

Part 23: Missions and the Church

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In November of 2018 a young man by the name of John Chau died attempting to bring the gospel to a hostile, unreached people group on an island in the Indian Ocean. After years of anticipation, John made his way to the island in a kayak only to be met with arrows shot by the very people he wanted to reach. His body was later seen being dragged away to be buried, and his remains were never recovered. In his final journal entry, John had written: “I hope this isn’t one of my last notes but if it is ‘to God be the Glory.’”

While John Chau’s sacrifice is admirable, a lot of controversy has surrounded his methods. How did he discern his calling? Did he move too quickly? Should he have had help from a church? Did he have to go alone? Was he misled by a desire for adventure and heroism? His willingness to make the sacrifice was admirable. But was it a foolish sacrifice?

What would you say if it was one of your friends here at Sovereign Hope who wanted to go? We recently had a group of college students and leaders go to a missions conference. They were told that they only have three options: “Send, go, or disobey” – meaning that you’re disobeying God unless you support missionaries (with prayer and finances) or else go to the mission field yourself. What if it was one of those students who felt called to be a missionary? Would you and the rest of the church be obligated to support them, and what would that look like? How could you tell if they were going about it in a wise way? How could you tell if they were making a wise sacrifice? Is it true that you will either “send, go, or disobey”?

Now if you’ve been with us through the book of Acts, then you might not have noticed anything remarkable in the passage Paul just read. But in reality, the book has been building up to this moment. Remember Jesus said at the beginning of the book that “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” Well we’ve seen the gospel spread from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria. We’ve seen the first evangelism to non-Jews, the first mixed church of Jews and non-Jews, and the first time that they were called “Christians.” And so now the stage is set for the final phase that will take us through to the end of the book of Acts. The Spirit through the church is going to start sending missionaries to the ends of the earth.

And not only is this a significant moment in the book of Acts, but it’s also a significant moment in the life of our church. After service we’re having a members’ meeting where we are going to present a missionary candidate to the members of the church. In the 20 years that I’ve been here, we have *supported* missionaries that *other* churches have sent, but we have not sent out a long-term missionary from Sovereign Hope Church.

So if we’re going to talk about sending a missionary, then we’re going to have to be able to answer some important questions, like: What is a missionary? How does someone become a missionary?

What do missionaries do? What is the role of the church? And most importantly, why? Why should we even care about missions?

And so in light of this, we're going to look at this passage through the lens of what can we learn about missions. And our main point today is this: The mission of God sends his people through his church with his word.

And we're going to look at this in three points:

1. The Call to Missions
2. The Work of Missions
3. The Hope of Missions

So let's start with our first point: The Call to Missions

1. The Call to Missions

Let's read v.1-3:

Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. 2 While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." 3 Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

So the church is gathered and Barnabas and Saul are there (and Saul is also called Paul so both names refer to the same person) - and all of the sudden the Holy Spirit commands the church to set apart Paul and Barnabas to send them out on their first missionary journey. And this might seem abrupt, but notice what the church was doing when this happened.

It says that they were "worshiping the Lord." Now what is worship? Sometimes we can think that it's singing songs because we have *worship* music. Or sometimes we can think it's just what we do here at church on Sundays because it's called a *worship* service. But worship is actually about the orientation of your heart. Whatever you live for, whatever you are ultimately devoted to, whatever you long for above all else, whatever you seek for the satisfaction of your soul - that is what you are worshiping.

When I meet with fellow church members for biblical counseling, we spend a lot of time talking about worship. The things that get our attention and cause us to seek counseling are usually the result of something deeper. For instance, circumstances in your life might cause you to feel anxious. But at the "root," underneath those feelings, you might be worshiping security. Maybe past suffering has taught you that you're the only one looking out for you and you need to be in control if you're going to be safe and okay. But we're constantly faced with circumstances that remind us that we are *not* in control and that everything we want or love is vulnerable. And so that can leave you feeling paralyzed in fear that a wrong move will end up in suffering. But when we worship God, we remember that *he* is the one in control and he keeps us eternally secure in Christ. Then we can move forward and risk suffering to glorify him and love others knowing that he will be with us whatever happens.

