

# Sunday 19th May 2024

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 19 May 2024

Preacher: Johan DeJong

[ 0 : 00 ] If you've been with us the last few weeks, you'll know that all this action is taking place in Antioch. Antioch is a city to the north of Jerusalem where Christians have landed after they've been basically persecuted, they've been oppressed and followed and cast out of Jerusalem, scattered all over the place.

So this is a very new church and at the same time it's not exactly an easy place because there's an awful lot of sad and probably partly traumatised people there. Still they've managed to look back to Jerusalem and think there's need there so we're going to send help and Paul and Barnabas, who are two of the leaders in this early church, have gone back to Jerusalem with that gift.

And in the meantime, difficult things happening in Jerusalem. That's what John Ross was speaking to us about last week, wasn't he? People being thrown in prison, people being executed, the authorities opposing them.

But we pick it up again here at the end of chapter 12 and Paul and Barnabas have just come back to Antioch from that mission of sending help. And you can imagine the feeling in the church, can't you? Paul and Barnabas are back, thank goodness.

And they brought a new intern with them as well, John Mark. And that's just as well because we could show you some manpower around here. It feels like, well, maybe now we can go somewhere.

[ 1 : 22 ] The leadership team's complete because Paul and Barnabas are back and they were gone and we were a bit stuck without them. And if you look at the names and the descriptions of that leadership team, chapter 13, verse 1, you can see them there.

What you can find if you look into those names is that this leadership team had a lot going for it. So not only was there Paul and Barnabas, you know, Paul, one of the most ten most influential human beings ever to be alive, most likely.

Barnabas, who we heard about last week, the encourager who was chosen to go and help this new crew. And all the other names which tell us that this leadership team was socially diverse, racially diverse, enormously talented.

And here they are and you think, great. Finally, we've got all the right people in the right places. And now we're ready to go. And they've got the excitement of a new start.

And the commitment of a passionate group of people. Because we can see they fasted and prayed. See that verse 2? While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting. And then a little bit later in verse 3.

[ 2 : 25 ] So after they'd fasted and prayed. So these guys were committed, weren't they? It seems like it was habitual, this fasting and praying business. They keep skipping lunch. Not just once.

They keep doing it. Kind of think, okay, things are going to happen now. All the pieces are on the board. And then Jesus, by his spirit, says, I want you to take Paul and Barnabas and set them aside.

Because I'm going to send them somewhere else. And that probably, for this new church, also meant providing for Paul and Barnabas. Financially. Meeting all their needs. Making sure they were okay.

I think if I'd been sitting in that leadership meeting, I'd have been thinking, what now? We've only just got them back. You know, we're not exactly on all fours here. And you want us to send them off somewhere else?

I think, you know, can you say that again, spirit? Because I think I misheard. But as always, Jesus is at work here.

[ 3 : 30 ] Changing hearts. In the way that only he can. Because Paul and Barnabas go willingly. We read. And the church at Antioch send them off with their blessing.

So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them. It's a movement of blessing, isn't it? And they sent them off. And yet at the same time we read in verse 4, that it's the Holy Spirit who sends them.

This is interesting, isn't it? The two of them sent on their way by the Spirit, verse 4, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to the island of Cyprus. So whatever's going on on the surface, it's the Spirit who's making this move.

He is the one who's speaking. And that's really the first thing that we need to know if we're going to change the world forever. Is that we need to listen for the Spirit speaking.

Interesting, isn't it? More amazing, perhaps, that after the Spirit is spoken, they just keep on skipping lunch. Did you see that, verse 3? Verse 2, they were fasting and praying.

[ 4 : 44 ] And then in verse 3, after they've heard the Spirit speak, they fast and pray some more. So they keep doing this. Just a little aside about fasting.

What's fasting? What's going on with fasting? Well, obviously, fasting in one sense, in the simple sense, is just not eating. You can do that for all kinds of reasons. But in the Bible, fasting is not just about saying no to something, which we would expect to do as Christians, wouldn't we?

Because Jesus says, following him means denying ourselves and taking up our cross. But it's not just about saying no to one thing. It's about saying yes to something else. Prayer.

Prayer. So if we want to change the world forever, we need to listen to the Spirit speaking. But then you go on to ask the question, well, when does he speak?

