

Looking Ahead Through The Rearview Mirror How God Does a New Thing



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October 11, 2009

I love the Thanksgiving weekend. I love the color of the leaves, the joy of family gatherings and the smell of turkey roasting in the kitchen. It brings back memories of 8 - 10 hour drives home from school to have the weekend with my family, of churches decorated with pumpkins, crab apples and bundles of wheat and the retelling of the Pilgrim Fathers journey to America. For although we are Canadians, the story of a small band of believers risking all for the chance to freely live out their Christians beliefs, encourages my soul. But you know, as exciting as the crossing the ocean in that small 90 ft boat called the Mayflower was, it couldn't have happened unless one night during a prayer meeting in a small town in Southern England, in a town named Scrooby in Nottinghamshire at Pastor John Robinson's home or William Bradford's house (the Postmaster), someone hadn't said the unthinkable. They said 'Friends, it is getting too dangerous to practice our faith here. We are being taken to court and jailed for how we are worshipping. I believe that as I have been praying, God is saying that He wants us to leave England and go to Holland where we can live out our faith in freedom'. Then 10 years later at another prayer meeting someone said 'As I have been praying, I think we need to do something that has never been done before. Risk it all and travel to the 'new lands' and establish a place where we can practice our faith in freedom'. I am sure there was silence when someone finally said 'You know that feels right in my spirit as well'. I am sure years later around a Thanksgiving meal in their new home in America, someone would have said 'You know, as I look back I can see the hand of God on all what has happened and it all started in brother Bradford's home at the prayer meeting when we heard and obeyed what God told us to do'.

That is one of those moments in time when the actions in that room, the faithfulness and obedience of a few Christians, would have a profound influence and impact on the eternities and lives of so many. I want to take you to just such an occasion in scripture. Acts 13:1 - 3

Before we look at the setting, let me remind you where we are in the story of the followers of the resurrected Jesus. In Acts 1:8, the resurrected Jesus commissions his disciples to go and make disciples in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. Pentecost happens in Acts 2. The Holy Spirit comes, Peter preaches and over 3000 Jews from all over the Middle East are saved. The church grows rapidly because of the power of the preaching and the wonderful miracles of healing that were happening. But opposition happens and a Deacon named Stephen is stoned to death, followed by Saul's insane persecution of the church. It is so bad that Acts 8:1 says Jerusalem was almost emptied of Christians who are forced to flee into the province of Samaria. They went as far north as Antioch (300 miles) and as far south as Cyrene (in modern day Libya in Northern Africa). Then an amazing thing happened - Saul the persecutor had a supernatural encounter with the Resurrected Jesus and is wonderfully saved. Now 10 years later (around 46 AD) Saul comes back to Antioch as their key preacher and teacher and this special prayer meeting happens (Acts 13:1-3).

I. The Danger of being Left Behind

As we read these verses, it is so easy to miss how profound they are. You see, to this point in history (just like with the Pilgrim Fathers) nothing like this had ever happened before. Israel believed that not only were they the people of God but they were the only people who God even cared about. They were the soul keepers of the true faith and God didn't care about anyone but the Jewish people having any connection with Him. That is why in the Old Testament when Jonah was sent to preach to the people of Nineveh he didn't want to go for God was theirs and theirs alone. In the Jewish faith, the idea of sending "missionaries" to non-Jews hadn't even crossed their minds. And if for some reason a non-Jew wanted to follow their God they made it

as hard as they could. For example, if they were men they had to be circumcised, baptized and then they still weren't allowed into the Jewish church. They could only worship out in the courtyard, outside the church. That was the Jewish religious background that the Christians had been brought up in at Jerusalem. And it would seem that even though they were now Christians, this old idea of the exclusiveness of their faith had been carried over into their belief system as Christians. Why do I say this? Look at Acts 11:19. It says 'Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews'.

Why did this happen? First, it would have happened very naturally as Antioch was a city of around 500,000 at that time with about 25,000 of those living in the Jewish quarters of town (like NE Calgary has a little India/China town) and when Christian Jews came from Jerusalem, it was only natural that they would preach to people who had the same language and cultural background as they did. Secondly, if we are honest, there was a bias from their home church in Jerusalem that non-Jews had no right to this new faith. It would seem that the idea of telling non-Jews about their Christian faith was not part of their thinking. It had never been done before and if this change had been brought up at a church meeting it would have been laughed off the floor and everyone would have been against it. Where did that idea find its roots? Where else but in the Jerusalem church. I say this because Acts 11:19 indicated that those who came to Antioch and only evangelized Jewish people came out of the Jerusalem church and this narrowness was never corrected by their home church.

