

Paul's First Missionary Trip

Acts 13:1-4 reveals that Paul's first missionary trip began with supernatural guidance by the Holy Spirit of God's specific will: *"Now in the church that was at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, 'Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' Then having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away. So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus."*

The Book of Acts does not record God giving any specific supernatural guidance to Paul and Barnabas throughout the rest of this first missionary trip. But neither does it say that the rest of Paul's major decisions in relation to this first trip were all a result of purely human planning. The Book of Acts merely records where they went and what they did on this first journey.

What seemed to be human planning was not

Acts 15:1-4 is an example which proves that just because there is no specific accompanying mention of God giving supernatural guidance in relation to certain decisions Paul or others made, does not mean the decisions were purely human planning. Acts 15:1-4 states: *"And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren: 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.' Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question. So being sent on their way by the church, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, describing the conversion of the Gentiles; and they caused great joy to all the brethren. And when they had come to Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders; and they reported all things God had done with them."*

On a surface reading, these verses seem to suggest that Paul and Barnabas decided by purely human planning to go to Jerusalem. But when we cross-reference Acts 15:1-4 with Paul's words in Galatians 2:1-2, we obtain a totally different picture. Galatians 2:1-2 reveals that Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem in response to a supernatural revelation of God's specific will: *"Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, and also took Titus with me. And I went up by revelation and communicated to them that gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but privately to those who were of reputation, lest by any means I might run, or had run, in vain."*

See also Paul's words recorded in Acts 22:17-21: *"Then it happened, when I returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, that I was in a trance and saw Him saying to me, 'Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, for they will not receive your testimony concerning Me.' So I said, 'Lord, they know that in every synagogue I imprisoned and beat those who believe on You. And when the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by consenting his death, and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him."*

‘Then He said to me, ‘Depart; for I will send you afar away from here to the Gentiles.’’

Here Paul was in Jerusalem at the end of his third missionary trip. He tells of the previous time when he was in Jerusalem just after his conversion to Christ. He says that on his first return to Jerusalem after his conversion, God gave him supernatural guidance, telling him to leave Jerusalem immediately and to go far away to the Gentiles or non-Jews.

Acts 9:26-30 and Galatians 1:18-19 also record details of Paul’s first return to Jerusalem after becoming a Christian. But note these passages contain no mention of this guidance recorded in Acts 22:17-21. Acts 9:26-30 states: ***“And when Saul had come to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, and did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. And he declared to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus. So he was with them at Jerusalem, coming in and going out. And he spoke boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus and disputed against the Hellenists, but they attempted to kill him. When the brethren found out, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him out to Tarsus.”***

Therefore, when reading the Acts 9:26-30 and Galatians 1:18-19 accounts of Paul's first return to Jerusalem, we may have wrongly interpreted them to mean that Paul and/or his Christian brothers in Jerusalem had a purely human plan that he should leave and return to Tarsus. A surface reading of those two accounts seem to infer this. But when we cross-reference them with Acts 22:17-21, we see that God’s supernatural guidance and not human planning resulted in Paul being willing to have the Christian brothers take him down to Caesarea so he could go back to Tarsus.

A Biblical command taken as specific guidance

One interesting point to observe is Acts 13:50-51, 14:5-7, and 19-20 infer that on three occasions on their first missionary trip, Paul and Barnabas took their guidance from Jesus’ Words recorded in Matthew 10:14 and 23: ***“And whoever will not receive you nor hear your words, when you depart from that house or city, shake off the dust from your feet...But when they persecute you in this city, flee to another. For assuredly, I say to you, you will not have gone through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes.”*** They fled the towns when persecution became too intense.