**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**ACTS-050. TO THE REGIONS BEYOND by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. Now there were in the church that was at Antioch certain prophets and teachers; as Barnabas, and Simeon that was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen, which had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. 2. As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them. 3. And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away. A. So they, being sent forth by the Holy Ghost, departed unto Seleucia; and from thence they sailed to Cyprus. 5. And when they were at Salamis, they preached the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews; and they had also John to their minister. 6. And when they had gone through the isle unto Paphos, they found a certain sorcerer, a false prophet, a Jew, whose name was Bar-jesus: 7. Which was with the deputy of the country, Sergius Paulus, a prudent man, who called for Barnabas and Saul, and desired to hear the word of God. 8. But Elymas the sorcerer (for so is his name by interpretation) withstood them, seeking to turn away the deputy from the faith. 9. Then Saul, (who also is called Paul,) filled with the Holy Ghost, set his eyes on him, 10. And said, O full of all subtilty and all mischief, thou child of the devil, thou enemy of all righteousness, wilt thou not cease to pervert the right ways of the Lord? 11. And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon thee, and thou shalt be blind, not seeing the sun for a season. And immediately there fell on him a mist and a darkness; and he went about seeking some to lead him by the hand. 12. Then the deputy, when he saw what was done, believed, being astonished at the doctrine of the Lord. 13. Now when Paul and his company loosed from Paphos, they came to Perga in Pamphylia: and John departing from them returned to Jerusalem."*

*Acts 13:1-13*

We stand in this passage at the beginning of a great step forward. Philip and Peter had each played a part in the gradual expansion of the church beyond the limits of Judaism; but it was from the church at Antioch that the messengers went forth who completed the process. Both its locality and its composition made that natural.

**I.** The solemn designation of the missionaries is the first point in the narrative. The church at Antioch was not left without signs of Christ's grace and presence. It had its band of prophets and teachers. As might be expected, four of the five named are Hellenists,--that is, Jews born in Gentile lands, and speaking Gentile languages. Barnabas was a Cypriote, Simeon's byname of Niger (Black') was probably given because of his dark complexion, which was probably caused by his birth in warmer lands. He may have been a North African, as Lucius of Cyrene was. Saul was from Tarsus, and only Manaen remains to represent the pure Palestinian Jew. His had been a strange course, from being foster-brother of the Herod who killed John to becoming a teacher in the church at Antioch. Barnabas was the leader of the little group, and the younger Pharisee from Tarsus, who had all along been Barnabas's protege, brought up the rear.

The order observed in the list is a little window which shows a great deal. The first and last names all the world knows; the other three are never heard of again. Immortality falls on the two, oblivion swallows up the three. But it matters little whether our names are sounded in men's ears, if they are in the Lamb's book of life.

These five brethren were waiting on the Lord by fasting and prayer. Apparently they had reason to expect some divine communication, for which they were thus preparing themselves. Light will come to those who thus seek it. They were commanded to set apart two of their number for the work whereunto I have called them. That work is not specified, and yet the two, like carrier pigeons on being let loose, make straight for their line of flight, and know exactly whither they are to go.

If we strictly interpret Luke's words (I have called them'), a previous intimation from the Spirit had revealed to them the sphere of their work. In that case, the separation was only the recognition by the brethren of the divine appointment. The inward call must come first, and no ecclesiastical designation can do more than confirm that. But the solemn designation by the Church identifies those who remain behind with the work of those who go forth; it throws responsibility for sympathy and support on the former, and it ministers strength and the sense of companionship to the latter, besides checking that tendency to isolation which accompanies earnestness. To go forth on even Christian service, unrecognised by the brethren, is not good for even a Paul.

But although Luke speaks of the Church sending them away, he takes care immediately to add that it was the Holy Ghost who sent them forth. Ramsay suggests that sent them away is not the meaning of the phrase in verse 3, but that it should be rendered gave them leave to depart. In any case, a clear distinction is drawn between the action of the Church and that of the Spirit, which constituted Paul's real commission as an Apostle. He himself says that he was an Apostle, not from men, neither through man.

**II.** The events in the first stage of the journey are next summarily presented. Note the local colouring in went down to Seleucia, the seaport of Antioch, at the mouth of the river. The missionaries were naturally led to begin at Cyprus, as Barnabas's birthplace, and that of some of the founders of the church at Antioch.

So, for the first time, the Gospel went to sea, the precursor of so many voyages. It was an epoch-making moment when that ship dropped down with the tide and put out to sea. Salamis was the nearest port on the south-eastern coast of Cyprus, and there they landed,-- Barnabas, no doubt, familiar with all he saw; Saul probably a stranger to it all. Their plan of action was that to which Paul adhered in all his after work,--to carry the Gospel to the Jew first, a proceeding for which the manner of worship in the synagogues gave facilities. No doubt, many such were scattered through Cyprus, and Barnabas would be well known in most.