And so every trial exposes what we're worshipping and is an opportunity to look to Christ and entrust ourselves to him and treasure him more than the false promises of idols. Worship is an orientation of your heart towards God or towards some god-substitute. Only the holy God who created you and offers you salvation by grace through his Son so that you can worship and enjoy him forever – only this God is worthy of your worship.

So the question is “what do we worship?” “What do we live for?” And when it is God, the fruit in our lives starts to look more and more like Jesus and more and more strange to the world.

And we see that the worship here in our passage is accompanied by fasting. Now fasting isn't an exclusively Christian practice. Muslims fast every year for Ramadan to cancel out sins. Even people who aren't religious might fast for reasons of health or body-image. But Christian fasting is distinct. Jesus helps us understand why Christians fast back in Luke 5:33-35, which says this:

And they said to him, “The disciples of John fast often and offer prayers, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours eat and drink.” 34 And Jesus said to them, “Can you make wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? 35 The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days.”

Jesus said that the reason his disciples didn't fast at that time was because he was physically present with them. But he said a day would come when he would be taken away, and *then* his disciples would fast. And so now after Jesus had died and rose again and ascended into heaven – now is an appropriate time to fast. So fasting has everything to do with Jesus' presence. Jesus is the Bridegroom who came to redeem us as his Bride. For all who have turned to Jesus and received this gift, you now enjoy a new life in Christ and share in sweet communion with the Beloved. But he is not here. Not physically, not in all his fullness. And so for now, it is an appropriate time that we might choose to fast.

When we fast, it's because we *know* him and we are *his* and yet we are not yet fully in his presence. And so fasting aids our worship by expressing our longing to be with him and to be fully devoted to him, our preference for him over his gifts, our trust in him for all that we need, and our desire for him to be worshiped among all the nations.

So it is no coincidence that it's while the church is gathered to focus on worshipping the Lord that the Spirit speaks. The very thing that they are doing – worship – is the very purpose for which they must send and be sent.

The goal of missions is the glory of God in those he has called being gathered from the ends of the earth to worship him for his mercy towards them.

We worship what we love above all else. And so love motivates “going.” It was the love of the Father for the Son and of the Son for the Father that motivated the sending of the Son that we might share in their love. Now, just as the Father sent Jesus, so now Jesus, through the church, sends missionaries to preach his word, which people must hear and believe in order to be saved, so that they too might

share in the fellowship of the Father and his Son Jesus Christ. Love for the Father and the Son and a desire for others to share in their love motivates churches to *send* and missionaries to “*go*.”

Are you concerned that Jesus be worshiped in all the earth? Even compassion for those who have never heard the gospel flows out of worship because we don’t just want people to not go to hell for their sins, we want people to be welcomed into glorifying and enjoying God forever. Worship motivates missions. And so we are all called to *participate* in missions because we are all called to worship God. We will either send, go, or disobey.

But who is called to go?

Discerning the Call

Well we see that as the church is worshiping, the Holy Spirit speaks and says, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”

Calling can be a confusing issue. Culturally, you hear a lot of Christians talk about God calling them to do things. It carries an authoritative weight to it. Some Christians speak as if they have total confidence that everything they decide to do has a divine stamp of approval on it. And if God called them to do something then who are we to question it?

Or sometimes people are adamant that God called them to do something but then they change their mind but are just as confident in their *new* calling. Or they might claim that God told them to do something that you know the Bible says is sinful. Feeling a strong desire to do something or feeling an inner sense of peace isn’t proof that God is calling you to do it. Our hearts are deceitful. We can suppress our consciences. So feelings are *authentic* but they aren’t *authoritative*. All these things should make us cautious to claim that we know with certainty that God has authoritatively given us supernatural insight into his sovereign plan for us.

