

THE POWER OF GOD FOR SALVATION ACTS 13:4-12

We are told in the New Testament that when a person hears and believes the gospel—the good news about Jesus—some things happen to that person which suddenly, profoundly, and permanently change his/her identity and destiny. When a person hears and believes the truth that Jesus died on the cross for their sins and three days later rose from the dead, he/she is born again (made a new creature in Christ), forgiven of their sins, delivered from the power and dominion of sin, transferred from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light (Col 1:13), reconciled to God (Rom 5:8), united with Christ, saved from God's wrath, adopted as God's child, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, sealed by the Holy Spirit, made an heir of God and a co-heir with Jesus Christ, and given eternal life.

It is no wonder, then, that Paul called the gospel *"the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes"* (1:16). Paul was declaring that when people are exposed to the message about Jesus, God's power is activated so that those who hear it and believe it are suddenly, profoundly, and permanently transformed by God. They may have the same appearance, personality, mannerisms, etc. but in God's eyes—in the spiritual realm—they are radically different.

It stands to reason, then, that Satan's number one objective in this world is to keep people from hearing the gospel. And he will use whatever tactic necessary and utilize every resource at His disposal to do so. Because the gospel—the power of God for salvation—is *the* biggest threat to his kingdom. The gospel wreaks havoc on the kingdom of darkness.

The passage we are going to look at this morning is evidence of this. Last week, we looked at the first three verses of Acts 13 in which the Holy Spirit revealed His intentions while the leaders of the church at Antioch were praying and fasting. We are told that the Holy Spirit said to them *"Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."*³ *Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off (13:1-3).*

I told you last week that the Holy Spirit brought Barnabas and Saul to the church at Antioch in its early stages of development and growth and used them to facilitate stability and maturity in the church. But since the Holy Spirit is sovereign and since the Holy Spirit's agenda is not maintenance but expansion, when He accomplished what He wanted through them in Antioch, He reassigned them to a different task. We discover the nature of that task in **verses 4-5**.⁴ *So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus.*⁵ *When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. And they had John to assist them.*

The "work" to which the Holy Spirit called and set apart Barnabas and Saul to do was proclaim the gospel in places where it had never been heard. Once again, this is the primary reason Jesus sent the Holy Spirit in the first place. In Acts chapter 1 Jesus said to His disciples, *"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth"* (1:8).

The Holy Spirit's chief objective is to proclaim the life-giving, liberating message of Jesus through disciples of Jesus to the entire world. Henry Martyn, the great missionary statesman to India and Persia, once said, "The Spirit of Christ is the Spirit of missions, and the nearer we get to Him the more intensely missionary we become". When we are filled with the Spirit and walking in step with the Spirit we will be interested in and passionate about the kingdom of Christ advancing in places where the kingdom of darkness presently reigns.

And the kingdom of darkness was presently reigning on the island of Cypress, so that

was Barnabas and Saul's first assignment. To get there, they traveled 16 miles from Antioch to Seleucia, a port city, and sailed from there to Cypress, approximately 150 miles away—about a twenty-four-hour journey by boat. Cypress had been home to Barnabas, so this was familiar territory for him. What's more, John Mark, who had been led to faith in Christ by the apostle Peter (1 Pet. 5:13), was Barnabas' cousin, and came along to assist them.

They began their ministry by preaching in the synagogues in a port city named Salamis, which was on the northeastern end of the island. The text does not say if the Jews there were receptive to their message, or if they shared the message with any Gentiles in that city. I suspect they did, and I suspect that the seeds of the Gospel were sown on fertile soil, since they were directed by the Spirit to go there. Nevertheless, **verse 6a.** *⁶ When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos...*

That Barnabas and Saul traveled the "whole" island, may well be a reference to the fact that they had many opportunities along the way to share the good news about Jesus. Paphos, the capitol of Cypress, was a hundred miles from Salamis on the southwestern shore, and there were, undoubtedly, many small towns and villages between the two cities.

Verses 6b. *...They came upon a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet named Bar-Jesus.* Bar-Jesus means son of Jesus, but since Jesus was a very common name in the first century, there is no reason to think that he had any prior knowledge of or association with Jesus of Nazareth. His name, however, indicates that he was a Jew. Apparently, he was well-known in Paphos, if not the whole island. He is identified as a magician, not the kind of magician who performs sleight of hand, but a wizard who dabbled in witchcraft and sorcery and was able, therefore, to perform wonders by Satan's power.

Verses 7-8 *⁷ He was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. ⁸ But Elymas the magician (for that is the meaning of his name) opposed them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith.*

As the *proconsul* of Cypress, Sergius Paulus was the highest ranking government official on the island. We are not told how he came to find out about Barnabas and Saul, but it is likely that their preaching, accompanied by signs and wonders, had been the talk of the town. He is described as a man of intelligence, suggesting that he was well educated and a seeker of truth. Not surprisingly, he wanted to hear the message that Barnabas and Saul were preaching, which is identified as the Word of God.

