

The Power of the Word

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[0:00] I'm Chad Heisinger. I currently am in Milwaukee serving as one of the chaplains at Children's! Wisconsin. I'm a member and regular attendee at City Reformed Christian Reformed Church down! in Milwaukee, Wisconsin as well. So it's wonderful. It's an honor and a privilege to be back up here and to just worship with you all this morning. We this morning are going to be looking at Acts 13, 1 through 12. I believe it will be on the screen. Otherwise, if you have a Bible or one of the Pew Bibles, feel free to grab one. We're going to be looking at Acts 13, 1 through 12 this morning.

Now, there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers. Barnabas, Simeon, who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manin, a lifelong friend of Herod the Tetrarch, and Saul. 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. Then after fasting and praying, they laid their hands on them and sent them off. So being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus. When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogue of the Jews, and they had John to assist them. 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. He was with the pro-council, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. But Elimus, the magician, for that was the meaning of his name, opposed them, seeking to turn the pro-council away from the faith. But Saul, who was called Paul, filled with the Holy

Spirit, looked intently on him 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?

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. Then the pro-council believed, and he saw what had, when he saw what had occurred, and he was, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord. The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God. Would you please join me in prayer this morning? Father, Son, Holy Spirit, Lord, we come, we've been called by your Spirit this morning to come into your house to worship you, to hear the word you have for us this morning, Lord.

Lord, we are coming in a variety of different places this morning from all over town. Some of us are coming just happy about the beautiful day, maybe relieved that our house and our home is safe after the storm.

[3:24] And others of us are coming into this place full of pain and sorrow because of what happened. And we're thinking about the people who are not here this morning too, Lord.

Those who are still cleaning up, who felt the devastating impacts of the tornado. And so, Lord, we trust that wherever we come into this place with happiness and joy or pain and sorrow, anger and frustration, you meet us here by the power of your Spirit.

And you have words for us today. Words of comfort, but also some words of challenge at times.

And so, Lord, we pray that you are at work, Holy Spirit, in us.

You are tilling the ground, the soil of our hearts and our minds for your word to be planted, for us to receive that word. Lord, may the meditation of my mouth, the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable and pleasing to you, our Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. As I have been getting older into my adult age, I'm really trying to read more books.

[4:41] Sometimes it's a struggle, especially when it's a long day after work. It's a lot easier to put on Netflix. But I really want to do more reading. And a large part of that is because I grew up in a family of readers.

My sisters are really big readers. And specifically, my mom is a huge reader. One story I can remember as a child, when she was really into a book that she was reading, one of the many books she was reading all at once, if there was one that really gripped her attention, I can remember she would have it in the car.

And when the light turned red, she would quick pull out the book. And she would try to read a couple pages until the light turned green. That's how big of a reader she is. And as I've gotten into more and more into reading, especially I'm trying to read fiction.

I read a lot of nonfiction, you know, Bible, theology books, other historical stuff. But I want to read more fiction stories. And I, a couple years ago, experienced this book called Pachinko.

And it's become my, it's probably my favorite book. It's a story of a Korean family in Japan over the course of the century, over generations, and how, you know, things that happen in the great grandparents' generation impact the generation of the great grandkids.

[6:01] It's a beautiful book. I highly recommend it. You should read it. But recommending a book can be kind of a scary thing. Because how is someone going to receive a book that's so meaningful to you?

And so I read this book, Pachinko. And I was like, I got to tell my mom about it. So I told her to read it. And she's like, I'll read it. She read it. And like, you know, what took me probably like three weeks took her like four days, of course.

And she read it. And the next time I saw her, I said, Mom, what did you think of Pachinko? And I was ready. And she's like, it was fine. It was fine?

It was fine, Mom? It was like the best book I've ever read. And she was like, oh, no, it was good. You know, it was a nice read over the course of a couple days. I was like, ah. And, you know, on Goodreads, she read it four out of five stars.

I was like, how could you? How could you not experience this book in the same way how much I love this book? And I don't know if you've ever had that feeling.

[7:03] If that's ever happened to you, maybe you've shared a book you love or a movie or music. You shared it with your partner or your friends or your kids. And they're just not that into it, right?

Maybe as parents, right, the music that you loved, your kids just think is really dumb or lame. It's something that, like, when we share these things that are so near and dear in our heart that we've had a powerful experience with, and other people don't experience it in the same way as we do, it can be really hard for us to understand.

And I imagine that many of us have similar experiences with how people have experienced the Word of God in their lives, right?