But notice who the Spirit says this to. It’s the church. The Spirit tells the church to set apart Barnabas and Saul to a work that he already called them to. The Lord had previously told Paul about his calling, but now the Spirit confirms it in the church.

We see something similar to this in the example of Titus in 2 Corinthians where there is a combination of an inward call of God in Titus’ heart, followed by an external appeal from the church that Titus accepts, and then he is sent. We see the same thing with the calling to be an elder or pastor (which both refer to the same office). We’re told that someone aspires to be an elder but then we’re given qualifications that the church uses to evaluate him. And so it can be helpful to think about *any* calling to ministry in terms of an internal and an external calling. Internally, the Spirit may grow an aspiration to leadership or being a missionary, but then the Spirit also confirms that calling externally in the church. The church recognizes them as someone the Spirit is gifting to the church for this purpose and sets them apart for a specific work.

Now for many of us, we probably have had a more individualistic idea of how a calling to missions works. Maybe you’ve heard stories of famous missionaries we respect, like Gladys Aylward. She was

turned down by a missions agency but she went anyway on her own and proved them wrong. We tend to love stories like that. But then there's other stories of missionaries like Amy Carmichael who thought she was following God's call when she impulsively went to Sri Lanka. She ignored all counsel but then later regretted it.

So what makes the church so essential to missions?

First, let's consider what the word "missionary" even means. Our word "missionary" actually comes from the word for apostle – which means "sent one." The word "apostle" was used particularly of the 12 apostles but also more broadly of various people that the churches sent out. They were the churches' representatives. So already when we talk about missionaries, we're technically talking about messengers of a church who have been authorized to represent that church in some task. And as representatives of the church, they need to be people who can be trusted to represent the church well.

And that's why there's also a principle of those being sent having first been tested. We see that it's Paul and Barnabas who are called. Paul had three years of study after his conversion. Barnabas had a good reputation in the church. They've already taught the people together in Antioch for over a year, and most recently they had returned from an assignment to bring relief to the church in Jerusalem. So they've proven themselves to be men of integrity in their life and teaching.

So a call to missions shouldn't be discerned in isolation. Instead, as the church knows its members and observes their character, their ability to teach, and the fruit in their life, it's easier to discern if that internal calling should be affirmed. It's this process which we are bringing to the church later today in our congregational meeting.

And that's why this process requires humility.

Maybe you have a zeal for God and your greatest desire is for him to be glorified in your life. You want to do something significant – something radical - you want your life to count for him - you want to do big things for God.

But consider two things: First, are you known in the church? Are you a member? Do you humbly love and serve others? Do you disciple someone in the church? Can the church observe in you a humble Christlikeness that they can affirm? And second, are you content with God being known over and above you being known?

Zeal is good. But listen to this quote about entering ministry:

"...as you enter ministry, you will be tempted to orient your desires toward doing large things in famous ways as fast and as efficiently as you can. But...almost anything in life that truly matters will require you to do small, mostly overlooked things, over a long period of time with [Jesus]." (Imperfect Pastor by Zack Eswine)

We want to be aware that apparent zeal for God's glory could be zeal for our own glory - our own significance - basically worship of self in disguise. Do you really want to preach the gospel, or do you just want to be heard? Do you really want to do great things for God, or do you just want to be *seen* as one who does great things? Do you really want to love people, or do you just want to be admired for being so loving?

If the point of ministry is worship of God, then we've got to be willing to humbly be a part of the church serving and loving others with Jesus in mostly overlooked things over a long period of time. The work of missions and the life of a Christian is never about how people view you. It's about how they view God. Missions, and Christian living, is a concern and a commitment to God's glory over your own. This matters in every area of life - from education to relationships to missions. To quote John the Baptist, "He must increase, but I must decrease."

And so with a clear vision of the glory of God and a clear understanding of their roles in sending and going, the church sends off Paul and Barnabas.

Commissioning

So what did it look like to send them off? Well later from Paul's letters we know that it included financial support. But what's emphasized here, and what's most often neglected in the church, is prayer.

