

Acts 13:1-13

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: 07 May 2023

Preacher: Canon David Short

[0 : 0 0] I want to keep your Bible open at Acts chapter 13 on page 921. As you do that, I just mention again, this is a wonderful and important day for us at St. John's as we've commissioned and we send off those who will plant the new church at King's Cross.

And it's a costly, risky thing that they're doing. And I say, obviously, without the power of the Holy Spirit, they are absolutely certain to fail as are we.

And we will miss you and we'll pray for you. And we look forward to hearing what God does through you and through this risk of faith. And this passage, Acts chapter 13, is a wonderful and important passage in the book of Acts.

It's the first time a local church takes the deliberate decision to sacrifice some of its best people and send them out on mission to a place where the gospel has not yet taken root so that others can hear the message of salvation and be saved for the glory of Christ.

Interesting, isn't it? I mean, no one could ever accuse we Christians of being fast learners. I mean, when Jesus rose from the dead, remember he said, all authority in heaven and earth has been given to me.

[1 : 2 4] Go, make disciples. I'll be with you always. You remember in Acts chapter 1, verse 8, that fantastic verse where Jesus says to the disciples, you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in Judea and in Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

Question. Did the apostles or the church in Jerusalem, and the apostles, I mean the 12, did the apostles or the church in Jerusalem ever arrange a mission or send people out to reach Judea, Samaria, or the ends of the earth?

Answer? No. No. And it takes 13 chapters before a local church becomes a missionary sending church. And very interesting, it's not Jerusalem.

It's the church in Antioch. I mean, that's way up the coast. It's in Syria, right on the border of Turkey. And throughout the history of the church, throughout the centuries, it has been just so easy for Christian churches to settle down.

I mean, we've got enough on our plate, haven't we? We struggle with the cares of this world. And the more we focus on ourselves, the less we ask the question, what can we do for the advance and progress of the gospel?

[2 : 4 5] I mean, where should the gospel go? And in the early chapters of Acts that we've been reminded of in the last few weeks, everything was going very swimmingly for the church.

And the early Christians, the more we're going to be doing so, what can we do for the church? And the more we're going to do, the more we're going to do, the more we're going to do, the more we're going to do. But it doesn't take long for the tide to turn against the early Christians.

As the apostles preached more and more clearly the lordship of Jesus Christ, a furious opposition arose, until we get to chapter 7, when Stephen is brutally murdered for preaching the risen Jesus. Now, you may think that would put a freeze on all gospel sharing. Yes, let's try a different tack. But the opposite happens. Keep your finger in chapter 13 and just turn back to chapter 8 for a moment. And in verse 1, there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions, surprise, surprise, of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.

[4 : 0 0] Verse 4, now those who were scattered went about preaching the word, literally evangelizing the word. The persecution is always appalling.

But we see something of the cross, the shape of the cross here. Though it was painful, and we don't know how many people died, and though many families were completely dislocated, somehow God sovereignly uses the persecution to move the gospel out of Jerusalem into Judea and Samaria as

ordinary, anonymous, unnamed believers moved, taking their faith with them.

And last week, we had a look in chapter 8, how the gospel went to the Samaritans, deeply hated by the Jews. And the apostles in the Jerusalem church are so amazed, they send Peter and John up there to confirm that it's true.

Then in chapter 9, the risen Christ takes a hold of the main instigator of the persecution, the Pharisee named Saul, and he's radically converted to Jesus Christ.

And the risen Jesus gives him a special task, take my name to the Gentiles, which he begins to do immediately. But still the apostles in Jerusalem are not fully convinced.

[5 : 18] And so in chapter 10, that beautiful story of the conversion of Cornelius, the Roman centurion, God sends a vision to the apostle Peter, where he has to repeat three times.

Go three times. And I've always wondered why Peter was staying in the house of Simon the Tanner, if he was so concerned about food laws, but that's for another sermon.

