

The Eye of the Storm

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[0 : 00] I'll travel out in front of you and open to Luke, sorry, Acts chapter 13. If I see anyone going to sleep, we're going to have a third greeting time today, so that we can be a very friendly congregation.

Acts 13, it's on page 125. This is one of the most important, I never tire of saying that, but this, it is, this is a very important passage, because if this passage had not taken place, you would not be here today, either would I.

Maybe you're wondering why you're here. Verse 1, we move up from Jerusalem where there was persecution. Now in the church at Antioch, we're back up to Antioch, there were prophets and teachers, basically the same thing.

Barnabas, Simeon, who was called Niger, Lucifer, Lucius of Cyrene, Menae, and a member of the court of Herod, the Tetrarch, and Saul. So we come back out from the persecution, as I say, in Jerusalem, to this huge, cosmopolitan, diverse, multiracial, multiethnic, wealthy congregation in Antioch.

And Luke gives us this lovely snapshot. There are five prominent members who are teaching in prophecy. The list begins with Barnabas and ends with Saul. And in the middle, we meet this man called Simeon, called Niger, and that means black man.

[1 : 29] Then we meet Lucius from Cyrene. He was also a black man. That's from North Africa. And then finally, Menae, who grew up with Herod. He went to the same school, same tutors.

He's a court insider. And it cannot have been an easy thing for him to have identified with this fledgling Christian movement, particularly when Herod was down in Jerusalem persecuting the church.

I mean, if he had any desire for promotion in the future, he would not have identified with the church. Here he was, up front, prophesying and teaching. And while there seemed to be great trouble in Jerusalem, everything seems to be going swimmingly here in cosmopolitan Antioch.

Don't you think Saul and Barnabas may have been tempted with the thought that they should just stay there forever, build the biggest church in Syria and an apostolic theme park, retire?

But for the first time in all of Scripture, something happens. A community of God's people sends out some of their best overseas with the gospel with the intention of spreading the word to those who've never heard it.

[2 : 43] And if they hadn't done it, the Christian movement would have stayed a little Jewish sect. And if they hadn't done it, the birth of Jesus and the death of Jesus and the resurrection of Jesus would mean absolutely nothing to you and to me.

And so we see the spirit at work inside the church at Antioch in the first three verses and then outside in Cyprus in verses 4 to 12. Let's just look at these two sections together.

In verse 2, Now, I want you to see the radical transformation in the Christian gathering since the day of Pentecost.

It was only as recently as chapter 5 in Acts that the early Christians were going up to the temple and participating in the Jewish worship. Now, this is entirely different.

No sacrifice, no priesthood, no temple. Instead, they are gathering and look at what they are doing. They are worshipping the Lord. The centre of their life, the focus and heart of what they are doing is the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, the one about whom they are teaching and prophesying.

[4 : 20] It is Jesus risen from the dead. This is not a breakaway group from Judaism. This is a new thing. And this is the only time in all the New Testament that Christians are described as worshipping.

Maybe a surprising thing for you to know. And the one that they are worshipping in the centre of the devotion is the one who died and rose just ten years earlier, Jesus Christ the Lord. They are not worshipping a dead teacher.

They are worshipping a living Lord who is with them, who gathers with them, particularly through their teaching and their prophecy. Just as the church in Jerusalem, you remember, devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, so these early Christians, they love to identify with the public preaching and teaching and prophesying of the Word of God.

Their public worship is not a ritual. It's not a rut. It's where they meet with the living Lord Jesus Christ by His Spirit, through His Word.

And it is as they worship and as they hear the teaching that Jesus Himself takes the initiative with them and speaks to them.

[5 : 35] And He says, set apart for me, Barnabas and Saul, for the work that I have called them. The idea is there's new work. It's not going to be easy. It's work.

And I've already called them to this and I want you to set them apart now and send them off now. You remember, about nine years early on the road to Damascus, when Jesus met Saul, knocked him off his horse, I'm showing him, said Jesus, that he is going to bear my name before Gentiles and kings.