The church must earnestly pray for its missionaries. Elsewhere in Scripture prayers are modeled and encouraged for missionaries. Look at these different examples. We're encouraged to join missionaries in praying:

- for open doors to declare the gospel with clarity (Col. 4:3-4)
- for words to proclaim the gospel boldly (Eph. 6:19-20)
- for protection and deliverance from opposition (Rom. 15:30-31)
- for the opportunity to see and refresh them (Rom. 15:32)
- for deliverance from persecution, and perseverance to the end (Phil. 1:19)

And then of course Jesus also teaches us to pray earnestly that the Lord of the harvest would "send out laborers into his harvest." We must humbly recognize that all of these things come *from* God and *through* the steadfast prayers of the saints.

So if you are a member, I want to encourage you to use your membership directory for prayer. On the back page there is a list of the missionaries that the church supports. These people covet your prayers. And if we're going to be a church that sends missionaries, then the thing they will need most from us out on the field will be our prayers. Prayer is a training ground for our hearts to long for the worship of Jesus in all the earth.

So after prayer and fasting, they laid hands on them and sent them off. The laying on of hands is a symbolic act of publicly commissioning them. Later today we're just *proposing* a potential missionary. But when the day comes that the congregation sends a missionary out, we will lay hands on them and

commission them. This commissioning is a beautiful but also sober event. Paul warns elders not to be too quick to "lay on hands" since the church bears responsibility for those they have commissioned. We might partner with a missions agency, but the church can't delegate its responsibility for its missionaries and their work in the field. These would be *our* messengers, *our* representatives, *our* ambassadors. And we must support them.

And so it says they *sent* them off and then the next verse starts with the word "sent" as well. It says, "So being *sent* out by the Holy Spirit." And what's interesting is that the word for "sent" is different in those two verses. When the church sends, it's a word that means "set free, release, or let go." But when it says the Spirit sent, the word means "send out or send away." The Spirit is ultimately doing the sending. The church merely releases these missionaries. Having recognized the Spirit's calling, they are submitting to God's will. Missions is a humble work of submission of every Christian either in sending or going.

I can imagine that this was a costly commissioning for those who had to say goodbye.

Is your will aligned with God's will to where *you* can say goodbye to friends or family for the sake of missions? Do you so desire him to be worshiped among the nations that you are willing to endure the cost for the sake of his name?

When we do evening devotions as a family, we normally end by blessing our kids with this blessing from Numbers 6 that goes like this:

"May the LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace." And then we end with saying this: "And may you be so satisfied in him that you spend your lives for the glory of God and the spread of the gospel."

I'm sure my kids don't fully realize what a prayer like that could cost us. What did Paul spending his life for the gospel cost him?

afflictions, hardships, calamities, 5 beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger...8 through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; 9 as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; 10 as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything.

That is what it looked like for Paul to spend his life for the glory of God and the spread of the gospel. What will it look like for us and our friends and our children?

Parents, does your life model to your kids satisfaction in God that frees you up to spend and be spent for his sake? Are you raising them to be *consumers* or to be *commissioned* - should the Lord save them - into spending their lives for his name - perhaps some of them on the mission field?

“To the ends of the earth” is the banner over the rest of the book of Acts. It is the banner over our own age until our Lord returns.

The mission of God sends his people through his church.

So up to this point, we’ve seen how a missionary is sent. But now we’re about to see what a missionary does. And that brings us to our second point: The Work of Missions.

2. The Work of Missions

Let’s read v.4-5:

So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus. 5 When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. And they had John to assist them.

They make their way by ship to the island of Cyprus. There are some believers who already moved to Cyprus because of persecution. But those believers didn’t share the gospel with anyone but Jews. So there’s a presence of Christians in the region and yet, Gentiles (which are anyone who isn’t Jewish) haven’t been reached yet.