Here is the scary part. As wonderful as the church was in Jerusalem, despite the passion they had for Jesus, the miracles that happened and lives that were changed through that church, it would seem that if God wanted to reach and touch the world He had to go around the Jerusalem church and those who had been steeped in it's bigoted view of the world. Many scholars would say that is why God allowed the persecution to happen in Jerusalem, because He needed to get new believers away from their narrowness and stubbornness concerning change. Don't miss how profound a statement this is, for in order to reach the world, God had to step around the very first church in Christianity. And this is a church that made a profound impact on its city and on our world. Why? Because it only had a great future *behind it* not *in front* of it.

Has that ever happened again in history? In the early 1500's the Roman Catholic church had become so inward looking and so into self care and sinful within, that for a time God walked around the Catholic church and allowed the Reformation to happen so new life could begin again in the church. Now understand that I am not making a comment on the Roman Catholic Church of today. There are some wonderful things happening in many Roman Catholic churches in our city and around the world, but at that particular time in church history, God said 'If you won't be apart of what I want to do in the world, I will move away from you and work around you. I'll leave you behind, for my work in people's lives is so much more important than any organization, even one like First Baptist Jerusalem with it's great history'. Prof. James Houston from Regent college spoke about this and said 'If God would move around the church in Jerusalem, or the Catholic church for a while, don't for a minute think that He won't do that to Protestantism or your local church if you won't listen to His leading'. Why? Maybe this picture will help.

This is a picture of the Choluteca Bridge in Honduras. They spent millions of dollars building this amazing bridge and then the river changed its course and it became the bridge to nowhere. There will be (and are today) changes that are happening in the culture we are part of that demand that as a church we re-think our strategy for outreach, re-position the approaches we

take in how we use our buildings or how we grow leaders, the type of ministries we offer, the kind of staff or even structures we have as churches. We have to constantly be coming to God and saying 'For such a time as this, what would you have us do for your kingdom sake or else we who have given our lives to care for the church and mission of the church will cause it to become irrelevant and not reaching our generation, let alone the next'. I thank God for your passion for following Jesus and I ask you to re-affirm with me our determination to do whatever it takes to follow His leading. Because on a personal and church wide level, the reality is that we can either follow His leading or He will be forced to leave us behind. The choice is ours.

II. The Way God loves to do a new thing

Act 13:1 - 3 It begins "in the church". You need to know that they didn't have a church building like ours. Instead, the church at Antioch was made up of small house churches scattered across the city of Antioch located in the many different sections of the city. And while they may have occasionally met together for a huge gathering, it was really made up of small groups without any church structure that were occasionally visited by those who were seen to have teaching and preaching gifts. Five are listed in verse 1. It would seem that there was a prayer and fasting weekend which may have been attended by a specific number of people and the result was that something that was brand new happened. The proposed concept of foreign missions with cross cultural missionaries was something never heard of. And as they were praying, every person there sensed that God's Holy Spirit was for this. So they lay on hands, as a way of affirming them and promising to stand with them as they sent Barnabas and Saul for "the work God had called them to do". In other words, they saw within these two men, missionary hearts. They didn't call them to be missionaries; they simply agreed with them that it was very evident that God wanted them to be involved. But again don't miss this, it had never happened before. So as we read this, it is fair to look for how God does a new thing in a local church. This was a huge change. But to be honest, when it comes to change I have often found that while I desperately want to stay in step with what He wants to do (and I love it when He does new things among us), there is still a fear and apprehension which grabs me when I am about to step out into change. A feeling that if I open the door, God may do things in weird and crazy ways that will scare, embarrass or totally shock me.

While at first glance it may look like that is what God did here, as I dug deeper into this passage I found that in most cases God orchestrates change in a specific way. Once I saw that, my attitude toward change began to change. Let me show you how God really orchestrated this change.

Step #1 - Jesus' Command

Acts 1:8 Right off the bat, Jesus had told them that their call was to share the good news with the world. It just took them a while to process what He meant.

Step #2 - Their Past Experience

In Acts 7:26 Deacon Philip helped the Ethiopian Finance Minister (an African Jew) become a believer and be baptized. Later Peter was sent to share the good news of Jesus with the Roman God fearer and when he was saved, he spoke in tongues at his baptismal service just like many other Jewish Christians did.