But we are told that Bar-Jesus, also called Elymas (which means "magician") tried to turn him away from the faith. We are not told how he tried to do this, but this *is* a standard tactic of the devil. Satan tries to divert or distract or confuse so that people will be prevented from hearing the truth that he knows is the power of God for salvation. And Bar-Jesus was his instrument to employ these tactics so that Sergius Paulus would not hear and believe the gospel.

Verses 9-11. *⁹ But Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him ¹⁰ 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? ¹¹ 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.*

Saul, whose Roman name is Paul, understood who and what Elymas was. He understood that he wasn't merely the proconsul's advisor; he was an emissary of Satan. Satan was using him to prevent the proconsul from hearing the liberating, life-giving message of Jesus. How did Paul know this? Because he was "filled with the Spirit", verse 9.

Paul called Elymas a “son of the devil” because that’s exactly what he was. In other words, Paul wasn’t cursing him or cussing at him because he was irritated. He was identifying the source of Elymas’ words and actions—that Elymas was working on behalf of his father, Satan. Paul knew that the gospel is the power of God for salvation and is, therefore, the biggest threat to the kingdom of darkness, and he could see Satan’s fingerprints all over Elymas’ attempts to divert the proconsul from hearing and believing the gospel.

What is more, since Paul was under the influence of the Holy Spirit just as Elymas was under the influence of the devil, Paul could boldly and courageously confront Elymas because greater is He that was in Paul than he that was in Elymas. This was a spiritual power and Paul wasn’t about to let Satan win. So, Paul temporarily afflicted Elymas with blindness, an affliction that was so sudden, stark, and astonishing that Elymas could not help but immediately shut up. The text says that he went about seeking people to lead him by the hand, which is another way of saying, he went from being Mr. Bravado to Mr. Helpless, abandoning his attempts to steer the proconsul away from the gospel.

Verse 12, *¹² Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord.*

Sergius Paulus believed when he saw what had occurred. In other words, the power encounter between light and darkness in which the light overcame the darkness proved to him that the message being proclaimed was true. And as he heard the message being explained, he was astonished, not by the power encounter he had just witnessed, but at the teaching of the Lord he had just heard.

What is so astonishing about that teaching? Though we are not told anything about Sergius Paulus’s background, we can assume, by the nature of his position, that he was a high achiever. You don’t become a proconsul without rising through the ranks and being singled out for your intelligence, work ethic, leadership skill, trustworthiness, and responsibility. Sergius Paulus had spent a lifetime trying to impress his superiors through his personal performance, proving himself to be worthy of his position.

But what is so astonishing about the gospel is that being in a position of favor with God has nothing to do with self-effort, personal merit, or individual achievement. Favor and status with God comes from believing that God’s own Son, Jesus, secured God’s favor for us by being nailed to a Roman cross (the ultimate symbol of shame) and while on that cross bearing our sin in His own body, being punished for that sin by God His Father so that we wouldn’t have to be punished, dying in our place, and then rising from the dead three days later to conquer our ultimate enemy, death. Jesus did all the work for us so that there is nothing of our own we bring, simply to His cross we cling. And that message is the power of God for salvation.

What is the application of this passage for us? I would like to suggest two things:

First, if the primary reason Jesus gave us His Spirit is so the Spirit can use His followers to proclaim the gospel, let *us* be filled with the Spirit so He can use us. I cannot emphasize enough that the reason for the effective presentation of the gospel on Cypress, the reason for Sergius Paulus’ conversion, the reason for Elymas’ temporary blindness is not because Barnabas and Saul were exceptional individuals. It is because they were under the influence of the Holy Spirit. Look again at verse 2, *The Holy Spirit said [to the leaders at the Antioch church], “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”* Look at verse 4, *“So, being sent out by the Spirit, they went on their way...”* And look at verse 9, *“But Saul...filled with the Holy Spirit...”*

Someone has said, “The Whole Work...of the Whole Church...is the Work...of the Holy Spirit” (Bob Bakke). It is not the Holy Spirit plus our good ideas, eloquent words, and clever

strategies. The *whole* work is the work of the Holy Spirit.

So, the only way that we can possibly be effective in terms of proclaiming the message of Jesus and advancing the kingdom of Jesus is if we are filled with the Holy Spirit so He can initiate and empower us to go where He wants us to go, say what He wants us to say, and do what He wants us to do. If we are not filled with Him, all that we do will be an exercise in futility.

Secondly, since the gospel is the power of God for salvation, it is the biggest threat to the kingdom of darkness; thus, presenters must be prepared for stiff opposition. We must be prepared for that stiff opposition *whenever* the gospel is presented.

It took me a while to figure this out. I remember two things that occurred within a week of each other early on in my pastoral ministry. The first took place on a warm summer afternoon when a young couple and I were sitting on our lawn having a conversation. They had been referred to me by a mutual friend who had heard them talk about taking their own lives and was concerned that they might just do it.

It was evident just by looking at them that this couple had lived very difficult lives. There were hard lines etched on their faces, a vacancy in their eyes, and an abruptness in their manner that led me to think they were not going to give their trust easily. They were fidgety, edgy...and wary.

