

TOO SMALL A THING

Different histories have their own hinges.

The hinge of world history is surely the first coming of Jesus Christ, the world-changing events that occurred between his birth and his ascension.

If you think of cosmic history – the history of the universe – the hinge is surely the second coming of Christ, an event that hasn't happened yet. When it does take place, the universe will never be the same. There will be a new heaven and a new earth, in which justice dwells, as the apostle Peter told us.

Another kind of history is the history of the people of God, both before and since the incarnation of Jesus. This history also has its hinge, and we find that hinge recorded in Acts 13:44-49:

"On the next Sabbath almost the whole city [Pisidian Antioch] 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. The word of the Lord spread through the whole region."

The hinge is found in verse 47, *"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."*

Why do I say that this passage is the hinge of the history of God's people? The reasons are clear. We must begin in the days of Abraham, two thousand years before Jesus.

God chose Abraham – one man – with the intention of forming a nation through him, a nation through whom God planned to bless the world. Israel was to become God's channel of blessing to the nations.

But the people of Israel never fulfilled their destiny. There were moments when a break seemed near – during the days of Moses, or David, or Isaiah, or after the Babylonian captivity. At such times it appeared these chosen people were actually going to realize their appointed purpose and move out into the world.

But it never happened.

Their basic problem was this: They turned inward generation after generation after generation. They became preoccupied with the blessings of being chosen rather than the joy of blessing others. They focused on the blessings of salvation rather than on the potential and responsibilities of salvation.

Time and again God attempted to direct their attention outward, where they could carry blessing to the world. But they never caught on. Some of their prophets, such as Isaiah and Jeremiah, were men of vision and understood this. Desperately, they endeavored to convince their fellow countrymen. But they failed.

Then Jesus came, proclaiming the nearness of the kingdom of God. One would expect the situation to change immediately. A new people was formed, a new people of God. And yet, as the community of The Way developed, things remained the same.

Even after they received the Great Commission from the risen Jesus to “make disciples” of all nations, and even after they received the promised Holy Spirit’s power to accomplish this task, they stayed in Jerusalem.

God finally allowed severe persecution to force them out into the world.

The apostle Peter was the leader of the emerging church, yet there is no indication he had it in him to try to reach the world.

Even after God spoke to him about it in a vision, and allowed him to witness the Holy Spirit fall on the Roman centurion, Cornelius (Acts 10) – even after this moment when Peter could truly have been moving out – he returned to his everyday duties. He saw himself only as “the apostle to the Jews” (Galatians 2:8).

But one man was different.

We don’t know where or when he discerned the true destiny of the people of God. It may have been at the moment of his conversion on the road to Damascus.

Perhaps it came as he meditated on the Scriptures during his years in the Arabian desert. Or maybe while he was serving as an elder in the church in Antioch.

Never mind. Somewhere along this man's pilgrimage, as he was pondering texts in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible), God began to enlighten his mind. In this primitive period of the church's formation, he was the first to comprehend the true destiny on earth of God's people.

The man was Paul. And the passage that opened his eyes was Isaiah 49:6, cited above. The full text reads:

[God says] "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."

You will recognize that the last part of this passage is what Paul quoted to the crowd in Pisidian Antioch. But it was the first half of the text that had revolutionized his thinking.

As Paul had meditated on the words "It is too small a thing," he realized: *This is what we should be doing. God isn't satisfied that we should minister only to Jews, to those immediately around us. God wants us to reach out to the whole world.*

Note carefully that God did not say that his servant should not have a ministry to those in his immediate vicinity. Rather, he said that this by itself is "too small a thing. God's servant is meant for greater things, and capable of greater things.

Israel saw what was close at hand, but could not see beyond her borders. And this was also true of the church in its formative years. As nearly as we can tell, Paul was the first disciple of Jesus to have developed "bi-focal vision" – the ability to see both near and far.

You and I today cannot be content to simply minister to America. We need to don glasses with bi-focal lenses in order to see the whole world.

In a cover story on American evangelicalism a few years ago, *Time* magazine reported that the evangelical "tends to grow safe in his inner consolation, lapsing into passive indifference to the evils of the outside world. Critics...tend to see the resurgence of evangelicalism as a

sign of a self-preoccupied and self-serving national swing toward conservatism in general.

That is what outsiders think about us. Can you see any difference between our attitude and the attitude of Israel in the Old Testament?

Dawson Trotman, founder of The Navigators, used to say that world vision is simply getting on your heart what God has always had on his heart – the world.