Step #3 – The Antioch Experience

Let me take you back to Acts 11:20. What this indicates is that following the persecution in Jerusalem 31 AD, a group of believers fled to northern Africa to Cyrene, ministered there for a while and then traveled the 1300 km to Antioch. They settled in the Gentile sections of town

among the Greeks and began the first cross-culture missionary outreach more than 6 - 10 years before Acts 13 happened. The result was verse 21 "great numbers were saved". It seems to imply that the great numbers of people getting saved wasn't happening in the Jewish section of town but rather in the Greek sections. Now don't miss this, these missionaries were just as ethnically Jewish as those in the Jewish quarters but for some reason they began to reach out and touch their gentile neighbors with the good news of Jesus. God was beginning a new thing – slowly, almost unnoticed, except that it was evident that the Lord's hand was on them. So the Jerusalem church sends Barnabas to check it out and he in turn brings Saul from Tarsus to be their key teacher and preacher and it says he taught a great number of people.

Step #4 - Their Friends in the Church

Look at who was worshipping in the church in Acts 13:1

Barnabas - This is the man who sold some of his possessions to meet the needs of other Christians in the Jerusalem church and was the first person to support Paul after his conversion. Do you now where he was from? Acts 4:36 says he was a Jew from Cyprus (a Gentile island).

Simeon called Niger – [Niger is Latin for Black) Scholars believe that he was from Africa, possibly Cyrene or maybe he was someone who had heard about Jesus from the Ethiopian Eunuch. And he now lived in Antioch.

Lucius of Cyrene – Where have you heard the word Cyrene before? Simeon of Cyrene. He was the black man pressed into service to carry the cross of Jesus on the way to Golgotha. It is possible that after carrying the cross Simeon became a believer and here is his son 20 years later, a key leader in the Antioch church.

Manaen (who was brought up with Herod the Tetrarch) - So he was a man with royal blood who was brought up in the same palace as one of the bloodiest rulers of Israel and yet this rich man found Christ and had his life changed.

Saul (Paul) the Jewish rabbi – He had killed Christians until he met Jesus on the road to Damascus. But also remember that Paul grew up in Tarsus – and spoke Latin, Greek and Hebrew.

So the church, in which God is about to breathe this new idea called *missions*, was made up of Jews and non-Jews who all were dedicated followers of Jesus. It was a church which was color blind as people of different ethnic backgrounds were sharing meals, prayer, friendship and communion together. It was a church that had seen that Jesus could equally change the lives of Jews and Gentiles alike. It was a church situated in different neighborhoods in which they daily had to deal with non-Jewish friends and business associates and therefore they saw that they needed Jesus as well. It was a church that was full of people who, step by step, had been prepared for what God was about to tell them next. It was a church which God had graciously been preparing to become part of a *change* God needed to make so He could *change* our world.

When I first saw the strategy God had followed in this situation, it was as if God with a wink was saying 'David, relax. If you will daily do what I am calling you to do and if Brentview is daily being obedient to where and how I am leading them, then you never have to fear me shocking you with some new change for my primary way of moving will be to prepare you for what I want to do among you next - a step at a time'. Isn't that encouraging?!

But here is where the rubber meets the road. I can trace the step by step plans of God for the Pilgrim Fathers coming to America. Unless they had heard God's Holy Spirit leading in the small prayer in Scrooby, they would have never made it to America and profoundly affected millions of people's lives. And in a similar way, I can trace back the movement of modern missions to a single weekend of prayer in the church in Antioch. Without that weekend and their openness to the leading of the Holy Spirit, millions of people's lives (ours included) would not be able to be as thankful on this Thanksgiving weekend for God's intervention and gracious acts in our lives. Key to that happening is one simple thing - positioning oneself well for the move of the Holy Spirit in one's life. Unless the Pilgrim fathers and unless the Antioch Church leaders had positioned themselves well for the move of the Holy Spirit in their lives, none of this was possible. How do you position yourself well for the move of the Holy Spirit in your life?

- i. Deal with known and recurring sin.
- ii. Set time aside to read God's word and pray.
- iii. Build quiet times in life so you are quiet enough to hear His leading.
- iv. Don't be afraid of change when God is in it.
- v. Tell God you will do whatever He asks you to do and do it.
- vi. Look for where you see the hand of God at work and join Him.
- vii. Live thankfully.

When a cobbler named William Carey met with his local church to talk about going to India to tell them about Jesus, one man stood up and said "Young man, sit down; when God pleases to convert the heathen, he will do it without your aid and mine." Does that sound similar to the church in Jerusalem? William Carey traveled to India and saw great things happen that to this day still are making a difference. He carried with him a saying that was taken from Isaiah 54:2, 3 which became his life statement and I think it can be ours as well. 'Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God'. I believe if we listen, God will speak and great things are possible. For that I am very thankful.

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