

## When It Is Time to Leave

[Acts 13:13-14, 13:44-52](#)

Dr. M. Craig Barnes

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Throughout the Sundays of Lent, I will be preaching on Paul's missionary journeys as depicted in the book of Acts. Along the way we will be searching for insights on the fulfilling of our own missions in life. Today we look at the one of the most important insights on having a mission - knowing when it is time to move on. \*\*\*\* Paul and Barnabas' first missionary journey did not get off to a spectacular start. They first went to Cyprus, which was Barnabas' home. Although we are told that they preached the gospel, we are not told that many who listened to them became believers. Then they sailed up to the shores of Asia Minor, where young John Mark abandoned them and went back home. From Paul's letter to the churches in Galatia, we also learn that Paul was very sick during this time. But still they pressed north until they came to Antioch of Pisidia.

Finally, when they got to Antioch of Pisidia, their preaching was starting to generate a crowd. In fact, we are told that almost the whole city was gathering to hear the Word of the Lord. But this was a little too much success for the Jewish leaders in the city who began to resist them. So Paul said, "Fine, from now on we will preach to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, 'I have set you to be a light to the Gentiles, so that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.'"

Here, Paul was pretty much quoting from Isaiah 42:6, where the prophet declared that it was Israel's job to be a light to the nations. So essentially what Paul was saying to the Jewish religious leaders was, "Your mission was to bring salvation to the Gentiles. If you don't do it, God will get the message to the Gentiles another way." Now, the Gentiles were delighted to hear this. But it really torqued the Jewish religious leaders. So they incited the leaders of the city to drive Paul and Barnabas out of town. On the way out, they stopped long enough to shake the dust off their feet. It was the only way they would be free to move on to the next place.

Paul and Barnabas were no strangers to conflict. Paul had been in conflict with the church when he was a Pharisee, and he had been in conflict with the Pharisees when he joined the church. He had been in conflict in Damascus, in Jerusalem, in Cyprus, and with John Mark. In the next city, Iconium, the conflict would be so great that they would stone Paul. When they were done, Paul picked himself out of the rubble of stones, and went back into town to do some more preaching. So clearly, these missionaries were anything but quitters. But in Antioch they decide to walk away from the resistance, and move on to the next town. How did they know to do that?

It is not unlike the struggles we face fulfilling our mission. How do you know when to hang in there in a tough job, and when to start circulating your resume? How do you know when to keep trying to make a relationship work, and when to say goodbye? How do you know when to start over with life. When you play scrabble and need to toss in all your letters, you're allowed to start over because you can't make anything out of what you've got. How do you know when to move to another town and start over?

We are not quitters! We would not have gotten this far in life if we were. But sometimes persevering is not the wise choice. Especially when you are racing in the wrong direction. In his play, *The Wild Duck*, Henrik Ibsen uses the metaphor of a hunting dog who relentlessly dives under water for a duck that has fallen in the weeds, until the dog himself is in danger of drowning. How do you know when to keep going after the wild duck, and when to leave it buried? Sometimes we are drowning in our failure. Sometimes we are drowning in our success, becoming so much less than we use to be, and than we want to be.

Paul and Barnabas knew it was time to leave Antioch of Pisidia for several reasons. For one, they knew their mission was different from their job. Their mission was to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth. Their job, for the time being, was to conduct a campaign in Antioch. But they would never let a dogged commitment to a job prevent them from fulfilling their mission. When things didn't go well in Antioch, they moved on to Iconium, where frankly things didn't go any better. If you don't like your job, quit and get another one. Just don't expect the new job to make you happy, either. It's just a job. The fulfillment for which you are searching will come not from your job but from your mission in life, which may have nothing to do with how you make your money. It is a particularly American preoccupation to reduce God's calling to a job description. Your calling has more to do with how you have been created, gifted, and made passionate. You may get to exercise that calling in a job, for a while, but eventually every job comes to an end. And you have to find new ways of expressing your mission. So never confuse your job, which is temporary, with your mission in life.

