

403 Separate me Barnabas and Saul

There is an intriguing little phrase in Philippians 2.12 which reads – “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (KJV). At first sight this seems to suggest that we are to earn our salvation by our own efforts and good works, which would be in direct contradiction to Ephesians 2.8-9 for instance – “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: [it is] the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast”. But the possible contradiction is removed in the next verse, Philippians 2.13 – “For it is God which worketh in you, both to will and to do of [his] good pleasure”.

So in these words from Philippians 2 the Holy Spirit tells us through Paul of this key truth – that our Christian discipleship must be a proper blending of God’s activities and our own activities. In our daily lives we carry the normal responsibilities of Christian obedience and service, by which we are indeed “working out”, that is, expressing, our salvation (Philippians 2.12); but at the same time we live consciously under God’s sovereignty, knowing that He is steadily at work within us and through us. We stray from the path if we just fill our days with worthy activities of our own choosing, giving not a thought as to what the Lord may be wanting us to do. Equally we stray from the path on the other side if we sit back waiting for God to tell us every five minutes precisely what to do next - and if we hear nothing specific from Him then nothing gets done!

We can see this blending, of our responsibilities being fulfilled yet always under God’s sovereignty, in the following few selected examples from the Book of Acts; (a map showing Paul’s missionary journeys is helpful here but not vital).

In Acts 13.1-2, the prophets, teachers and members of the church in Antioch (in northern Syria of today) are “ministering to the Lord and fasting”, that is, “working out their own salvation” through normal Christian activities. But then God by His Holy Spirit steps in – “Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them” (v.2b, KJV); here now is God specifically intervening.

We note their response. First they “fasted and prayed” (v.3a), testing that this call was indeed of the Holy Spirit, rather than perhaps some silly mistake. Then, when settled that this instruction was indeed “of the Lord”, by faith they laid hands on the two separated ones and sent them on their way (v.3b). So there is the blending in action: Christian

normality, interrupted by God's specific word, which is tested, then accepted and acted upon.

See how this develops. Barnabas and Saul only knew their general orders – to preach the Gospel (see in particular Acts 9.15 regarding Saul, soon to be Paul). So they settled into the task, but crucially with they themselves deciding where to go and what to do. They, not the Lord specifically, decided to go to Cyprus, Paphos and so on, before returning eventually to Antioch (13.4 - 14.28).

Then in Acts 15.36, it was Paul, not the Lord, who suggested to Barnabas that they re-visit the new little churches “[and see] how they do” (15.36). These two great Christian saints then disagreed sharply over John Mark, so, after “being recommended by the brethren” (15.37-40), Paul travelled with Silas instead and duly “confirmed the churches” (v.41). Paul was again taking the basic day-by-day decisions, within his God-given brief.

In 16.6 they were in Phrygia and Galatia (see map if available), but then “were forbidden of the Holy Ghost to preach the word in Asia” (that is, a region of north-west Turkey). In 16.7, they tried to go up to Bithynia on the Black Sea coast “but the Spirit suffered them not”.

Here were two clear prohibitions by the Holy Spirit, overruling their own plans. In each case Paul and Silas had to be alert for such interventions, then to test them, to accept them by faith, and to act upon them.

And so, by this combination of faithful human responsibility over the months with occasional specific divine guidance, they “came down to Troas” (16.8). The Lord had now got them to just where He wanted!

Quickly they learned why, through a night-time vision given to Paul of “a man of Macedonia” – crucially, in Europe – “saying, Come over into Macedonia, and help us” (16.9). And they did just that, without delay (16.10).

So we see how, when the Lord wished for the Gospel to make the critical jump across into Europe, He inserted His own specific instructions, in His own time and manner, into the steady, ongoing ministry of these faithful saints.

This blending remains the same for us. In Christ we ourselves take responsibility for our own daily Christian conduct, while remaining

prayerfully alert for God's occasional, specific words of instruction by the Holy Spirit.

What responsibilities we hold, and what privileges we have!

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