I imagine many of us, we have friends, we have family members who maybe they grew up in church, they, you know, read their Bible, they've, you know, all those things, and they just don't believe.

Something that has been so important to many of us here, I'm sure, the Scripture, God's Word, we have found that God has met us in that place.

[8:14] He's spoken to us through those words. And because of that, we have been compelled to follow Him and to trust in what Jesus has done and is doing in our lives.

But our friends and our family, who maybe have had, who've also experienced the Bible, who've read it, who've been taught it, they just don't. They don't have that deep impact in their lives like it has been for us.

And that's a curious thing. Not only is there pain and sadness for our close friends and loved ones who have, you know, not accepted Christ, who have not, you know, been moved to follow Jesus. There's a lot of pain and sadness there. But there's also some real just general curiosity. Why is it that some people, they experience, they hear God's Word, and they follow Jesus and others don't? If it's the Word of God, why is it that not every time someone reads it, or experiences it, they're moved to follow Jesus? Well, I think our passage today in Acts actually helps us a lot in understanding what is going on, what do we understand by the power of God's Word, the power of God's Word, because we believe that God's Word has power.

[9:34] So we're going to take some time to reflect on that looking at Acts 13 this morning. But I think it's important for us to start off with that primary question.

If the Bible is God's Word, and we trust that God is at work in it, why is it that some people believe when they read or they hear it preached, and others don't, right?

It doesn't make a whole lot of sense. Because if it's God's Word, and we trust God is at work through his Scripture, then shouldn't any time someone hears it or read it, shouldn't they be moved to follow Jesus?

Well, we all know that's not true. We know people in our lives who have experienced God's Word in some way and yet still are not believers. You know, we don't have this belief as Christians that the Bible, if you read it, you'll immediately become Christian.

That is something that other religious traditions do believe, that if you read their Scripture, you will become a believer. But we don't believe that about the Bible, right?

[10:40] And there's nothing specifically special about the Bible as a physical book. I say this, and you should always be respectful of books in general. But when you take a physical Bible, there's not a...

The Bible in itself is not some sort of magical spiritual object, right? It's not something where it's like, oh, there's something in the paper and the ink that God is working through. No, we don't believe that either.

So God's Word, God is working through Scripture in some different way than through the physicalness of it. And we may think, well, okay, trying to make sense of how God is at work through the Bible, maybe the reason that some people believe and others don't believe is something about them.

And if we look at Acts 13, we can kind of see kind of two examples, right? Why some people, their eyes are blinded to Scripture, while other people's eyes are opened when they hear the Word of God.

So we have these kind of two main characters that Paul and Barnabas... Paul and Barnabas go to. Let me say this. As I'm talking, I know the passage mostly refers to Paul as Saul, but I'm going to refer to him as Paul just because it's easier for me, and I think we all know what I'm talking about.

[11:58] So let me just make that clear. But when Paul and Barnabas, they come to Cyprus on this missionary journey, they're encountered by these two main characters, right?

We have Bar Jesus and Sergius Paulus. Now, to understand who they are, Sergius Paulus, he's referred to as the pro-council.

And if you know a little bit about the Roman Empire, they had all these regional leaders, right? You had the Caesar at the top and you had the Senate, but then you had all of these different regional leaders.

And Sergius Paulus was kind of like the mayor or the governor of this area of Cyprus. Kind of similar, like kind of on the same lines as Pontius Pilate was in Jerusalem. That's who Sergius Paulus is.

So he's a big deal. He would have been a smart man. He would have been a rich man. He was a big deal in this area. And because he was kind of a leader, he would have had some sort of council of advisors, right, like most politicians have.

[13:01] And that's where we get this guy Bar Jesus. He was, it's some sort of Jewish sorcerer magician. And the Roman world is this very cosmopolitan area.

There were all sorts of different religions. Maybe Sergius Paulus was particularly interested in different religions and the Jewish religion. And so he on his council has this Jewish magician, eh, add him onto the council.

He's got to have some insightful things to say. Okay. So what we can tell from this is Sergius Paulus, he's open. He wants to like hear different ideas in some way.

And we see that the book highlights Sergius Paulus, the Bible highlights him as a smart man. He's a very smart, wise man.

So he comes and he and Paul and Barnabas share the word of God with him and he comes to believe it. Well, maybe he is believing into it.

[13:59] Maybe he receives God's word because he's smart, right? He's intelligent. Maybe that's why he believes. Maybe those in our lives that here have come to believe in Jesus because they're smart or they're rational.

