

August 18, 2024
As You Are Going: The Battle is Real
Acts 13:4-12
Vernon Advent Christian Church

Intro... One of the best ways to lose a battle is to not even realize that you're fighting one. Any country that's oblivious to the presence of a powerful enemy or to that enemy's strategies or tactics will almost certainly be defeated. We see this play out in the world of sports all the time. When a team is doing well in a particular season, or over the course of several seasons, the temptation is there to think to become over confident and to think highly of themselves and not prepare as hard against the competition they believe is weaker than they are. Sports history is filled with examples of some of the greatest upsets. The 1980 US Olympic Men's Hockey team defeated the Russians, the best hockey team in the world who had won the gold medal in 5 out of the previous 6 Olympics, largely because they did not believe they could lose to a bunch of college amateurs.

One other example of this hits a little too close to home, and I apologize if it brings up any painful memories (I know it does for me.) In 2007, the New England Patriots had won every single game and were headed to the Superbowl against, at least on paper, a much weaker New York Giants team with a win securing a perfect 19-0 undefeated season, something that had never been done in the NFL. Heading into the game, Tom Brady was interviewed about comments made by a Giants defensive player saying they were going to hold the record setting Patriots offense to no more than 17 points to which Brady responded with a chuckle and brushed it off. When it was all said and done, the Patriots lost the Superbowl 17-14, and with that loss, an undefeated season. To this day, every player that has been interviewed has admitted that they did not prepare well for that game because they thought they were going to win just like they had every other game that season.

This concept of not taking your opponent seriously also works the same way spiritually. The Bible is filled with passages that remind us that we're in the middle of a spiritual battle that many of us are unaware of and ill prepared for. In fact, that's the main idea of the passage in Acts 13 we are going to look at today. This passage shows us that a spiritual battle is raging for the souls of those who don't yet know God. And, again, the best way to lose this battle is to not even realize that we're in the middle of it.

Satan, our great enemy, is a powerful opponent with a very specific plan. And at the very center of that plan is his desire to stop the spread of the gospel and keep people from putting their faith in Jesus. So, it's not an acceptable option for Christians to be oblivious to this spiritual battle that's raging around us. And not only do we need to recognize the reality of this battle, we also need to know a thing or two about our enemy if we're going to counter his attacks effectively. Thankfully, I believe the passage before us shows us these things.

But before we walk through this passage, let me first remind you of the context here. Ch. 13 marks a major turning point in Acts as Pastor Bruce made us aware last week. The first twelve chapters of Acts tells us about the spread of the gospel among the Jews, primarily through the Apostle Peter in Jerusalem and then in the larger regions of Judea and Samaria. However, beginning with ch. 13, and continuing through the rest of the book, the focus now shifts to the gospel work among the Gentiles through the Apostle Paul, and his associates, who take the

gospel far beyond Judea and Samaria and go throughout the Roman Empire, or as Jesus put it in Acts 1:8, “And you will be my witnesses...to the ends of the Earth.”

Now, as we saw last week, the first three verses of Acts 13 record the Holy Spirit leading the church of Antioch to set apart Barnabas and Saul and to send them wherever the Spirit might lead them to go. So, the church prays over Barnabas and Saul and sends them off for this ministry. And this brings us to the passage we will be looking at together today beginning in vs. 4 of Acts 13. If you are able, please stand in honor of God’s Word as I read it aloud for us this morning. [Read passage]

Our text begins by telling us that Barnabas and Saul were sent out by the Holy Spirit and traveled to Selucia, a port city in close proximity to Antioch, and set sail for the island of Cyprus. And one reason, most likely, why Barnabas and Saul probably chose to go to Cyprus first was because, not only was it close by, but, according to Acts 4:36, Barnabas was actually from there. So, Barnabas already knew the culture and how to get around, which made him well-equipped for ministry there. The text tells us that they went to Salamis first, which makes sense because it was the closest port city on the island and they preached in the synagogues first. Being that they were both learned Jewish men, it gave them the opportunity to speak to the Jews on the Sabbath and they took opportunity they were given to open up the Old Testament scriptures and point them to Jesus. And this would become Paul’s M.O. throughout his missionary journeys to preach to the Jews and the synagogues first and then to the Gentiles.