And now the same living Lord takes the initiative through the Holy Spirit and sends them out. That's why you can't measure a church by its attendance.

You can only really measure a church by its true deployment in the lives and in the culture and in the city around about us.

As we meet with Jesus Christ week by week and as we know Him through His Word, it is always God's initiative to send us out, to express to others the life of blessing that we have received through Him.

[6 : 48] You and I, we as a Christian community, are meant to be a highway. We are meant to move out into the world and we are meant to live and act in such a way that people may come in, or as with Jesus, welcoming sinners.

And while it is the initiative of the Holy Spirit to send out Paul and Barnabas, He doesn't do it independently. He doesn't do it without the church. He includes the church in the active, living, bearing of His name.

The church is not passive here. Do you ask the question, is it the church that sends out Paul and Barnabas? The answer is yes. They have a valedictory service, as it were. Is it the Holy Spirit that sends out Paul and Barnabas?

The answer is yes. Same for us. You see, we're not meant to be a passive group of hearers.

The New Testament picture of the community faith is that you, the community, are the primary actors in the Gospel drama. And when God takes initiative, he does so through the community.

[7 : 59] It's the community that prays. It's the community that responds. It's been so enormously encouraging over the last two weeks to have so many people come out to the information meetings talking about what we're doing as a congregation.

And I don't want to make anyone feel guilty if they didn't come to those meetings, although those who did come are very special to me. I'm kidding.

There's tremendous details here which we don't have time to look at. Let me just take these away and think about these things if you like. Don't you think it would have severely damaged the plans for growth in Antioch to send off both Paul and Barnabas at the same time?

Why would they do something like that? It must have been expensive personally, spiritually and financially to be that kind of sending church. Do you think that's a challenge? The big issue is that God takes his initiative and when he takes his initiative, we respond as a community in humility and in prayer to his word.

Mission is not something that Dan Gifford does. It would be great, wouldn't it? We will pay you to do mission, Dan. We will pray for you. It's a community thing.

[9 : 24] The community is mission-minded here. That is what the Spirit has done in Antioch. Well then secondly, what does the Spirit do in Cyprus? Verse 4.

Look at the end of verse 3. The church sent them off. Verse 4. So being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, from there to Cyprus. They arrived at Salamis.

They proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews and they had John to assist them. It's a bit of a... It's not much of a reference to John there, John Mark.

They had him to assist them. We'll come back to that when we get to the end of the chapter. Now Cyprus is a world of difference from the mainland. It's only 200 kilometres by boat, ship, but it's pluralist and diverse.

The question is this. How does the Holy Spirit send Jesus to the island through the apostles? I mean, what is the great powerful gift that he sends the apostles with to take on all the religions of the world and to enter into the pagan territory of Cyprus?

[10 : 35] What's this great fresh power that will bring the blessing of God to the world? And the answer is, in verse 5 and verse 7 and verse 12, they proclaim the word of God.

Now, proclaiming is not the same thing as preaching, how we understand preaching today. You know, preaching has a terrible reputation today.

One of the worst things you can do to someone is to preach at them. And I'm amazed that preaching doesn't have a worse reputation today, to be honest with you. It had a much worse reputation in Paul's day.

But preaching, sorry, proclaiming is not expounding and explaining your views and filling out a religious system and teaching morality and ethics and theology.

proclaiming is a very, very interesting word. It's the simple announcement of an event. In other words, it is the announcement that in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has acted.

[11 : 41] See, over there, we have a very large black book on the lectern so that people can read from it in public. When Luke speaks about proclaiming the word of God, he's not really saying that Paul and Barnabas travelled around with a big black book.

He's saying that what they did is they announced the event of what God had done in Jesus Christ. And here is a test. What are the four points of the gospel?

Do you remember from three weeks ago? That Jesus has come from God and that he has come to liberate those who are oppressed by the devil.

Secondly, that he died for our sins. Thirdly, that he rose again from the dead and that God has made him Lord and Saviour. And fourthly, we need to respond by repentance and faith. That's it.

Well, let me say it even more briefly. The fundamental announcement of the gospel is that in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ has been made Lord of all.