When does Jesus speak by his Spirit? And the answer is here in this fasting and praying. He speaks when we declare our dependence on God, in self-denial, and when we practice his presence in prayer.

[ 5 : 52 ] In the church. That's when. He speaks when we worship him in a Christ-like way. And when we invite him to be with us.

And when we go, by prayer, into his presence. That's when the Holy Spirit speaks. So we can ask one question, which is, would we be prepared to do what the church in Antioch did?

You know, taking two of the best leaders and the new church intern and send them off somewhere else. Instead of getting somebody in as a community support worker, a community outreach worker.

Instead, we're going to lose two leaders plus the intern. Would we be prepared to do that? That's church planting, isn't it? But I think this passage wants to ask us a more basic question than that. And the question is this. If Jesus was going to speak to us by his Spirit, where would that happen? Where in church life would he speak?

[ 6 : 57 ] And would we be there as individuals when he did? As you join the church family, Judy, we're going to be praying for you.

That you will keep growing as you listen to the Spirit of the Lord Jesus. Please pray for us. That we'd be a church that does the same thing.

I think that's what this passage points out. We're talking about changing the world. I wonder if you know the answer to this question.

How many people are there, out there in the world, who have never heard the good news of the Lord Jesus? I'm going to play a little PowerPoint game.

Anybody got an idea yet? It's not 3.4 people, I can tell you that. 3.4 billion people.

[ 7 : 59 ] I've never heard anything about the good news of Jesus. And next to that, the World Health Organization thinks that there are about 735 million people who are at imminent risk of starvation in the world at the moment.

And you look at those numbers and we look around and we think, yeah, church is nice, isn't it? Isn't it good to be together, caring for one another, trying to do something good in our world?

But you also look at those numbers and you think, well, what difference are we going to make? Is anything we do really going to change this world forever?

How are we different from any other good news club in history? You kind of think that in the passage too. You think, oh, great. Well, they sent two people off to another town with someone to help them.

Well, what difference is that going to make? Let's read the next section of our passage and find out. Okay, verse 6.

[ 9 : 06 ] They traveled through the whole island until they came to Paphos. There they met a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus, who was an attendant of the procouncil Sergius Paulus.

The procouncil, an intelligent man, sent for Barnabas and Saul because he wanted to hear the word of God. But Elymas, the sorcerer, for that is what his name means, opposed them and tried to turn the procouncil from the faith.

Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right.

You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord? Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind for a time, not even able to see the light of the sun.

Immediately, mist and darkness came over him, and he groped about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand. When the procouncil saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord.

[ 10 : 19 ] Thank you, Rachel. So, when the church does what Jesus, by his Spirit, asks them to do, what comes next, as we just read, is two things.

Opportunity and opposition. They go through the whole island and they tell people the good news of the saving love of the Lord Jesus, wherever they go, which is everywhere on the island.

Apparently. Apparently. And they're even invited in to the halls of power, aren't they? White Hall, open door. Come and tell us about this Jesus. And they can talk to Sergius Paulus, the proconsul, who's described as being intelligent and powerful.

No wonder. So, great opportunity. On the other hand, opposition as well. In the person of this man, Elymus. And Elymus, Luke is at pains to tell us, has a name that means something.

It represents something. It means sorcerer. And he tries to turn Sergius Paulus, the ruler of the island, from the faith. So, this is not a polite disagreement, which we all have sometimes, but this is active opposition, isn't it?

[ 11 : 34 ] That's what's going on here. Maybe you're thinking, sorcery. Is this all hokum from some unscientific age before they really understood what's going on?

There's no science there. So, we can dismiss this whole story, basically, as nonsense when we read that. I want to share with you a story that I came across in the news this week about this man, Omar bin Omran.

There was a civil war in Algeria about 26 years ago. And at that time, this man was imprisoned by his next-door neighbour in his cellar. And just this week, he was found alive in that same cellar 26 years later.

So, he was imprisoned next door. Can you imagine that? Next-door cellar. And he was asked, why didn't you yell and scream? It was just next door.

Here's his explanation. He told his rescuers that he had, at times, seen his family from his prison. He could see them. But he claimed he had been unable to call out for help because of a spell that his captor had put on him.

[ 12 : 49 ] Evil is real, isn't it? This isn't hokum. Actually, this isn't about Elymas, either. There's a name thing going on here.