They thus traversed the island from east to west. It is noteworthy that only now is John Mark's name brought in as their attendant. He had come with them from Antioch, but Luke will not mention him, when he is telling of the sending forth of the other two, because Mark was not sent by the Spirit, but only chosen by his uncle, and his subsequent defection did not affect the completeness of their embassy. His entirely subordinate place is made obvious by the point at which he appears.

Nothing of moment happened on the tour till Paphos was reached. That was the capital, the residence of the pro-consul, and the seat of the foul worship of Venus. There the first antagonist was met. It is not Sergius Paulus, pro-consul though he was, who is the central figure of interest to Luke, but the sorcerer who was attached to his train. His character is drawn in Luke's description, and in Paul's fiery exclamation. Each has three clauses, which fall like the beats of a hammer. Sorcerer, false prophet, Jew, make a climax of wickedness. That a Jew should descend to dabble in the black art of magic, and play tricks on the credulity of ignorant people by his knowledge of some simple secrets of chemistry; that he should pretend to prophetic gifts which in his heart he knew to be fraud, and should be recreant to his ancestral faith, proved him to deserve the penetrating sentence which Paul passed on him. He was a trickster, and knew that he was: his inspiration came from an evil source; he had come to hate righteousness of every sort.

Paul was not flinging bitter words at random, or yielding to passion, but was laying the black heart bare to the man's own eyes, that the seeing himself as God saw him might startle him into penitence. The corruption of the best is the worst. The bitterest enemies of God's ways are those who have cast aside their early faith. A Jew who had stooped to be a juggler was indeed causing God's name to be blasphemed among the Gentiles.

He and Paul each recognised in the other his most formidable foe. Elymas instinctively felt that the pro-consul must be kept from listening to the teaching of these two fellow-countrymen, and sought to pervert him from the faith, therein perverting (the same word is used in both cases) the right ways of the Lord; that is, opposing the divine purpose. He was a specimen of a class who attained influence in that epoch of unrest, when the more cultivated and nobler part of Roman society had lost faith in the old gods, and was turning wistfully and with widespread expectation to the mysterious East for enlightenment.

So, like a ship which plunges into the storm as soon as it clears the pier-head, the missionaries felt the first dash of the spray and blast of the wind directly they began their work. Since this was their first encounter with a foe which they would often have to meet, the duel assumes importance, and we understand not only the fulness of the narrative, but the miracle which assured Paul and Barnabas of Christ's help, and was meant to diffuse its encouragement along the line of their future work. For Elymas it was chastisement, which might lead him to cease to pervert the ways of the Lord, and himself begin to walk in them. Perhaps, after a season, he did see the better Sun.

Saul's part in the incident is noteworthy. We observe the vivid touch, he fastened his eyes on him. There must have been something very piercing in the fixed gaze of these flashing eyes. But Luke takes pains to prevent our thinking that Paul spoke from his own insight or was moved by human passion. He was filled with the Holy Ghost, and, as His organ, poured out the scorching words that revealed the cowering apostate to himself, and announced the merciful punishment that was to fall. We need to be very sure that we are similarly filled before venturing to imitate the Apostle's tone.

**III.** The shifting of the scene to the mainland presents some noteworthy points. It is singular that there is no preaching mentioned as having been attempted in Perga, or anywhere along the coast, but that the two evangelists seem to have gone at once across the great mountain range of Taurus to Antioch of Pisidia.

A striking suggestion is made by Ramsay to the effect that the reason was a sudden attack of the malarial fever which is endemic in the low-lying coast plains, and for which the natural remedy is to get up among the mountains. If so, the journey to Antioch of Pisidia may not have been in the programme to which John Mark had agreed, and his return to Jerusalem may have been due to this departure from the original intention. Be that as it may, he stands for us as a beacon, warning against hasty entrance on great undertakings of which we have not counted the cost, no less than against cowardly flight from work, as soon as it begins to involve more danger or discomfort than we had reckoned on.

John Mark was willing to go a-missionarying as long as he was in Cyprus, where he was somebody and much at home, by his relationship to Barnabas; but when Perga and the climb over Taurus into strange lands came to be called for, his zeal and courage oozed out at his finger-ends, and he skulked back to his mother's house at Jerusalem. No wonder that Paul thought not good to take with them him who withdrew from them. But even such faint hearts as Mark's may take courage from the fact that he nobly retrieved his youthful error, and won back Paul's confidence, and proved himself profitable to him for the ministry.