

The Providence of God (6) God's Providence and His Use of Means (2)

Let us turn to Acts 13:1ff and read of the onset of Paul's first missionary journey into the Gentile world. As read of these events, let us be mindful that it was God's will to expand the gospel into the Gentile world. Let us give attention to God's providence, both in His direct dealings, as well as in His use of common means to accomplish His will.

Now in the church that was at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. ²As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, "Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." ³Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away.

⁴So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus. ⁵And when they arrived in Salamis, they preached the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. They also had John as their assistant.

⁶Now when they had gone through the island to Paphos, they found a certain sorcerer, a false prophet, a Jew whose name was Bar-Jesus, ⁷who was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, an intelligent man. This man called for Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. ⁸But Elymas the sorcerer (for so his name is translated) withstood them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith. ⁹Then Saul, who also is called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him ¹⁰and said, "O full of all deceit and all fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease perverting the straight ways of the Lord?" ¹¹And now, indeed, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you shall be blind, not seeing the sun for a time."

And immediately a dark mist fell on him, and he went around seeking someone to lead him by the hand. ¹²Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had been done, being astonished at the teaching of the Lord.

¹³Now when Paul and his party set sail from Paphos, they came to Perga in Pamphylia; and John, departing from them, returned to Jerusalem. ¹⁴But when they departed from Perga, they came to Antioch in Pisidia, and went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day and sat down. ¹⁵And 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."

¹⁶Then Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand said, "Men of Israel, and you who fear God, listen: ¹⁷The 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. ¹⁸Now for a time of about forty years He put up with their ways in the wilderness. ¹⁹And when He had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, He distributed their land to them by allotment.

²⁰"After that He gave them judges for about four hundred and fifty years, until Samuel the prophet. ²¹And 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. ²²And 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.' ²³From this man's seed, according to the promise, God raised up for Israel a Savior-- Jesus-- ²⁴after John had first preached, before His coming, the baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. ²⁵And 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.'

²⁶“Men and brethren, sons of the family of Abraham, and those among you who fear God, to you the word of this salvation has been sent. ²⁷For those who dwell in Jerusalem, and their rulers, because they did not know Him, nor even the voices of the Prophets which are read every Sabbath, have fulfilled them in condemning Him. ²⁸And though they found no cause for death in Him, they asked Pilate that He should be put to death. ²⁹Now when they had fulfilled all that was written concerning Him, they took Him down from the tree and laid Him in a tomb. ³⁰But God raised Him from the dead. ³¹He was seen for many days by those who came up with Him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are His witnesses to the people. ³²And we declare to you glad tidings-- that promise which was made to the fathers. ³³God has fulfilled this for us their children, in that He has raised up Jesus. As it is also written in the second Psalm:

‘You are My Son,
Today I have begotten You.’

³⁴And that He raised Him from the dead, no more to return to corruption, He has spoken thus:

‘I will give you the sure mercies of David.’

³⁵Therefore He also says in another Psalm:

‘You will not allow Your Holy One to see corruption.’

³⁶“For David, after he had served his own generation by the will of God, fell asleep, was buried with his fathers, and saw corruption; ³⁷but He whom God raised up saw no corruption. ³⁸Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins; ³⁹and by Him everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses. ⁴⁰Beware therefore, lest what has been spoken in the prophets come upon you:

⁴¹“Behold, you despisers, Marvel and perish!
For I work a work in your days,
A work which you will by no means believe,
Though one were to declare it to you.”

⁴²So when the Jews went out of the synagogue, the Gentiles begged that these words might be preached to them the next Sabbath. ⁴³Now when the congregation had broken up, many of the Jews and devout proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas, who, speaking to them, persuaded them to continue in the grace of God.

⁴⁴On the next Sabbath almost the whole city came together to hear the word of God. ⁴⁵But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy; and contradicting and blaspheming, they opposed the things spoken by Paul. ⁴⁶Then Paul and Barnabas grew bold and said, “It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles. ⁴⁷For so the Lord has commanded us:

‘I have set you as a light to the Gentiles,
That you should be for salvation to the ends of the earth.’”

⁴⁸Now when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified the word of the Lord. And as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.