Did you notice that? Elymas' name means something, sorcerer. And then in the verse before, in verse 8, we read that. And then in verse 9, it says, then Saul, who was also called Paul.

And Luke's trying to draw to our attention that there's something more going on here than a disagreement between two people in the street. Can you see that? Paul and Saul, those names mean something as well.

This isn't just a culture clash that's going on. They both represent something far bigger than themselves. They're like the champions of two opposing armies facing off across the battlefield. Boxer in the blue corner. Boxer in the red corner. And we see this when the Spirit of Jesus speaks through Paul. And he looks straight at Elymas and he says, verse 10, you are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right.

[ 13 : 55 ] You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord? And the Spirit of Jesus speaks through Paul and he rebukes Elymas, doesn't he, for speaking with the devil's words.

Because that's what the Bible tells us. It says deceit, trickery, lies, that is the language of the devil. And that's what this man was using. You can see his allegiance, can't you?

But when the Spirit of Jesus speaks, it stops this man in his tracks. And what we get is a peek into the spiritual battle that's going on behind these two men.

Do we need to look to the Spirit's power if we want to change the world forever? Now, some of the commentators say that unlike in other stories, in Acts and in the Gospels, there's no miracle here to make us believe.

And it is right, isn't it, that it says at the end there, when the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord. But there is a miracle here. Because a miracle is a supernatural intervention, you know, one that you, by definition, can't prove by science. [15:11] And it's a supernatural intervention that points to something bigger, bigger than itself. So what's going on here? Well, by striking Elymas physically blind, the Holy Spirit is revealing the state of his heart, his spiritual blindness.

And he is showing that the power that Elymas represents and that holds Elymas captive is completely outmatched by the Spirit of Jesus. So if we want to change the world forever, face evil where we find it, we need the power of the Holy Spirit.

Even as Christians, we don't quite believe, sometimes, do we, that we live in a world that is in the middle of a spiritual battle.

Sounds kind of kooky. We don't really think that people are controlled by spiritual forces in some way. And we think, you know, events don't normally have spiritual significance.

God doesn't really intervene directly anymore. And we live that way. Even if we might not say it that way, that's kind of how we live. That isn't Christian faith.

[16:27] That's functional materialism, to give it a technical name. And we need to take God at his word when he says that people are integrated beings. They are physical and mental and spiritual and emotional all together.

And we need to take him at his word when he says that he is a spirit. Because the Bible says that. It says God is spirit.

And we need to take him at his word when he says there is a spiritual battle going on. Otherwise, we will misread it when people oppose Jesus and try to turn other people away from the faith.

Unless we are looking to the spirit for his power, when people say, it's stupid to be a Christian, it's just a lot of irrational myths, then we will only answer with rational arguments.

And we'll forget to pray. And we'll retreat into a personal faith. He says, well, I think it's rational. Instead of holding out hope for the whole world.

[17:30] And when people say, well, church is just, you know, it's an oppressive system. It just results in religious trauma and it's all about control and manipulation.

If we are not looking to the spirit's power, what we will say is, look at all the good that the church has done in history. And it has, that's true. But what we will forget to do is speak about the comfort and the grace that we get from a living relationship with our maker.

our father, our saviour. If we don't look for the spirit's power, then when people say, you don't really need God, or, yeah, you can have God, but he's kind of like a nice add-on to your life.

Like a kind of a, you know, a quilt that you throw over a sofa that was okay, fine anyway. If we're not looking for the spirit's power, then we'll just carry on talking about how nice the quilt is and how everybody should buy one.

Instead of praying for blind eyes to be opened and dead hearts to be given new life, that's what the spirit's power does. So we need to look to the spirit's power if we want to change the world forever.

[18:41] We have a son called Sam. Some of you have met him. He likes to help me mow the lawn. He likes to get behind the lawnmower and do his thing.

And the other day he asked me, I was mowing the lawn, and he said, can I help? And it reminded me of a story that I'd heard. There was another boy like Sam who loved mowing the lawn. Really loved it. And one day, his birthday came along, and he was given a brand new petrol mower. Brand new. Really loud. One of those, you know, the pool cord starts. Unbelievable. Everything the boy could dream of.

So boy and dad get the mower out and they put it on the grass and the boy's there and he's yanking on the pool cord and nothing's happening and dad says, son, what have you forgotten? And the boy says, oh, yeah, you're right, we haven't got the petrol.