They're reasonable people. They've come to trust in God's word and hear the Holy Spirit speaking to them because of what the Bible says. And where you have someone like Bar-Jesus, maybe he's kind of somewhat, it's said that he is, Paul calls him evil.

He's this evil sorcerer, wicked character here in this story. And so maybe other people, the reason they don't believe is because they're just a little bit worse off than we are, right?

Someone like, you know, Sergius Paulus, he believes because he's a smart and good person.

Whereas Bar-Jesus is this evil guy. Or even not even saying that people in our lives are particularly evil.

Maybe part of the reason that they're having such an issue coming to faith is because of the evils in the world, right? After a major storm like this past week, it can cause a lot of people to wonder, is God good?

[15 : 05] Why would God allow such evil things to happen in our world? Are those maybe helpful examples of why some people come to believe in scripture and others don't?

You probably know the answer. That's not why some believe and others don't. I'm sure all of us are very smart and good people in this room, but I hate to break it to you.

That's not why you came to trust and believe in God's word. And people who don't trust and believe in God's word, they're not particularly any more bad or evil than the rest of us.

No, because we come to trust and believe in God's word not by our own power. You see, if we trust in our own intellect and our own goodness, we blame other people for being evil or for being evil.

That just puts all of it on ourselves. And ultimately, to trust in God's word is not something that we can muster off enough intellect or goodness or rationalism in order to trust in.

[16 : 13] We have to be moved by the power of the Holy Spirit to receive God's word. In our tradition, the Reformed tradition, we have a document.

It's called the Belgic Confession. It kind of gives a, I think it's like, is it 29 points of kind of the basics of our beliefs. And in point five, it highlights that the only reason that we come to believe in scripture is because of the Holy Spirit working in us.

It's not because the Bible is particularly historically based, that it's this good, you know, it's all the history is exact.

It's not because, you know, of our smarts, our own goodness. It's only by the power of the Holy Spirit that we come to believe in God's word and we can hear God's word.

It's by grace and not by our own will that we are able to be moved and we can respond to what God has been speaking to us. Which is good news because that means that we don't have to primarily focus on, you know, making sure we're smarter or better.

[17 : 26] We can trust in God's work in us. We can trust that the Holy Spirit is at work in us more and more each day to continue to receive the word that God has for us.

Because God is still speaking to us. God has a word and he's speaking to all of us. And when I say the word of God, I imagine many of us, the word of God, when we think of that, we're thinking of the Bible, right?

That's kind of our go-to. The Bible as the word of God. And that's true. The Bible is the word of God. We trust that. We believe that. The Bible, scripture, is this testament of how God through the Holy Spirit has been inspiring writers over centuries and centuries to write down how God has revealed himself to us.

To reveal who we are as people and the ways that we need salvation and how God sent his son Jesus to die and rise again, to set us free, to be Lord of all things and show that he's coming back. We trust and we believe that that is God's word in scripture. But also, God's word is more than just that.

[18 : 48] You see, when we're looking at this passage in Acts 13, Paul and Barnabas, they're out on Cyprus and they're going out proclaiming God's word. Well, what are they using?

Are they going with their copy of the English Standard Version of the Bible, the ESV? No. You know, obviously, you know, they're, we're reading about this in the New Testament.

They didn't have the New Testament yet. You know, Jesus died and rose again, you know, maybe 15-ish years or so before this story. So, they didn't have the word of God in the way that you and I do.

Yes, they probably have the Old Testament. It says they're going to synagogues, preaching to the Jews. So, in some ways, they would have been using scripture to proclaim God's word.

But they probably weren't carrying those with them. So, for them, the word of God is more than just scripture. Yes, it's grounded in how God has revealed himself to his people. And he has revealed himself through the gospel.

[19:50] Right? That Christ is Lord of all things. That Jesus is the true son of God. That Caesar is not the son of God. He is not the one who is coming to bring peace. That Jesus is bringing that.

That he has come to set his people free from sin and evil to join with him forever as a community. That's what Paul and Barnabas are proclaiming.

They're sharing this good news to the people of Cyprus, telling them the words that God has. So, it's this reminder that, yes, scripture is the primary word of God.

But there are other ways in which God is speaking. There's other ways in which God is speaking. Because if we just believe that scripture was the only way that God spoke to us.

Right? That that was it. That was all. Well, we would believe that all we have to do is go home and read our Bibles. There's no reason to come and to worship together. There's no reason to come and hear words preached.