⁴⁹And the word of the Lord was being spread throughout all the region. ⁵⁰But the Jews stirred up the devout and prominent women and the chief men of the city, raised up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region. ⁵¹But they shook off the dust from their feet

against them, and came to Iconium. ⁵²And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit. (Acts 13:1-52)

Last Lord's Day in our study of God's providence, which is the sovereign rule of God over history to bring to pass His eternal decree, we considered how God uses means in His work of providence. By "God's use of means" we are speaking of how God uses people, things, and events in order to govern the history of His creation. We saw how our Confession of Faith of 1689 depicts God's use of means. It states the matter this way: *God, in his ordinary providence maketh use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them at his pleasure.*¹ When it states that *God is able to work "outside" of means*, it simply means that God is not bound to use means, but can intervene in miraculous ways to accomplish His purposes. When it states that the Lord *is able to work "above" means*, it means that God can enable his people or things to do beyond what they normally do or can do in order to accomplish His will of decree. And thirdly, when the confession says that *God is able to work "against" means*, it means that God is able to suspend the normal way that things occur, even suspending physical "laws", in order to accomplish His purposes.

Today I would like us to consider God's providence and His use of means as reflected in the book of Acts, specifically in several of Paul's missionary journeys. I believe the lessons that we glean will help us in our own efforts to see God work in our lives. I believe it will also affirm several principles for us in how we are to discern His will in our service toward Him and His people.

Now, the book of Acts is a particular style or genre of writing that requires particular interpretive principles and skills to understand and apply rightly. It is in some ways not like an epistle, or even like a Gospel. It is what is called *historical narrative*; it is a record of God's dealings in history during the apostolic age. The Book of Acts records for us how God in His providence caused apostolic Christianity to expand from Jerusalem and Judea to major cities of the Roman Empire and ultimately to the capital of the empire, the city of Rome.

Now one of the difficulties in interpreting historic narrative passages of Holy Scripture is *the need to determine and distinguish that which is normative for Christian faith and practice from that what was the work of God during apostolic times*. Clearly the events of the first century were in ways very unique. **Hebrews 2:1-4** speaks to this:

Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. ²For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, ³how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, ⁴while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to His will. (Heb. 2:1-4)

The first century was a unique time which saw many unique works of God's providence in the establishment of the church throughout the world. Coupled with this is the knowledge that the apostles had a unique role and had unique gifts, which the Lord used to establish the foundation of the church (cf. Eph. 2:20). Paul wrote of the special equipping of Christ's apostles in 2 Corinthians 12:11f:

I have become a fool in boasting; you have compelled me. For I ought to have been commended by you; for in nothing was I behind the most eminent apostles, though I am nothing. *Truly the signs of an apostle were accomplished among you with all perseverance, in signs and wonders and mighty deeds.*

¹ *Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689*, Art. 5, par. 3.

But sadly, there are some, even many, who do not perform this important task of interpretation of identifying what was unique to the apostolic age and apostolic ministry. They wrongly assume that anything recorded in Scripture is *normative*, that is, anything read in Scripture as having occurred, should be viewed as something that God continues to do and commonly does among His people at all times throughout history. This has resulted in much error of both faith and practice. Many times these ones defending the idea that everything is normative that is recorded in Scripture, will express a rather unthoughtful justification, quoting Hebrews 13:8 which reads, “Jesus Christ *is* the same yesterday, today, and forever.” They conclude, therefore, that means anything that God has done in the past, He still does today. I would argue that the most that can be said is that if God did something in the past, it means that He might choose to do it again, but that there is no certainty or basis of confidence that He will do so. Acts is a record of God’s providence in the apostolic age in which it records many events that are not to be understood as normative for all Christians at all times throughout the history of the church.

The opening words of Acts 13 may be considered in the light of this interpretive principle. We read of this occasion when the Holy Spirit, apparently in response to the prayer of the church at Antioch, audibly spoke to the gathered church, instructing the church to send forth Paul and Barnabas on a missionary journey into the Gentile world. We read in verse 2, “As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’” We would argue that this event signaled the beginning of God bringing to pass His great purpose in history of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ to extend into the Gentile world. This should not be regarded as a normative event. The Holy Spirit does not commonly speak to a church or its leaders in an audible voice instructing them in detail what it was that He would have them do. This was a special act of God, using special means rather than ordinary means, in order to initiate this great work among the Gentiles.