[12 : 46] That's what they take with them. And the picture we're given here in Cyprus is that this announcement is enormously threatening to the world. It creates a terrible confrontation with the entrenched powers.

Here is the first time the gospel has come to an area dominated by pagan religion. And what it does is it tears the mask off and it exposes the true spiritual reality underneath.

Whenever the gospel goes forward, it reveals terrible blindness and the slavery in which Satan holds men and women and boys and girls. Remember, that's exactly what happened in Jesus' ministry.

Remember, as soon as Jesus enters his public ministry, he's baptised, he goes straight out into the desert where he confronts Satan, does battle with Satan. He comes back and he preaches the message in the synagogue where he says, I have come to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty all those who are oppressed by the devil and he walks out and the first miracle that he does is casting the demon out of a man.

If you hear it, the heart and centre of our Christian faith is the announcement that Jesus Christ is Lord of all and that's very threatening to every spiritual power. They cannot let Jesus be Lord.

[14 : 17] The gospel is a terrible rival to every idol, every religious belief that will not submit to the crucified Jesus Christ.

Whenever the gospel goes into new territory, it does not receive a neutral response because Satan's power has already been at work. It's a little like what's happening in Iraq today.

It doesn't matter what you think of the US involvement in Iraq. The fact is that the elections will not take place without resistance. What is it that's so offensive about this announcement?

What is it that's so offensive about the proclamation of the gospel? It's Jesus Christ. It's the fact that he has come with saving love and forgiving grace and that through his resurrection God has appointed him Lord of all.

That he does come to liberate those who are oppressed by the devil. Whenever the gospel is announced, it always raises cosmic, spiritual opposition.

[15 : 28] We would love to create a gospel that doesn't get any opposition, wouldn't we? The problem is you see that the gospel is about much more than just getting individuals to heaven.

It's about the overthrow of evil. It's about the triumph of the Lord Jesus Christ over Satan and sin and about the spiritual reality of rescue and a new world to come.

So, verse 7, we meet the proconsul Sergius Paulus and Dr. Luke calls him a man of intelligence.

Isn't that a lovely phrase? He's the only person who gets that phrase in the New Testament. And I think the point is this, that he is educated, sophisticated, incredibly smart and completely in the dark about the true God.

In fact, all the human wisdom and intelligence and humour in the world cannot lead us to God. In my experience, the greater the sophistication, the greater the self-deception. Without the Holy Spirit and the word of God, our minds are dark about the glory of Jesus Christ.

[16 : 45] But the lovely thing about this is, I wonder if there's a little bit of irony at the end of the verse where he says that Sergius Paulus sought to hear the word of God. That's what makes him so intelligent. But there is a problem.

Verse 6, Sergius Paulus has an official religious consultant named Bar Jesus, a magician, Jewish false prophet. Bar Jesus just means son of salvation.

And what Bar Jesus would do is he would do a fortune telling, a bit of necromancy. He would pray to the ancestors. He would mix up some intestines of chickens and goats and cast spells.

In fact, there's a record of a magician over on the mainland casting a spell so that someone else's wife will fall in love with one of the Roman rulers. The thing above everything else, he claimed to be able to tell the future, which is a very useful thing if you're a pro-consul.

Well, in verse 8, Elimas, his name is, but that's the meaning of his name, the magician, he withstood Paul and Barnabas seeking to unconvert, to turn away the pro-consul from the faith.

[18 : 03] And here we begin to see that Elimas' religion is not harmless spiritual entertainment, it's deadly serious. As soon as the light of the gospel appears on Cyprus, the darkness of Elimas' religion must respond.

He knows instantly that the announcement of Jesus Christ must be stopped. In verse 9 we read this, But Saul, who is also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him, witheringly at 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, you shall be blind, 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.

Now that's just a bit strong, isn't it, don't you think? Don't you think that's a bit strong? Doesn't the apostle need to go to some anger management classes? Surely there's room for dialogue and reasonableness here?