And Cornelius is converted, and Peter is converted. He says, I know the gospel's gone to the Gentiles now, and the whole story is told a second time in chapter 11, so that we'd get the point. And then in the second half of chapter 11, the first reading today, the church is planted up there in Antioch in Syria. Ordinary, anonymous believers, on the run from persecution in Jerusalem, they go all the way up to this Antioch in Syria, a huge cosmopolitan city of half a million people, and they speak the word of God mostly to Jews, but some speak it to Greeks and the Hellenists, and they believe and turn to Jesus.

And the church in Jerusalem is starting to get it. So they think, who is the most big-hearted, encouraging bloke we've got? Barnabas. So we'll send Barnabas up, and Barnabas goes up to Antioch, and he's so thrilled to see the grace of God, that he drives up the road to Turkey, where Paul is, and he grabs a hold of Saul and brings him back.

[6 : 51] Saul's now been preaching the gospel for seven to eight years, and he joins the ministry team at Antioch. And it's a brilliant picture of what the whole of the book of Acts teaches us, that the gospel is unstoppable.

When my boys were small, we'd take them to a river, and we had two boys, and so if you've got water, sticks, and rocks, a day goes by.

It's just happy, happy, happy. And they would try and block up a little part of the river, and they'd block it up, and then it wouldn't work, and they'd block it up. When you try and block up a river with sticks and stones and those kinds of things, it just flows around those barriers, and that's exactly what happens with the gospel.

And as we come to chapter 13, the first missionary journey since the resurrection of Jesus begins. And it's interesting, the center of gravity in Christianity has moved away from Jerusalem, and it moves up to the church of Antioch in Syria, because the spread of the gospel now begins from Antioch.

It's not unlike what's going on in the Anglican Communion today. And the reason we're told all this is because God is a mission-hearted God.

[8 : 09] Mission is his idea. He desires all to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth. Back in the Old Testament, God's purpose for Israel was that they would be a light to lighten the Gentiles, but they became the biggest obstacle for the mission of God.

And God sends his only son from heaven, and Jesus' life and death reveal the mission of love, the length to which he's willing to go to rescue us from sin and death and Satan.

And after he's raised from the dead, Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to empower us to continue the mission of Jesus. And the biggest hindrance, I say this carefully, the biggest hindrance to the advance of the gospel is not persecution.

It's not lack of resources. It's not lack of talented people. It's not the hostility of the culture roundabout. It's churches that don't think that the words of Acts 1.8 apply to them.

And so we, they, focus on looking inward. Now, let me just say, the inward life of the church is vitally important.

[9 : 22] I don't want to be misunderstood here. The mark of the health of the inward life of the church is that in our worship and in our prayer and in our growth, we keep asking the question, what can we do for the advance of the gospel?

The mark is that we're committed to taking certain risks so that others will come to faith. And those churches in history that are most sacrificial and giving in the missions of Jesus are the churches

that experience, most experience the life of the risen Jesus in their inner life, as you would expect. So as we turn to chapter 13, the local church responds to the Holy Spirit. They intentionally make a sacrifice. And Luke teaches us three things about mission.

And I'm now in the second half of the sermon. Three points. And they are these, that the mission of Jesus goes forward, first through ascending church, second through the communication of the word of God, and thirdly against opposition.

They're very simple points. Let's look at them together. Number one, the mission of Jesus goes forward through ascending church, verses one to three. And if you look down at verse one, we're told just how diverse the church at Antioch is.

[10:40] We're given the names, six names of the leaders, prophets and teachers in the church. Barnabas. Remember Barnabas, he'd come from the island of Cyprus. He'd sold his, the real estate there and given the money to the church in Jerusalem.

Simon, called Niger, means he's a black man, he's a man of color. Peter, Eleusius of Cyrene, that's Libya. Mana'an, who's, he grew up in the palace of Herod, well-connected guy, and Saul the apostle.

Then we read verse two, 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've called them. And after fasting and praying, they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

Now, question, who is they? They? While they were worshiping. And I think in the Greek, it most naturally means not the whole congregation, it's the six leaders, as it rolls on from verse one.

And the word worship here isn't the word that's used in the New Testament for what we do in the gathering. It usually has to do with teaching God's word and giving money, believe it or not.