I would argue as well, as we will see a little later, this event certainly does not teach us that a church should only embark on a great work for the kingdom if and when God through the Holy Spirit clearly and remarkably communicates directly His will for that church. And here is one of the major lessons in the matter of God’s providence that I would like us to learn and to take to heart today. Some well-intentioned Christians, and often times it will be those who are Reformed in their understanding, who believe in the sovereignty of God and the providence of God, will be essentially spiritually “paralyzed” while they “wait upon God” for some kind of “clear” and “direct” leading of God pointing them in the direction that He would have them go. I myself went through a period of about two years or so, which began about 1981, after I had come to the truth of God’s absolute sovereignty over history, in which I was too passive in the Lord’s work. I was looking for some indication or leading of God before initiating a ministry or putting forth an effort in some new endeavor, while I sincerely but wrongly was waiting on God’s “leading.” It was my study of the narrative portions of Acts that revealed to me my error and brought correction to my thinking and practice. And so, I would like us to work through this passage and take note of God’s work of providence in the ministry of Paul and Barnabas.

Acts 13 opens in the city of Antioch. This was a Roman city that was one of the first cities outside of the regions of Judea and Samaria to hear and receive the gospel. We read of the initial work of evangelism in Antioch recorded in **Acts 11:19ff**.

¹⁹Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. ²⁰ But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus.

²¹And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord.

²²The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.

²³When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, ²⁴for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord.

²⁵So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, ²⁶and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians. (Acts 11:19-26)

This church at Antioch was one of the most important and influential churches of the first century. It was a church, the first church actually, that was largely comprised of Gentiles. God used this church to begin the great work of taking the gospel to the Gentile world.

Actually with Acts 13 we have a major transition in Luke's narrative of the book of Acts. Back in Acts 1 Luke had set forth the organization of his book as well as the purpose and plan to take the gospel to the world through his record of our Lord's words to His apostles. We read in Acts 1:1ff:

In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, ²until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

⁴And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, "you heard from me; ⁵for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." ⁶So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" ⁷He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. ⁸***But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.***"

⁹And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, ¹¹and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." (Acts 1:1-11)

The Book of Acts can be understood according to this order of events, which are three great works of God in history. Acts 1-7 may be seen as *the first stage* of this work in that the apostolic witness saturates *Jerusalem*. We read in Acts 5 of the accomplishment of God's purpose in Jerusalem. The Jewish leadership had put the apostles in prison in Jerusalem. But God had miraculously brought them out and commanded them to preach in the temple to the people of the city. The Jewish leaders then brought them before the Sanhedrin. We read of what occurred in Acts 5:26ff.

²⁶Then the captain with the officers went and brought them, but not by force, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people. ²⁷And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest questioned them, ²⁸saying, "We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, ***yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching***, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us."

²⁹But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men. ³⁰The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. ³¹God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. ³²And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him." (Acts 5:26-32)

The *second major division* of Acts begins with Acts 8:1ff when the gospel went forth from Jerusalem unto the regions of all *Judea* and *Samaria*. God in His providence used Jewish persecution of Christians in order to spread the gospel to these regions. We read in Acts 8:1ff of this event:

And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and ***they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria***, except the apostles. ²Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him.

³But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

⁴***Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.*** ⁵***Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ.*** ⁶And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip when they heard him and saw the signs that he did. ⁷For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who had them, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. ⁸So there was much joy in that city. (Acts 8:1-8)

God had accomplished His will in bringing the gospel to Judea and Samaria. A summary statement of this accomplished purpose of God is recorded in Acts 9:31f.

So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.

Beginning in Acts 10, the gospel begins to spread to the Gentile world. It initially occurred through Peter being divinely directed to the house of the Roman centurion, Cornelius. But it was with this event in Acts 13:1ff, with the calling of Paul and Barnabas to begin their missionary work to the Roman world, that ***the third division of Acts*** begins to unfold. Here we read that the gospel would be taken unto ***the uttermost parts of the earth*** (cf. Acts 1:8). This is a very unique, important, turning event in the advancement of the kingdom of God. What we read here in Acts 13 should not be viewed in every detail as normative for Christian faith and practice throughout church history. The special nature of these events is to be recognized and acknowledged. Again, we read of what our Lord was beginning to do in Acts 13:1-3.

Now in the church that was at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. ²As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, “Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” ³Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away.

It is to the gathered church that the Holy Spirit spoke. Here we see the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit as well as His personhood as One who speaks to His people. The Holy Spirit directed the people of God in the way they were to go and what to do in the furtherance of the Gospel.

Let us read further of the Holy Spirit directing Paul and Barnabas in their mission to the Gentile world.

⁴So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus. ⁵And when they arrived in Salamis, they preached the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. They also had John as their assistant.