[20:50] You see, in our tradition, in the Belgic Confession, we believe that God is speaking to us primarily through two means. And it says this in Belgic Confession, Article 2.

That God speaks to us, yes, through scripture, but also through creation. Referencing Romans 1, that God's goodness and glory is proclaimed clearly in all of creation.

And so, we have no... No one has an excuse not to turn to God. We see God's glory in the goodness of creation, in the power of creation. That God is clear.

How many of us have gone on hikes? We've gone out in the woods and we can just hear... We can just, you know, feel God's presence in those places. As much as it is here in church sometimes.

God is speaking to us through a variety of different ways.

Primarily grounded in scripture. And we trust that when God speaks to us in other ways, through our times of prayer, through worship, through sermons, and through conversations with other people, it's always grounded in scripture.

[21:58] But there is always more ways that God is speaking to us. God is speaking to us. He's sharing his word with us. Word that has power.

Word that has power. And we're called to receive it and to be listening for that. To be listening. You know, the other week, I was talking to a friend and she was saying that the church that she goes to, they kind of are always defaulting back to the same refrain for people.

If they want to grow in their faith, they just got to read God's word more. They just got to be more in God's word. They got to read their scripture more. Read their scripture. And I want to make it clear that reading scripture is a good and beautiful thing.

And we need to do that as believers. But I often think that we forget that their order to hear God's word.

Reading scripture is good. But we forget about some of those other disciplines that we see here in Acts 13 that are just as important, that help train us to hear God's word, to hear how God is speaking to us.

[23:07] What do we see? At the very beginning, we see this picture of this vibrant church in Antioch, this very diverse church, right? We see that Simeon, he's called Niger, which is a Latin word at the time for black, so maybe some sort of African guy.

We see that his friend, Manin, who is with a hard word to say, or hard name to say, he was like a friend of Herod the Tetrarch, right?

The Herod that we know from the nativity stories, right? Not the same Herod, but part of that royal, powerful family. So this is a very interesting, diverse church.

The Holy Spirit has brought all these diverse, interesting people together by his power, not by their own. That grounded in what Christ has done, this church has gathered. And we see that all of them, including Paul and Barnabas, they're worshiping and they're fasting.

And they are doing this in order to receive God's word. They know, this early church community knows, and if they want to hear what God is speaking to them through scripture, through conversation, through prayer, through creation, they need to be not only in the word, reading scripture, they need to be together, praying, fasting, worshiping as a community.

[24:30] So for those of us who have heard God's power, not because of our own smarts or goodness, but by God's grace that the Holy Spirit has compelled us, has turned us to follow him.

God is still speaking to us. He's speaking to you. He's speaking to me. He's speaking to us through his word. He's speaking to us through our church community.

And so we're called to always be working with the Holy Spirit, to allow the Holy Spirit to work in us, to grow more and more our faith, to grow more and more as people who pray, people who worship, to be able to hear and receive the words that God has.

Those words of comfort, sometimes those words of challenge. Because God is speaking to us. We try to do all these things in our own power. Try to believe in you, to have enough faith, to try to hear and listen to you, to try to be better Christians by our own work, by our own power, through different disciplines and routines and rhythms we have.

[26 : 16] But Lord, we know that our growth, we know that all that we have comes from you. So Lord, as we do develop these rhythms, as we do develop our routines and our habits, we pray, Holy Spirit, you're at work in them, to remind us to listen to your word, Lord, to read our scriptures prayerfully.

To read our scriptures prayerfully and in community so that we can be listening for you, the words that you have for us, words of comfort and challenge, that we can always go to those in our lives, our church community, our friends, our family, that we can all listen for your words together, individually and as a community.

Because God, you speak to us. You gave us your word through scripture. And you're continuing to confirm that word on our hearts through the power of your Holy Spirit.

To speak to fears and the anxieties, the pain and the suffering that we struggle with. To speak to the joys and the happiness and the pleasures of this world that you've given us that are good.

Lord, give us ears to hear, minds to comprehend, and hearts to receive the words that you have for us this week, this month, this year.

[27 : 51] Holy Spirit, continue to compel us by your word that we would more and more turn to you, God. That you'd be at work that we would desire to be people who hear the words you are speaking to us today.

We thank you, Jesus, for all that you've done for us. The way you've displayed your love and your power for all to see. And so we pray that as we continue our lives, we would be able to be witnesses to your glory.

That other people, through the power of the Holy Spirit, might receive your word as well. We ask this in your name. Amen.