After a little prodding I managed to discover that neither of them had any knowledge of the Lord or His Word, neither had ever been to a church, both were hard partiers, both were from broken homes, and both were estranged from their families.

I prayerfully navigated my way through the conversation looking for an opportunity to share the gospel with them. As I explained who God was and how He loved them and had made provision through His Son, Jesus, for them to become His friends, to be forgiven of their sins, and to have eternal life, their demeanors and their body language dramatically changed. They suddenly sat very still and became very attentive and focused. I was aware that the Spirit of God was at work, and it was as if I could see the light come on inside their heads.

When I finished sharing the gospel there was a sort of sacred silence for a few seconds as they pondered what Jesus had done for them. I asked them if they would like to receive Christ. But before they could even get the words out of their mouths to respond, a large wasp suddenly appeared and started buzzing around the young woman's head, causing her to leap to her feet and frantically wave her arms. Then he jumped up and began trying to swat the wasp, and for probably a full minute that pesky wasp would not leave her alone. But when it finally went away, and they settled back down, the opportunity was lost. Try as I may I could not get them to refocus and return to our conversation about spiritual things.

What was that? Was the timing of that intrusive wasp just an unfortunate coincidence? Or was there something else going on?

About a week later I was having a conversation with an intelligent young man who was a professing agnostic but was seeking truth. Once again, I had an opportunity to share the gospel. I explained how Jesus had bore this man's sin in His body, and how He had endured God's wrath and experienced the punishment that he and I deserved. And while I talked, he sat riveted, hanging on every word. Again, I was aware that the Spirit of God was at work opening his spiritual eyes.

But just as I started to ask him if he would like to receive Christ, something happened to me that had never happened before and has never happened since. Suddenly my throat tightened and felt as if someone had stuffed it with cotton, and I literally could not speak. Try as I may, no sound would come out of my mouth, not even a whisper.

After about a full minute, when my voice finally returned, the opportunity was lost. That bizarre incident had sufficiently distracted this young man so that his mind was no longer on the gospel and his spiritual need. And I never could get him to refocus in order to get the conversation back to where it was.

What was that? Was the timing of my sudden and inexplicable muteness merely an unfortunate coincidence? Or was there something else going on?

I want to remind you that the greatest threat to the kingdom of darkness is not our political influence or our intellectual prowess or our oratory skills. The greatest threat is the message we have—the gospel, because the gospel is the power of God for salvation for those who believe. The gospel is the weapon that will do the most serious damage to Satan's kingdom, and we, as Christian soldiers, have that gospel in our possession. We are the messengers of that gospel. And when we share it, we are invading the devil's territory with the liberating, life-transforming message that will set people free from Satan's control and transfer them from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light.

And so, the devil is going to try to do whatever it takes to shut us up, to keep us quiet, to render us ineffective in spreading this good news. And he will use whatever tactic he can including discouragement, intimidation, ridicule, wasps, and dry throats.

My experiences with the wasp and the dry throat occurred thirty-five years ago, when, quite frankly, I was relatively ignorant of the devil's tactics. When I share the gospel nowadays, I have a completely different level of spiritual awareness, and I usually go into such conversations with an alertness and a preparedness to deal with such occurrences in a more appropriate way.

May God help all of us to be prepared for the opportunities he places before us, for we are *all* ambassadors of Jesus Christ.

The Power of God for Salvation

Acts 13:4-12

Main Idea: Since the gospel is the power of God for salvation, it is the biggest threat to the kingdom of darkness; thus, presenters must be prepared to face stiff opposition.

Paul and Barnabas proclaim the Word in Cypress (4-6a)

They are sent by the Holy Spirit (4)

They start by preaching in local synagogues (5)

They travel throughout the island (6a)

Power encounter at Paphos (vv.6b-11)

The agitated wizard named Bar-Jesus (6b-7a)

He was a false prophet (6b)

He was a confidant of the proconsul (7a)

The interested proconsul

He was a man of intelligence (7a)

He wanted to hear the Word (7b)

The sovereign Holy Spirit (vv.9-11)

Speaking through Paul (v.9-11a)

Judgment through blindness (v.11b)

The gospel takes hold (v.12)

Application:

1. If the primary reason Jesus sent His Spirit is so the Spirit can use His followers to proclaim the gospel, let us be filled with the Spirit so He can use us.
2. Since the gospel is the power of God for salvation, it is the biggest threat to the kingdom of darkness; thus, presenters must be prepared for stiff opposition

Application and Discussion Questions

Acts 13:4-12

If the biggest threat to the kingdom of darkness is the gospel (since it is the power of God for salvation—Rom. 1:16), then it stands to reason that Satan will use whatever tactic necessary and utilize every resource at his disposal to prevent people from hearing and believing the gospel. What are some tactics and methods Satan uses in our culture to prevent people from being exposed to the gospel?

Have you ever witnessed or experienced spiritual opposition to the gospel? Describe what happened. Were you, in the power of the Spirit, able to be victorious?

Read Ephesians 5:18-21. What does it mean to be “filled with the Holy Spirit”? How does one become filled with the Spirit? What is your role or responsibility in becoming filled with the Spirit?