The Holy Spirit directed them to Cyprus and then traveling through the island they came to the city of Paphos, which was located on the western side of the island (Acts 13:6-12). God had used them, enabling them through a miracle performed by them, to proclaim the Word of God to the Roman Proconsul, Sergius Paulus, who embraced the gospel, becoming a Christian (vs. 6-12). God used ordinary means of a sailing ship to bring them to their destination of Cyprus. But God also worked outside of means when Paul caused a sorcerer to become blind, resulting in the Roman Proconsul coming to the faith (cf. Acts 13:6-12).

Afterward Paul and Barnabas sailed they sailed for what is now southern Turkey, to the cities of Perga and Antioch in Pisidia (not the Antioch of Syria from which they had originated). Their common practice was first to preach the gospel in the Jewish synagogues. We read that the Jews were not that responsive, and so the Gentiles became the focus of their efforts. We read in Acts 13:40ff of Paul and Barnabas turning from the Jews because of their unbelief and turning to proclaim the gospel the Gentiles.

⁴⁰Beware therefore, lest what has been spoken in the prophets come upon you:

⁴¹“Behold, you despisers, Marvel and perish!
***For I work a work in your days,
A work which you will by no means believe,
Though one were to declare it to you.***”

⁴²So when the Jews went out of the synagogue, ***the Gentiles begged that these words might be preached to them the next Sabbath.*** ⁴³Now when the congregation had broken up, many of the Jews and devout proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas, who, speaking to them, persuaded them to continue in the grace of God.

⁴⁴***On the next Sabbath almost the whole city came together to hear the word of God.*** ⁴⁵But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy; and contradicting and blaspheming, they opposed the things spoken by Paul. ⁴⁶***Then Paul and Barnabas grew bold and said, “It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles.*** ⁴⁷***For so the Lord has commanded us:***

***‘I have set you as a light to the Gentiles,
That you should be for salvation to the ends of the earth.’***”

⁴⁸Now when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified the word of the Lord. ***And as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.***

Here we see the providence of God directing these men to the ones that He had purposed to save by His grace. They quote an Old Testament prophecy to substantiate that what was being realized through them among the Gentiles was in accordance with God’s purpose declared in the prophets. It is from **Isaiah 40:5-6**, in which prophetically Jesus Christ spoke:

“And now the LORD says,
Who formed Me from the womb *to be* His Servant,
To bring Jacob back to Him,
So that Israel is gathered to Him
(For I shall be glorious in the eyes of the LORD,
And My God shall be My strength),
⁶Indeed He says,
‘It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant
To raise up the tribes of Jacob,
And to restore the preserved ones of Israel;
***I will also give You as a light to the Gentiles,
That You should be My salvation to the ends of the earth.***”

Luke is showing through recording these words of Paul, that their missionary effort to bring the gospel to the Gentiles in the Romans world was the effort of God to expand the nation of Israel to encompass the Gentile nations in fulfillment of His purpose revealed through Isaiah’s prophecy.

The ministry of Paul and Barnabas continued to publish the gospel throughout that region. We read in **Acts 11:49-52** these words,

⁴⁹And the word of the Lord was being spread throughout all the region. ⁵⁰But the Jews stirred up the devout and prominent women and the chief men of the city, raised up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region. ⁵¹But they shook off the dust from their feet against them, and came to Iconium. ⁵²***And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.***

That last statement is designed to show that God was continuously directing them and enabling them to take the gospel to the uttermost parts of the earth.

Now Paul and Barnabas continued to travel through the region and they proclaimed the gospel everywhere they went. We read in **Acts 14:21-28** of the concluding events of this first missionary journey and their return to Antioch, the place of their origin.

And when they had preached the gospel to that city and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, ²²strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, “We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.” ²³So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. ²⁴And after they had passed through Pisidia, they came to Pamphylia. ²⁵Now when they had preached the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia. ²⁶***From there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work which they had completed.***

²⁷Now when they had come and gathered the church together, they reported ***all that God had done with them***, and that ***He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles***. ²⁸So they stayed there a long time with the disciples.

Now we see throughout this account the hand of God’s providence directing and enabling these men to accomplish “the work which they had completed.” God dealt directly with them, in clear acts of providence in which He revealed clearly and fully what they were to do.

However, let us consider this word of caution and perhaps correction. There are some well-meaning Christians, I was once among them, who believe that they need to see God clearly and in a special and direct way He must reveal to them His will, what He would have them do, before they step forward to begin a work for God. They sometimes remain passive or inactive, refusing to act until they perceive God’s leading or direction. But this is not right.