And this is important to note. Remember Jesus said to “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.” And “nations” isn’t just referring to “countries” but rather to every people group in the world. Later Paul’s ambition will be for pioneering efforts to preach Christ where people have never heard the gospel. But he’s also eager to strengthen churches that have already been planted. So just because there are believers in a country doesn’t mean that all the people groups there have been reached. And just because a church has been planted doesn’t mean that they don’t need missionaries to come help strengthen the church.

Now there are people who haven’t been reached everywhere. If you’re a member of Sovereign Hope, then we’re all “sent” in the sense of representing the church locally in our city through evangelism. Or if you live in a nearby place like Lolo, then when you drive home you are an ambassador for Christ as you evangelize there. And there’s a sense where if we sent a team to Frenchtown or Florence to plant a church or revitalize a church, technically you could call them missionaries. But for clarity’s sake at Sovereign Hope, when you hear us use the term “missionary” we’re generally referring to those who have been formally set apart to be sent out for international, cross-cultural missions.

You see, anyone who hands out a Band-Aid is technically doing health care. But we all want clarity about who is and isn’t a physician. In the same way, we’re all called to ministry. We’re all called to discipleship and service and evangelism. But we need clarity around who the church has set apart and commissioned to be pastors or deacons or missionaries.

And so then we see Barnabas and Saul land in Cyprus and we see some of their strategic methods. They start in the synagogues which is where the Jews worshiped. They also made a strategic partnership with Barnabas’s cousin John Mark and had him come along with them as an apprentice.

In a few verses we'll also see Saul start using his Roman name, Paul, which is how he will mainly be referred to for the rest of the book. So he's contextualizing without changing the message.

So we see some of their strategy, but what was the main activity that they were sent to do?

You know, we've heard the term "mission trip" used in a lot of ways. Even when it's referring to an international, cross-cultural trip, there can be a variety of activities. When my wife went on a mission trip to Kenya in college, some teammates worked in an orphanage or served in a hospital and one teammate was preoccupied with working on a sun tan. Sometimes people who aren't even Christians might sign up to go on a mission trip for the purpose of self-discovery or to have an experience or even for a vacation. But if the church sends out missionaries for a specific task, then we need to know what the mission is that the church is supposed to go out into all the world to accomplish. What issue do we have to address - what problem do we have to fix - in order to know that we are being faithful to the mission of the church? Must we build hospitals or schools or dig wells? These are all good things. And over and over again it is Christians who are at the forefront of acts of mercy like this. But what *must* the church be doing in order to be doing the mission of the church?

Well it says, "they proclaimed the word of God." Three times in this short section the word of God or the teaching of the Lord is mentioned. And that's because the goal of missions is the mission that Jesus gave his church: to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them, and teaching them to observe all that Jesus has commanded. Acts of mercy are beautiful and good. We should care about suffering. But as one pastor put it, "we care about all suffering, especially eternal suffering." The magnitude of what is at stake between worship in the presence of God or eternal suffering under his wrath *forever* makes gospel proclamation the *most* loving thing the church can do. Without this, you don't have biblical missions.

As it says in Romans 10:13-15a:

For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." 14 How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? 15 And how are they to preach unless they are sent?

Those who "go into all the world" go to "proclaim the gospel." The message of Christ's life, death, and resurrection and the call to repentance for the forgiveness of sins must be proclaimed in the power of the Holy Spirit to bring salvation to the ends of the earth.

If they are to proclaim the gospel, then missionaries must know God and his word, they must be truly transformed by the gospel, and they must be able to share that gospel with others.

This is the kind of person that the church should consider for missions. They should keep a close eye on their life and doctrine so that their lives demonstrate a humble outworking of the gospel. They should be trained to rightly handle the word of truth and demonstrate that in their own lives and in discipling others.

Missionaries always start as students of God's word who are changed by it and give it away to others. But that's not just missions. That's all biblical ministry. We are all called to evangelize and help one another follow Jesus. All that we want to do and give away is rooted in the public and personal ministry of the word.