[11:52] And I think the picture we have here are that the leaders are set aside time to pray and to fast and to study the word of God. And as they do, we read the Holy Spirit said.

And we're not told how the Holy Spirit said what he said, but usually when the Holy Spirit speaks in the book of Acts, it's Luke looking back on the event and telling us the Holy Spirit was doing this and that.

That's why the intention of the Spirit for Saul and Barnabas is to do the work that I've called them to do. And Jesus had already called Saul to do the work of spreading the gospel to the Gentiles.

And he doesn't tell them where to go. He doesn't say go to Cyprus any more than he's told King's Cross Church to go to Boundary. But as they obey and take the risk of going out from the church, the gospel now moves out through Turkey to Greece and to Europe and to Rome and to the rest of the world, to the empire, Vancouver, Australia.

So they have a commissioning service just as we did today. And I know this is a narrative description and we need to take care with application. However, the creation of local sending churches becomes the model and pattern in the New Testament.

[13:16] You think about Ephesus, and Philippi and Colossae and Rome. And for us, the idea of a church plant for this church plant came to us through Joel, then Jeremy, through the staff and then to trustees, then to us as a whole church.

And at each stage we prayed and it was clear to us this is what the Lord would have us do. And it is a sacrifice of people, time and energy. And the only reason you would do it is if you believe in a supernatural Lord and in the power of the gospel and reflect the mission heart of God.

So that's the first part. Point one, the mission of Jesus goes forward through ascending church. I feel like I'd like to take questions and answers but we don't have time. So point two, the mission of Jesus goes forward by the communication of the word of Christ.

So they set sail to Cyprus. That's where Barnabas grew up. And it's on the island that the apostle Saul takes on the name Paul. They also, so it's Barnabas and Saul and they take John Mark, the guy who wrote the gospel we've just finished.

And what do they do? I mean, how do they reach this deeply pagan island of Cyprus? Where does Luke focus our attention? It's primarily on the communication of the gospel.

[14:40] So in verse five, when they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. Verse seven, he was with the proconsul Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God.

And verse 12, then the proconsul believed when he saw what had occurred for he was astonished at the teaching of Jesus. Interesting, isn't it? They don't take money, don't take gifts, they don't take

a new theory of ethics and politics, they take the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Because the word of the gospel is the eternal, living, imperishable seed of life. And when it takes root in human hearts, it connects us to the risen, living Jesus and brings the life of God into us that outlasts this world.

Everything in this world is like grass. It grows up and it withers and dies, but the word of the Lord remains forever. And Jeremy's ten years and Joel's six years with us, brothers, you have faithfully planted the seed as have many over the years, and you've watered the seed in the lives of so many, and only the day of Jesus Christ will show the fruit from that.

God's The simple gospel message about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, the call to repent and believe, has the power to give new life and new birth and new hope to those who've never heard about Jesus Christ.

[16:20] So Saul and Barnabas do what Christians have been doing since the time of the New Testament. They share the gospel concerning Jesus, and they do it in a range of contexts, in synagogues, in small groups, and one-to-one.

And what they're doing comes to the attention of the ruler of the island, one Sergius Paulus, who we're told is an intelligent man, which just means he can think in a straight line. That's what the word means.

And he has a lot on the plate. I mean, Cyprus has never been a simple place to rule. But all the things that he thinks are so urgent and important and vital, all his big to-do lists, you know, all the political and diplomatic and legal decisions are transitory and short-lived.

And here is this curious blip on the radar, these men from the mainland speaking about one Jesus being a saviour risen from the dead, and he has no idea yet that the message he wants to hear and commit himself to is going to change his life, not just for this life, but for eternity.

It's going to open the kingdom of heaven to him because the gospel is going to come and disrupt his life. And at this stage, there's something about the message that intrigues him, so he sends to Saul and Barnabas because he wants to hear more.

[17:36] He knows nothing about Jesus Christ at this stage, and he's already spiritually committed. He's committed to pagan superstition and the occult. There in the court, he has employed a magician, a wizard, a witch, named Bar Jesus, son of Jesus, whom Luke calls a false prophet.