And so, I would like us to consider how God in His providence led Paul on his ***second missionary journey***. Let us consider further the ways by which the Lord directed His servants, “leading” His people to accomplish His will. So let us consider Paul’s second missionary journey, which begins toward the end of Acts 15. We will begin to read in Acts 15:35.

Paul and Barnabas also remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.

³⁶Then 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.” ³⁷Now Barnabas was determined to take with them John called Mark. ³⁸But 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. ³⁹Then the contention became so sharp that they parted from one another. And so Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus; ⁴⁰but Paul chose Silas and departed, being commended by the brethren to the grace of God. ⁴¹And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches. (Acts 15:35-41)

This is the record of the onset of Paul's second missionary journey. By the time Paul returned to Antioch, he will have travelled not only through the regions that had previously proclaimed the gospel, but they would pass through Asia Minor, travel across the Aegean Sea, start churches in Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, and Corinth.

But the beginning of this missionary journey did not begin with the clarity and fanfare of the beginning of the first missionary journey. It is recorded here in Acts 15 that Paul simply proposed to Barnabas, "Let us now go back... and see how they are doing." This is hardly the kind of beginning of a great work that most Christians would regard as "the leading of the Lord." The point I am making is this, we should not wait or expect some clear "sign" or sense of God's leading us in order to embark on some work project or ministry for the Lord. Sometimes the Lord will direct His people in His providence simply by impressing a desire on the heart of one to "see how they are doing."

And then consider the fallout between Paul and Barnabas before this second missionary journey began. They had a sharp disagreement between them. Barnabas wanted to take John Mark with them. Paul refused to bring Mark along. The result was Paul and Barnabas severing their cooperation in the Lord's work. Barnabas took Mark with him to Cyprus and Paul took Silas with him on his missionary trip. I suppose if a present day evangelical was present he would tell them that this was no way to do the Lord's work. There needed to be a great deal of prayer and preparation, and there was a need to "wait on the Lord" until His "will" was clearly determined. But God directed these men in quite different ways that many would expect. Again, the point I am making is that we need not have a clear "word from the Lord" or some unique or unusual "sign" to determine the will of God. If you have a sincere desire for the work of the gospel and concern for the people of God or the glory of God, go ahead and act upon it, praying for the Lord's blessing on your efforts.

Now we do read of something that Paul secured in order to assure God's blessing on his endeavor. Paul sought the endorsement and I would assume the prayer support of his local church in Antioch before departing to the mission field. "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" (Acts 13:40f).

Let us look forward at a significant event that occurred when Paul and Silas were in Derbe and Lystra. This substantiates that their missionary journey was "of the Lord." We read in Acts 16:1-3,

Then he came to Derbe and Lystra. And behold, a certain disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a certain Jewish woman who believed, but his father was Greek. ²He was well spoken of by the brethren who were at Lystra and Iconium. ³Paul wanted to have him go on with him. And he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in that region, for they all knew that his father was Greek.

Timothy would become his most loyal and dependable fellow servant in the Lord's work. On one occasion Paul commended Timothy to the church at Philippi:

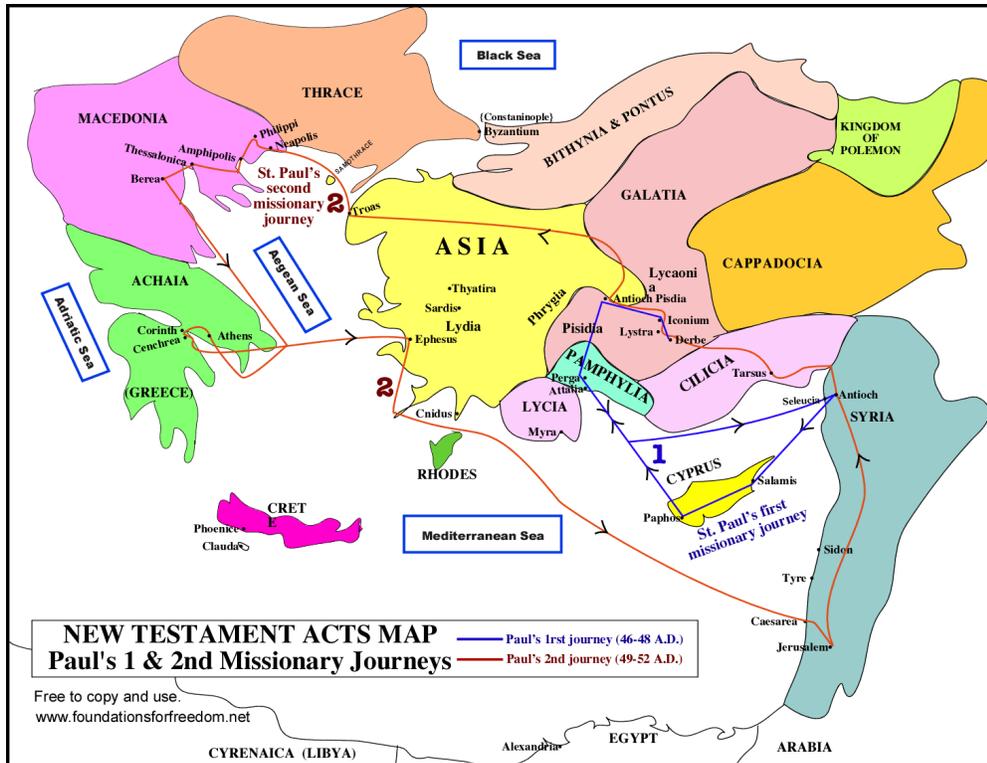
¹⁹I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I too may be cheered by news of you. ²⁰For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. ²¹For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. ²²But you know Timothy's proven worth, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel. ²³I hope therefore to send him just as soon as I see how it will go with me, ²⁴and I trust in the Lord that shortly I myself will come also. (Phil. 2:19-24)