So is the word central in your life? If the word is central to our mission as Christians, then what place does it have in your life? Even for those of us who are very involved and visible in the church community – if the only time we're in the word is when we're preparing something to present to others, then that's concerning. You can't have joy in your salvation, a desire for Christ to be worshiped, and concern for the lost while personally being indifferent to the Bible.

And that's why we have free Bibles, a Sovereign Hope Bible reading app, and resources in the bookstore to help you read your Bible. It's why when members are struggling, we desire that the church would be their first stop for biblical counsel before seeking help from the world.

So I want to encourage you to have a time set aside each day to read God's word. And if you need help with that, we also have a Wednesday Night Bible Study and a Sunday Morning Men's Bible Study. In those studies, we work through books of the Bible and help you learn basic Bible study principles of Observation, Interpretation, and Application. And if you want to learn more about that, please come talk to us or look online for the book *One-to-One Bible Reading* by David Helm and it will help you with what that looks like. We want to help you love the word, live by the word, and love people with the word.

The mission of God sends his people through his church with his word.

And so preachers, teachers, and evangelists are the greatest need on the mission field in proclaiming of first importance the good news and establishing or strengthening healthy churches.

The Centrality of the Church

And you may have noticed that I keep talking about planting churches even though this passage doesn't actually talk about planting churches. But the whole book of Acts is the story of Jesus building his church. This goes back to the mission of the church. Remember Jesus' marching orders in Matthew 28: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations..." That's evangelism. Then he says, "Baptizing them..." What we see in the book of Acts is that where there are believers professing faith and being baptized—a church is forming. It's why later Paul will keep returning where the gospel has been preached to appoint elders in the churches there. Paul would have seen it as a failure to find Christians and no churches. Those who believe are baptized and counted as part of a local church. And we're actually going to have a couple of baptisms in just a few moments to do this very thing.

That's why when we think of missions, we're thinking about planting or strengthening churches. We're not trying to come up with something new in place of the local church. The church is the vehicle that God uses to bring glory to his name in the salvation of people from every people group. There are stories where missionaries dropped into a location on a short term mission trip, quickly shared the gospel, and then moved on. Many times the end result was syncretism - people learned just enough of

the gospel to incorporate elements into their local religions. You might remember that when we supported Tom and Patty Maxham's ministry in Uganda, Tom specifically developed a curriculum to help local pastors discern syncretism with African Traditional Religion that plagues their churches. The Maxhams would say that the greatest need in Uganda is healthy churches. So the work of missions is to build strong churches.

And so the best preparation for missions starts with being part of a biblical church. We have to know what a church is and how to be a part of one if we're going to plant and strengthen churches elsewhere. You can't give away what you don't have. So if you are not a member, I want to encourage you to attend the Church Essentials class in 3 weeks on February 23rd. Pastor Tyler will be explaining what a church is, what we believe, and what it means to be a member of the church. So please consider that - whether you are just wanting to learn more or you're ready to take the first step towards becoming a member.

What you think about the church will determine what you think success looks like in missions. Jesus says, "On this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." It will come with great difficulty, but we know Jesus will build his church. So let's look at that difficulty and our hope in missions.

And this brings us to our final point: The Hope of Missions.

3. The Hope of Missions

Let's read v.6-8.

When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they came upon a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet named Bar-Jesus. 7 He was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. 8 But Elymas the magician (for that is the meaning of his name) opposed them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith.

So here we see a surprising audience for the gospel. A Roman government official named Sergius requests to hear the word of God. He's a man of intelligence who apparently also has a Jewish court magician. So he seems to be a curious guy. And this court magician named Bar-Jesus (who's also called Elymas) is an ethnic Jew. But he's broken God's prohibition against engaging in magic and false prophecy. And it seems he is eager to protect his employment with the proconsul.

And so Bar-Jesus opposes Paul and Barnabas's efforts to evangelize Sergius. He's trying to hold on to his position and employment. He's not curious like the proconsul is. He just doesn't want the word of God to ruin his life. And so he tries to oppose it.