And this brings us to the third point. The gospel of Jesus Christ never goes forward except with opposition. So the mission of the risen Jesus goes through sending churches, the communication of the word, and then finally now against opposition.

Bar Jesus, who is also called Elemas, has a very sweet thing going. He has an official sponsor, Sergius Paulus, he's like the court witch, the court magician.

And this is not harmless spiritual fun. This is not party tricks for children's parties. His power comes from Satan, we are told.

And he is continually pulling the spiritual wool over the eyes of those at court. And when the truth and grace of Jesus Christ in the gospel come into the court, it provokes a deadly hostility in Bar Jesus.

[18:56] And in desperation we're told that he does all he can to turn Sergius Paulus away from the Lord Jesus Christ. Not just because he's going to lose his cushy court appointment, but because the reality of the risen Jesus Christ in the gospel unmasks spiritual evil and rescues people from Satan's power.

So we should expect opposition. It's exactly what happened in Jesus' ministry. Remember back to the beginning of Mark's gospel? Soon as Jesus is baptized he goes out and has conflict with Satan in the wilderness.

As soon as he begins his ministry of preaching, the demons, the unclean spirits rise up and shriek out in protest. Or today, come and hear Baduta sing, speak about the progress of the gospel in East India and how God is rescuing people by those who've been ground down by evil.

The sheer goodness and cleanness and grace and life of Jesus which comes to us through his word is a terror to Satan and all that he's doing.

And it has to be stopped. So we read verse 9, but Saul, who was also called Paul, and this is where his name changes, filled with the Holy Spirit looked intently at him and said, you think you're a bar, Jesus, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy.

[20 : 25] Villainy, not such a good translation, twistedness, I think. Will you not stop making crooked the paths, the straight paths of the Lord? And now behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you.

You'll be blind and unable to see the sun for a time. And immediately mist and darkness fell upon him and he went about seeking people to lead him by the hand. And the proconsul believed when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord.

Now what do you think of Paul's little speech here? A little bit much? A bit too strong? Needs a bit of diversity training to think? This is not Paul losing his temper.

It's not Paul who takes the initiative, it's the Holy Spirit. And it's not the power of Paul that blinds by Jesus, it's God's. And I think the blindness is a perfect outward working of the inward reality of this magician.

It's something that Paul himself experienced, remember, when he met the risen Jesus. And because of the grace of God, it's only for a temporary period so that the gospel may take hold of the life of Sergius Paulus and even perhaps by Jesus himself.

[21 : 40] The passage finishes with these words that it's not the miracle on its own that shook Sergius Paulus, it was the teaching of the Lord that shattered his view of reality and the miracle confirmed the teaching of the Lord.

And so Sergius Paulus becomes a believer, the ruler of Cyprus, a disciple of Jesus and the mission of Jesus moves around the obstacles trying to stop it with this first completely Gentile convert in the New Testament.

And that brings us to today and to the team we're sending to King's Cross just as much as this applies to us. The mission of Jesus, it still continues to go forward through Ascending Church by the communication of the word and against opposition.

God remains a missionary God. God has purposes for Vancouver. I think we often think of God's purposes globally. He has purposes for our neighbours and he will bring men and women and boys and girls to himself as we trust him to be the Lord of the harvest.

And the word of the gospel continues to give eternal life through the forgiveness of sins. And so I say to the church planters as I say to ourselves we need to keep the main thing the main thing not to be distracted or deviated with all the very good secondary things.

[23 : 10] The planting and the watering of the seed will bear fruit for eternal life. And the Holy Spirit is at work sending and overturning the barriers to the word. There will be opposition.

There will be opposition as Satan tries to hold on to those he has in slavery. And the thing about opposition in my experience is that it often feels very personal and often comes in very close but it's not really personal.

Because Satan hates anything that brings glory to the Lord Jesus Christ. He is a defeated enemy and he knows that Christ is sovereign over all and he knows that the gospel will go through the barriers and so he rages with fury even more.

Dear brothers and sisters we look to Christ and to the gospel of his grace in the privilege of serving him lifting up each other in prayer until the day comes when the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.

Amen. Amen.