.

The leaders of the church were bound together in one solemn purpose of prayer.

(2) It was a pre-arranged season of supplication.

The brotherhood came together for a time of united prayer. The preaching of the Word, for the time being, was put in the background, while the church girded herself for a mighty struggle before the mercy-seat.

(3) It was a season of solemn and earnest waiting on God.

Fasting was not enjoined upon the New Testament church, and when believers resorted to it, it indicated an unusually solemn occasion and a profoundly felt necessity. So possessed were the souls of the Christians at Antioch with the depth and urgency of the need, for which they were praying, that all desire for food and pleasure lost their power over them.

While they waited on the Lord, the Spirit's message came. Concerning the call of Barnabas and Saul, five things are noteworthy.

(1) It was a divine call.

(2) It was a personal call.

(3) It was a call to separation.

(4) It was a call to work.

(5) It secured the obedience of the church.

He called the men to the task and called the church to send them out with their approval. He even designated the fields to which they were to go. We still believe in a God-called ministry and in a divinely-guided church. He also made it known to the church that these particular men were the ones who should do this work. When God calls a young man to preach, He also impresses the church and the community with the same fact. The men whom the Lord calls are actively engaged in doing good in their local churches and communities. They are faithful in even the smallest things.

When He calls men into the ministry, the Lord opens doors for them to enter. He gave these men a good hearing wherever they went. He opened the minds and hearts of men to receive their message. These men became conscious very early in their undertaking that the work was the Lord's, not theirs. He initiated it; He guided it; He blessed it; He crowned it.

When the Holy Spirit called Barnabas and Paul, He did not force them into the work against their wills. On the contrary they had the power of choice, of decision, and of will. They had latitude of personality, of individuality and of action. They were not moved like checkers on a board and forced into corners without any choice in the matter.

The human element was a very important factor in the work of these men. This mission enterprise did not make great men out of two obscure and indifferent individuals. Barnabas was a good man and full of the Holy Spirit before he was ever sent out as a missionary. Had he not possessed these qualities before they sent him out, they would have probably never sent him. The greatest recommendation these men had was not the success which they obtained in distant lands, but it was their spirit at home before they were ever sent out. The Lord never overlooks real merit in individuals.

As certainly as the Lord called them into the work, He called the local church to support them. If there were sacrifices to be made, the church was to share in them as much as these two missionaries. They were not sent out as free-lancers, but they were agents of the church. They were responsible to the church, and one day they would have to give an account of their labors to the church that had sent them out. The church shared in all their work. They had the keenest interest in their successes. Their sympathy, their prayers and their material support followed them into every new field.

It is to the honor of the noble church at Antioch that they promptly responded to the call for their best in an unknown enterprise. Without hesitation or murmuring, with fasting and prayer, they laid their hands on Barnabas and Saul, ordaining them to the high and holy task to which He had called them, and then sent them away.