Maybe you're here today hearing God's word and you're not too happy about it either. Young adults in the room, maybe you're simply here because of your parents. If you've never converted and professed faith in Christ, then ask yourself, "What is it that I value that makes me resistant to the gospel?" "What is it that I want that I would have to give up in order to convert and become a Christian?" You may feel

indifferent or unconcerned but there is no such thing as being "neutral" when it comes to Jesus. You are either converted or you are not. You are either dead or alive, in Adam or in Christ, a child of wrath or a child adopted by grace. And a generic belief in a God of our own imagination is not the same as repenting and trusting the Jesus who personally reveals himself in the Bible and identifying with his Bride, the church. If the gospel is true and you deserve a holy God's judgment for your sin and yet he sent his Son to die to offer you forgiveness in him, then the stakes couldn't be higher. So what do you believe is more valuable than what Jesus has died to offer you?

I want to encourage you to be honest and after service to share your thoughts with your folks or myself or a member here at the church. Curiosity may get you to the point of hearing the word of God. But the word heard demands a response.

And for Christians, fear of man is a huge deterrent to evangelism. I don't know about you, but when I consider that I might be in a situation where I might evangelize someone, I immediately assume that they are going to try to shut me down.

And what about on the mission field? There are missionaries we currently support who we can't openly talk about because of the dangerous location they are in. Are we willing to risk sending our fellow church members – friends and family – to dangerous places that need the gospel?

The answer to both fears goes back to worship. A preference for God above all else will loosen our hold on worldly security and will send us across the street and missionaries across the globe. The word of God will only go out when we value Christ more than we value avoiding suffering. Do you see your efforts in personal evangelism as preparing your heart to send or be sent?

So how can we have courage even if we meet hostility? Let's read v.9-12:

But Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him 10 and said, "You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord? 11 And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and unable to see the sun for a time." Immediately mist and darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking people to lead him by the hand. 12 Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord.

So Paul exposes Bar-Jesus for who he is. It's been pointed out that the name "Bar-Jesus" means "son of salvation," but Paul calls him a "son of the devil." Though he's out for himself, he's carrying out the devil's agenda – deceiving and trying to turn others away from the straight paths of the Lord.

And then Paul - the one who was blind for a time at his own conversion, the one the Lord called to open eyes so that people would turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God – Paul announces that Bar-Jesus will be blind for a time. It seems that the mist and darkness that fell on Bar-Jesus represent his spiritual darkness that keeps him from seeing the Son. The hand of the Lord is upon him so that he is left helpless seeking a different hand to lead him.

Now if we could strike adversaries blind then we might have confidence in the face of opposition too. But Paul didn't strike him blind. It wasn't that he overcame the magician with his own greater powers. Instead, it says the Holy Spirit was with Paul, and he simply announced what the Lord was about to do. Throughout this whole passage, it isn't man that is in control but God. Human hands simply confirm what the hand of the Lord is doing. The church laid hands on Paul and Barnabas at the Spirit's command because it was the Spirit who ultimately called and sent. Bar-Jesus seeks a hand to lead him because the hand of the Lord was upon him making him blind. We saw last week that Peter was rescued while James was martyred. The missionary endeavor is no stranger to suffering and death. But we can take comfort that no opposition will hinder what our Lord ordains.

And what he ordained in this case, was that Sergius would believe.

He believed *when* he saw what happened to Bar-Jesus, but he believed *because* he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord. Miracles are real. They were signs that confirmed the teaching. But it's the word that the Spirit ultimately uses to convert him.

You see, in conversion, there is both an external call and an internal call. We saw an internal and external call earlier in relation to becoming a missionary. But there's also an external and internal call in conversion.

The external call is the proclamation of the word of God. Both Bar-Jesus and Sergius heard the same message. Paul didn't give a better gospel presentation to Sergius than he did to Bar-Jesus. So why did one respond with astonishment and belief while the other went off groping in the dark for someone else to lead him? The difference is an internal call.