Second, Paul and Barnabas had enough humility to know they were serving God's mission. That means we are not fighting God's battles for him. We sometimes give ourselves too much credit when we think our conflict is a righteous one, and we are engaged in it as a way of doing the Lord's work for him. I recently spoke with an older woman who said, in a moment of exhaustion, "I have spent my whole life trying to help God." But God doesn't really need help. That's the great thing about being God. If God is in the midst of a battle, I figure he can do just fine on his own. That doesn't mean that you are not at times caught up in conflicts that are truly great battles over justice and truth. But it does mean that you are there only as a witness to God's triumph and salvation. You are not in charge! That should be cross stitched and hung in every home. It offers you the freedom to work without fretting over results that are a Savior's worry. Martin Luther once wrote, "Faith in Jesus Christ does not free us from hard work, but it does free us from false opinions concerning hard work." We are not saved by work. Neither is the kingdom of God.

Third, Paul and Barnabas knew that sometimes you have to change your plans in order to fulfill your mission. Remember, when Paul said, if the Jews wouldn't take salvation to the ends of the earth, God would move to Plan B, which commissioned missionaries to the Gentiles. If God himself has to change plans at times, the chances are great that you will also. The Bible is filled with people who have to go to Plan B. They set off in one direction, trying to fulfill their mission. It didn't work out, so they went to Plan B. Moses' first plan was to kill the Egyptians. Joshua's first plan was to enter the promised land from the south. Jeremiah's first plan was to prevent the fall of Jerusalem. Peter's first plan was to prevent Jesus from going to the cross. Paul's first plan was to get rid of the

church. All of them had to go to Plan B. Some of you may be up to X, Y, or Z. That's okay. Go to double letters if you have to. Just don't expect to be right all the time. That's hubris--one of the deadlier sins. So they don't make a statue of you in Antioch? So what? Move on. Get to the next town. You have got a mission, and there's a lot of work to do.

Fourth, Paul and Barnabas knew that their mission included enjoying life. Notice that in our text we are told that they shook the dust of Antioch off their feet, "and the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit." But they had just been run out of town. Why in the world are they filled with joy? Because they are also filled with the Holy Spirit. The ministry of the Holy Spirit in our lives is to so bind us into the Son's relationship with the Father that we too hear we are the beloved with whom God is so pleased. If you know that by grace, the heavenly Father is already so pleased with you, you can stop trying to impress him and get on with enjoying this precious gift of life. All the work that is necessary for your salvation has already been accomplished by Jesus on the cross. That is why in his last words he said, "It is finished." Your calling is simply to enjoy the salvation that you have been given. Those of you who are parents, know that what you most want for your own children is not for them to keep pushing at life, but to be joyful. That is what the Father most wants in your life as well. In the words of the Westminster Catechism, "The chief aim of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever." As we make God the delight of our lives, so do we discover how to delight in all of life.

I spent last Friday morning with a family in Baltimore whose nine-year-old son has a brain tumor. Then I rushed back here to lead a funeral for one of our elders who died from a car accident. After that I spent a lot of time on the phone with a woman who has a terrible disease that now appears to be terminal. Later that evening, my wife and I went to see Margaret Edson's wonderful play WIT. It is one of the best plays I have ever seen. It is about a very accomplished woman with stage four ovarian cancer. As she says in the play there is no stage five. By the end of the day, I was getting the message. Life is fragile. And death is not pretty or poetic. The poetry is in life. And death lasts for a long time. Too soon it is coming for all of us. Maybe even tomorrow.

This life is it! This is your one shot at enjoying life in this world. Is there a next life and a heaven? Absolutely. But everything we are told about the next life is meant to help us understand this one. And heaven proclaims that life is a grace to be enjoyed. The best way to wreck your life is to try to get it just right. Or make it always successful. You don't have time for that. And remember, you're not in charge. That is not meant to rob you of power. It is meant to make you free. Free to enjoy the unfolding mystery of life. Free to be a light to your end of the earth.

By your Holy Spirit, O God, set us free. Free us from attempting to save ourselves, and free us from the folly of being the savior. Free us, that we may work hard, not out of compulsion, but only out of the depths of a grateful heart. Amen.