Those of you who support the work of Ratanak know that in Cambodia, Ratanak is involved in trying to rescue pre-teenage girls from enslaved prostitution.

[19 : 35] Well, here is a situation where the devil has control and Paul is not in a fit of rage. This is not just an angry outburst. This comes from the Holy Spirit.

It's the Holy Spirit who takes the initiative and it is the Holy Spirit who blinds Elimas. Paul doesn't have the power to do that because the gospel will not be contained when it imprisons people.

And what Paul says to Elimas has absolute spiritual accuracy. He says, you call yourself Bar Jesus. You are Bar Devil. You say you have divine power but your power comes from Satan himself.

You say you can tell the future but you're full of deceit and you're full of lies and you're full of subtlety. You say you're an expert in spiritual things but you twist crookedly the gospel.

And not only for yourself do you do this but you do it for others and that is a wickedness of deep cruelty. Bad enough for you to block the straight path to salvation for yourself but to lay a roadblock in the way for others.

[20 : 41] That is a slavery to Satan and it is an evil thing. And full of the Holy Spirit all blinds Elymas. And it is the third that I can think of the third negative miracle in the book of Acts.

The others being Ananias and Sapphira and Saul himself on the road to Damascus. Don't you find it amazing that amongst the dozens and dozens of miracles in the New Testament all the interventions of God there is only three in Acts that are negative.

I mean clearly if God gave us miracles according to what we deserve they would all be miracles of judgment wouldn't they? But instead all we see is kindness kindness kindness and even in this miracle of judgment there is mercy.

Paul says this is only for a time and Paul himself knew what it was to be blinded and how God met him. The result is immediate verse 12.

The proconsul believed when he saw what had occurred. Just look at the last part of this verse for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord. Don't you think Luke should have said he was astonished at the miracle?

[22 : 00] Nope. He's astonished at the teaching of the Lord. It is not the miracle by itself it's the miracle which confirms the gospel. The announcement of Jesus Christ as Lord and suddenly Jesus as Lord is boiling on his heart and his conscience and the power of Satan begins to crumble before the power of the spirit and the gospel has astonished Sergius Paulus to become a disciple.

There's so much here I think that is to strengthen us and encourage us and challenge us but I just want to finish by saying this. There's a new movement a mentality in Canada which social scientists are calling the do not the do nothing mentality.

People are tired with the constant polarization in public life of every issue. they're weary of the over sexualization of our culture and so some have opted out and have begun calling themselves asexuals.

Some others have joined by calling themselves the unschooling movement weary of the over scheduling of their children. They now boast about how late their children have come to learn to read not how early.

And they're joined by a political movement which ran an ad campaign in the CBC during the last elections where they spoiled boldly about their right to not cast a vote.

[23 : 38] And I think there's a lot of sympathy for us for any notion that will do away with confrontation and conflict. And it would be so easy for us to become a do nothing church and to worship a do nothing Lord Jesus.

The trouble is that as we gather week by week it is the living Christ himself who meets us through his word by his spirit and shapes us and un.masks us as he reveals himself to us.

The question I want you to go away with this morning is how should we best respond to his divine initiative? How do we do that? How do we bear his name?

How do we be mission minded today? I want to call on you to give yourself earnestly to prayer. When Antioch responds to the initiative of Jesus they don't all get up and go out but they all share the risk and they all share the sacrifice.

They take the wealth of the resources that they have and spend it on mission. How thankful to God we are for their generosity and courage and insight and foresight and response to what God was doing.

[24 : 59] Brothers and sisters we are caught up in a much larger conflict. When we bear witness to Jesus Christ in this world our very lives are divisive.

Because the Lord to whom we bear testimony is a divisive Lord. God we bear witness to the one who came to bring release to the captives and people don't think they want to be released.

Recovery of sight to the blind, liberty to all oppressed by the devil. It is a revealing, unmasking and above all a saving word.

And it leaves no room for neutrality for us, those around us. will you pray that God would enable us to respond to him in a way that will bring glory to him, liberty to others and a sense of deep thankfulness in ourselves.

Let us kneel for prayer.