It's interesting that the word "summoned" in v.7 (where Sergius summoned Paul and Barnabas to hear the gospel) is actually the same word as "called" in v.2 where the Holy Spirit called Paul and Barnabas to a specific work. And what was the first significant step of that work? To preach the word to Sergius. He may have thought *he* was summoning *them*. But the Spirit had already summoned and sent them specifically to him. The Spirit combined the external call of the gospel with an internal call that left Sergius believing in astonishment. This internal call can be called an effectual call – meaning that the external call of the gospel has its intended result. This is where we get the phrase "irresistible grace" – which means that when God opens someone's eyes to the beauty of the gospel, it's an offer that they can't refuse.

And so this helps clarify our expectations of what results should look like in missions. What should we expect from our missionaries on the field in order to gauge the success of the work?

Missionaries can experience a tremendous amount of pressure – both from supporters back home and in their own evaluations of themselves.

One missionary we support shared this with me recently: he said, *"I remember a number of years ago needing to sign a funding form with an expected result-metric of how many [converts] will come to the Lord within two years. I was told that my funding would drop if I couldn't share the gospel with at least 80-100 [people] within the first two years. I don't mind having a goal of sharing the gospel with many, but*

I think an expected result oriented mission can lead to an "easy-believism" which often means not explaining the consequences of sin and the cost of following Jesus."

We don't get to set the agenda for what God will do. This is why it says that when Paul and Barnabas were commissioned, they were "commended to the grace of God." Everything we're attempting to do in missions is completely dependent on his grace. If the internal call is a work exclusively of the Spirit, then there's no conversion metric that can establish if our missionaries are being faithful or not. So then what should we be looking for? How are we to gauge what a successful missionary looks like?

Matt Schvaneveldt, a missionary we support in Italy, recently shared this with me: he said, *"There is a lot of pressure and stress for missionaries to prove that something supernatural and special is taking place. This can become scrambling to tell stories of God working and at times a pressure to exaggerate how exciting it is. 90% of missions in Italy "feels" like ministry in the US: Preaching the gospel, slow growth, hard hearts, finding creative ways to meet people, disappointment, church life, church problems, desperate prayer times, patiently waiting. I don't think the pressure comes from the supporting churches but inside the missionary's heart. We can wonder if God is not doing something spectacular will we keep being supported (trust issue), am I spending my life far from family and culture for normal, routine ministry (pride issue), I thought people would be diving in the Venice canals for baptism and instead there are just a few a year (contentment issue), am I really called to this (insecurity issue). Acts 13 brings encouragement for missionaries. There was a lot of travel (v4-6) and preaching (v5) and competition (v6) and curiosity (v7) and opposition (v8) before we see the belief of verse 12. Pray for us that we would not try to prove ourselves to supporting churches or our own hearts, but that we would be occupied to contently and faithfully follow where the Holy Spirit has sent us."*

Brothers and sisters, *that* is what we are looking for in a missionary. Success for our missionaries will look like faithfulness in the same things we are seeking to do here. We leave the results up to the Spirit. But it's entirely because he *will* accomplish what he has sent each missionary to do that we have hope in missions.

Jesus *must* bring in his sheep that are not of this fold, and they *will* listen to his voice. Because of Jesus' authority over all the earth, we have the assurance that a great multitude of people from every nation and from all tribes, peoples, and languages *will* worship Jesus.

Christ's reconciling work on the cross is fully sufficient. But what *is* lacking is the suffering still to be experienced in bringing the *message* of the cross to all peoples.

We are not alone in this. Just as the Holy Spirit is the main actor in the book of Acts, so now the work of missions is the work of the Spirit to do the impossible of saving souls through the preaching of his word. So Jesus himself will be with us fulfilling the mission of the church until his purpose of gathering in all of his elect is complete.

The mission of God sends his people through his church with his word. So Sovereign Hope, will you send, go, or disobey? And how will worship shape your gospel witness here, today?