We may read further of God's providential "leading" of Paul and his companions in **Acts 16:6-10**.

Now when they had gone through Phrygia and the region of Galatia, they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia. ⁷After they had come to Mysia, they tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit did not permit them. ⁸So passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas. ⁹And a vision appeared to Paul in the night. A man of Macedonia stood and pleaded with him, saying, "Come over

to Macedonia and help us.”¹⁰ Now after he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go to Macedonia, concluding that the Lord had called us to preach the gospel to them.

Here is a map that shows the first century regions through which Paul travelled:



Now Luke recorded that the Holy Spirit had forbidden them to preach in Asia. That would have been the “Asia” or “Asia Minor” of the first century world, which is present day south-western Turkey. They also tried to go into Bithynia, but the Holy Spirit forbid them. The Scriptures do not inform us exactly how the Holy Spirit prevented them from preaching in these regions, only that it was clear that it was the Holy Spirit preventing their intentions to proceed to these regions.

Now again, I could well imagine a modern day evangelical travelling with them. His response might have been something’s like this:

“You see how the Holy Spirit has forbidden us to go south or to the north, I tell you that this is a sign that we ‘out of His will.’ We should not have originally begun this journey. We did not ‘wait upon the Lord.’ And now we can see what we had done was ‘run ahead of God.’ We need to go back where we were in the beginning and wait until we have clear direction from the Lord.”

But there is no mention of doubt on the part of these Christian workers. They did not seem tempted to quit and return. Rather, they pressed on westward. They arrived to the coast to the city of Troas, and there Paul had his “vision” in the night. “A man of Macedonia stood and pleaded with him, saying, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’” The conclusion of those traveling with Paul was that *the Lord was calling them to Macedonia*, which would be the first incursion of apostolic Christianity into Europe. We read in verse 10, “Now after he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go to Macedonia, concluding that the Lord had called us to preach the gospel to them.” The point is this, that the Lord had been directing them providentially throughout their missionary efforts.

By the way, something else significant occurred at this point. Luke the physician apparently joined the missionary team at Troas. Look again at this paragraph:

Now when *they* had gone through Phrygia and the region of Galatia, *they* were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia. ⁷After *they* had come to Mysia, *they* tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit did not permit *them*. ⁸So passing by Mysia, *they* came down to Troas. ⁹And a vision appeared to Paul in the night. A man of Macedonia stood and pleaded with him, saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” ¹⁰Now after he had seen the vision, immediately *we* sought to go to Macedonia, concluding that the Lord had called *us* to preach the gospel to them.

The point that we want to emphasize is this. It is not our responsibility to determine the will of God by observing and assessing God’s works of providence. We do not have the ability to know what He is doing and why He is doing it in the way that He does. We will conclude with this statement from the Old Testament that reinforces what we have considered today:

“The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.” (Deut. 29:29)

Moses was declaring that God’s works of providence are hidden from our view and we are incapable of assessing them rightly. But God has given to us the Holy Scriptures, which are those things that He revealed in His Word that belong to us forever, even the words of God’s written Word.