So the boy and his dad go and get the petrol, pour the petrol in the machine. There he is, yanking at the pool cord. It roars into life. You know, big grin on the boy's face, obviously.

[ 19 : 44 ] And with all that noise, the dad just sort of taps the boy on the shoulder and sort of points to his head and points to his feet and sort of raises a quizzical eyebrow. And the boy switches off the mower and he says, I get it, dad.

I get it. You want me to tell you what I've learnt from this situation? Well, what I've learnt from this situation is that unless you have some sort of power source, you'll never get the thing started. And unless you have someone greater and wiser, like you, dad, to tell you how to use it, you'll never get it started. You'll never make any difference. And do you know what?

It's a, and you won't know where to go with this thing either. And that's a bit like God, isn't it, dad?

We need the spirit of Jesus. We need God's spirit to empower us and guide us.

And then even simple things like mowing the lawn will make a difference. That's it, isn't it, dad? And dad looks a bit bemused and says, no, what I meant is that you shouldn't try and mow the lawn in flip-flops and a sombrero.

[ 20 : 49 ] But good answer. You see the point, don't you? When Jesus gets involved with the power of his spirit, as he's promised to get involved in your life, Judy, he already is, and as he's promised to get involved in this church, then we can really change the world forever.

And yes, it can start with something as simple as mowing someone's lawn or skipping lunch to pray. Something as one-off as getting baptised. If we have his power, then we can go in front of powerful and intelligent people and tell the simple message of the Lord Jesus, who came in the flesh, lived, loved, died for our sakes to deal with our sin, rose again so that we might have hope of a new life, and has gone ahead of us into heaven to prepare a place for us there.

Then we can look evil in the face and call it what it is. If we want to change the world forever, we need the spirit of Jesus.

We're going to take a break from Acts after this Sunday, so I think it's worth just going back to where we started. Acts chapter 1 and verse 8. Page 1092, in case you're looking for it in the church Bibles.

Remember, we talked about why Jesus leaving is good news. Curious question, wasn't it? And it's because the spirit can come, and we're seeing that today, aren't we? So that he can be with believers and in the church doing these sorts of things.

[ 22 : 35 ] What does chapter 1, verse 8 say? But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

That's what this is about. What would that look like for us here? I wonder. Skipping lunch to pray? It would definitely be a prayer-filled church, wouldn't it? That's what it would look like. It would mean more meals that are really breaking fasts of whatever kind that is.

It would mean full, prayer-full, members' meetings. Of course, there are good reasons sometimes why we can't come. Just like there are good reasons why sometimes you shouldn't deny yourself food.

It would be dangerous. But the point is, if Jesus is going to speak by his spirit, and if we want the power of his spirit to change the world forever, then don't we want to be there to see it?

[ 23 : 41 ] Don't we want to be where that's going to happen? Skip lunch to pray. But secondly, it means asking him to open blind eyes.

It's a bit of an offensive thing to say in some ways, isn't it? It means praying to Jesus, Lord Jesus, please forgive my opposition to you.

Forgive the fact that I've lived like a functional materialist. Forgive the fact that I've denied your goodness by living, acting like there isn't a king.

It means praying, please help me to do what Judy's done today. Help me to make it clear to anybody who will listen that Jesus has saved me and that I'm going to follow him.

And there's hope for everybody in that kingdom that he's building. Did you notice that when Elymas was struck blind, it said, blind for a time? Now, who else in this story was blind for a time?

[ 24 : 54 ] Paul. Paul had a saviour who really could change the world forever. Because you know what the flip side of that big number is that we saw earlier?

3.4 billion, don't you? The flip side of that is that the Holy Spirit has already touched the lives of the other 4.7 billion in some way.

That's his power. So we want to change the world forever. We need the Spirit of Jesus. Let me pray. Lord God, we thank you.

We thank you that the story of Judy's life, the story of the church, as we've been reading it in Acts, the story of everybody who believes here, is that by your Holy Spirit's power, you are growing us, you are building us, you are changing us, you are redeeming us, you are rescuing us, you are shaping us, you are fitting us for the kingdom of heaven.

Lord, we pray and we ask that by your Holy Spirit you would be present in our church, speaking, sending, changing the world forever. We pray that in Jesus' name.

[ 26 : 18 ] Amen.