

BI-FOCAL VISION

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Text: Acts 13:44-48. On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy. They began to contradict what Paul was saying and heaped abuse on him. Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly, "We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. For this is what the Lord has commanded us: 'I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.'" When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.

Introduction

Here we have two men on a mission. Barnabas and Paul. Obviously these are highly motivated men. But what motivates them? According to Paul, who was their spokesman, they are two men under orders. They are propelled forward by a mandate they have received. "For so the Lord has commanded us," Paul says.

Now precisely what was this commission they had received from the Lord, and to which they were being faithful, and for which they were risking their lives?

Oddly enough, it was not what we know as the "Great Commission" – that set of orders Jesus Christ gave to his disciples after his resurrection. Matthew records these orders in Chapter 28, verses 18-20. "Going, therefore, make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you."

Barnabas and Paul were certainly familiar with these last instructions of Jesus. Every first-generation Christian was. Yet this "Great Commission" is not what Paul refers to when he says, "For so the Lord has commanded us."

Instead, Paul's reference is to a rather obscure text in the Old Testament, Isaiah Chapter 49, verse 6. Paul says, "for so the Lord has commanded us, saying, 'I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the uttermost parts of the earth.'"

Here Paul is quoting word for word from Isaiah 49:6. And it is this Old Testament text – and its context – that I want to discuss with you today.

The Significance of Isaiah 49:6

The correlation between what God said to his servant in Isaiah 49:6 and what Paul and Barnabas perceived to be the fundamental basis of their missionary activity is significant for several reasons.

First, it underscores the unity of the Old Testament and the New. God never had two plans – or three, or four – for saving the world: just one.

Second, it illustrates the great difficulty God's people have always had, both in ancient times and today, in understanding God's plan and becoming able and willing participants in it.

Third, it presents a concrete and rather disconcerting challenge to us modern, middle-class, upwardly mobile, suburban-oriented American Christians as to whether we understand God's plan and are amenable to it.

The Context of the Old Testament Mandate

The person speaking in Isaiah 49 is the servant of God. There is multiple representation here. On the one hand, the servant is Isaiah himself, so there is an autobiographical tone to the passage.

On the other hand, Bible scholars recognize as equally strong Messianic strand in the passage. That is, the servant here points forward to the coming Messiah who would be God's perfect servant.

In the third place, the passage specifically states that the servant of God is the people of God, the nation of Israel. Note verse 3, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified."

The servant begins by reaching for the widest possible audience. "Listen to me, O coastlands, and hearken, you peoples from afar" (verse 1).

Then he pays tribute to his sense of personal identity. Verse 1 continued, "The Lord called me from the womb; from the body of my mother he named my name." The servant recognizes that he is destined for a special vocation.

Because this is so, trial and testing are inevitable. Those who are God's elect have to be fitted for the task they are called to fulfill. So in verse 2 we read, "He made my mouth like a sharp sword...he made me a polished arrow."

This period of character development usually occurs out of the limelight. They are the "hidden years," when we labor in the obscurity of the home or workplace, developing the personal traits and honing the professional skills that will qualify us to be effective instruments in the hands of God. Thus we read, "In the shadow of his hand he hid me...in his quiver he hid me away."

During these hidden years, bereft of any personal glory, we learn the most important lesson life. We learn to live by the promises of God. Verse 3, "And he said to me, 'You are my servant, in whom I will be glorified.'"

These are not only hidden years; they are also painful years. So often our personal growth is unrecognized by others. Our hard work goes unappreciated. All seems futile. We are ready to give up. Verse 4, "But I said, 'I have labored in vain. I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity.'"

The making of a servant of God is an arduous task. As Raymond V. Edman expresses it poetically,

When God wants to drill a man, and skill a man, and
thrill a man;

When God wants to mold a man to play the noblest part...
When God yearns with all his heart
To create so great and bold a man that all the world will
be amazed –
Watch his methods, watch his ways,
How God hammers him and hurts him, and with mighty
blows converts him
Into trial lumps of clay – which only God understands,
While man's trembling heart is yearning and he lifts
beseeching hands –
How God bends but never breaks, when man's good he
undertakes,
How God uses whom he chooses, and with mighty power
infuses him,
With glorious joy induces him to try his splendor out –
God knows what he's about!

And so the conviction grows quietly and steadily within. "Yet surely my right is with the Lord, and my recompense with my God" (verse 4). The servant learns to serve God alone, not to seek the praise of men.

Verse 5, "And now, the Lord says, who formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him – for I am honored in the eyes of the Lord, and my God *has* become my strength..."

After all the years of training and preparation, the servant comes into his own, as it were, and is now ready to fulfill the purpose of God. And at this point we interrupt our reading because we are getting our first inkling of what the purpose of God might be for his servant.

The first order of business, it appears, is close at hand. God wants his servant to minister to those immediately around him – or her. For the people of God in the Old Testament, this meant that they were supposed to concentrate on spiritual renewal – bringing Jacob back to God, regathering Israel to him.

In our time, we might understand this in terms of Christian education and exhortation: devoting our time and talents to ensuring the integrity of the Church. Certainly this is no easy task.

It is no easy task to bring up a child in the way he or she should go. It is no easy task to guard the Church against the inroads of secular humanism. It is no easy task to avoid the snares of materialism. In short, it is not easy to be the people of God in modern America.

More importantly, it is not our only task. In fact, according to what we are about to read, it is not our most important calling as the people of God. For now, at last, we have come to verse 6:

"He says [that is, God says to his servant], 'It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.'"

So here we have it, God's ultimate intention, his plan for world redemption. This is why he calls his servant. This is why he equips his servant. This is why he tests his servant. This is why he upholds his servant with his promises –

To reach out beyond ourselves. To reach out beyond our families. To reach out beyond our congregations and denominations. To reach out beyond our neighborhood and even our nation. To reach out to the world!

Note well: God does not say it is a bad thing to minister to those close at hand. He does not say it is illegitimate, or unworthy. Rather, he says it is too light a thing – too small a vision, too limited an objective. God has something much greater in mind for his people.

Application and Conclusion

Sadly, Israel in Old Testament times never grasped the missionary nature of her calling. Throughout her long history Israel focused inwardly, not outwardly. She was preoccupied with her privileges as the elect of God rather than her responsibilities as a light to the nations.

Surrounded by hostile peoples and pagan idolatries, Israel developed a fortress mentality. She became narrow and nationalistic, petty and parochial.

It seems to me that American churches today face this same temptation. Throughout our history we have been relatively parochial and insular. We have concentrated to a large extent on ourselves. And we have been successful in many ways. By and large our families are stable and financially secure. Our congregations have kept the faith. Consequently we tend to be smug and complacent.

We are in danger of making the same mistake Israel made. We need to hear the word of the Lord that these goals, while not wrong in themselves, are nevertheless not enough.

Today more than ever we need to reach out to the poor and the powerless. We need to reach out beyond our comfortable suburbs to those masses around the world who live on the underside of history – those who are marginalized and alienated, hopeless and rebellious.

In short, we need bi-focal vision, the ability to see both near and far, a new commitment to our special calling to be a light to the nations. Barnabas and Paul had bi-focal vision at a point in history when few others had it. Because of their vision, we today share in the promises of God. Don those spectacles, so that yet-unreached peoples around the world may hear the good news of Jesus!