The text also mentions that a John was traveling with them and assisting them. This is not the Apostle John, but a man also known as John Mark, and he is the same one as mentioned in Acts 12:12 and 25. He traveled with Barnabas and Saul on this trip and is the same Mark who later wrote the Gospel of Mark. He grew up in Jerusalem, and this made him an eyewitness of many of the events in the life of Jesus. Now, based off Acts 12:12, some scholars believe that John Mark’s house may have been the same as the upper room where Jesus held the Last Supper and where the church was meeting on the Day of Pentecost, as it seems like this was a key meeting space for the early church.

The text then tells us in vs. 5-7, that as Barnabas and Saul continue across the island of Cyprus, and they arrive in the capital city, Paphos, on the western side of the island where they encounter two people. The first, is a magician and Jewish false prophet named Bar-Jesus. “Bar” is Hebrew for “son of,” so his name literally means “son of Jesus” or “son of salvation.” Now, we can’t be sure, but he probably chose this name for himself because he was actually claiming to be a descendent of Jesus and, as a magician, that he had inherited Jesus’s miracle-working power. But regardless of what his name was in reference to, just understand that this guy was bad news. And when it says that he was a magician, that’s not talking about the kind of magician we might think of who is an entertainer with a couple of card tricks. No, this man was practicing the kind of magic that involved demonic powers, known as a sorcerer in other parts of scripture.

And the text says that he was with the Roman proconsul, or governor, of Cyprus a man named Sergius Paulus. It is implied here that Bar-Jesus was functioning as an advisor for the proconsul, using his “magic” to give the proconsul advice in various situations. He was probably involved in using astrology to look for different signs that would be significant for the proconsul to provide him with guidance as he made important decisions as he governed.

Now, it just so happens that it seems the arrival of Barnabas and Saul at Paphos came at just the right time. Aren’t you amazed when God does that? You see, the scripture suggests to us that Sergius Paulus apparently had come to a place in his life where he was very interested in spiritual things and receptive to spiritual ideas. This is probably one reason why he kept Bar-

Jesus in an advisory role and why it says in vs. 7, he “summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God.” I mean, that’s pretty amazing when you think about it. Imagine being from somewhere else and travelling here to Vermont as a missionary and going up to Montpelier you’re immediately being summoned by Governor Scott because he wanted to “hear the word of God.” That would be incredible wouldn’t it? And that’s basically what happens here in vs. 7.

Evidently, Sergius Paulus was not convinced by the paganism and idolatry that was everywhere throughout the empire and was on a quest for spiritual truth and was open to finding it elsewhere. This should be an encouragement to us that those around us who do not yet know the truth, are searching for it. Whether they realize it or not, they are searching for the truth, they just don’t know where to find it. Some may think they have, but if it’s not based in a relationship with Jesus, it will not last and the search will continue. We, who are in Christ, have the truth that sets people free and we need to share the truth of Jesus to those who are lost without it in the same way that Barnabas and Saul did in our text today. We’re told that when Barnabas and Saul arrived, they were given the opportunity to share the gospel with the proconsul. And it’s when they do that, the spiritual battle that’s been a reality all along now becomes visible.

Look at vs. 8-10, as we now see the opposition to the gospel and Paul’s rebuke. Not exactly the kind of thing you would find on a greeting card. We’re told that the magician’s real name is Elymas, as if Luke the author doesn’t want to dishonor the name of Jesus any longer in this account. And we’re told that he was using his influence to actively try to turn Sergius Paulus away from the faith.

One thing to not miss here in these verses, it mentions that “Saul... was also called Paul.” Saul was his Hebrew name and Paul was the Roman version. So, as he travelled as the Apostle to the Gentiles, he became known by the Roman version of his name, Paul which I’m now happy about because I don’t have to keep confusing you folks by having to switch back and forth! From this point on in the Book of Acts, he is referred to as Paul.

Paul uses a play on words here when he calls him a “son of the devil.” Remember, this magician was calling himself Bar-Jesus, or “son of Jesus,” but Paul’s basically saying, “Jesus isn’t your father, the devil is.” And it was true. Elymas was being used by Satan in his attempts to keep the proconsul from embracing the gospel. That also made him, as Paul says, an “enemy of all righteousness” who was “making crooked the straight paths of the Lord.” (vs. 10) God designed the way to be rescued from sin to be a “straight path,” easy to travel for all who are willing to lay down their pride and self-sufficiency. But Elymas was putting obstacles in the proconsul’s way and thereby making that straight path into a crooked one. We can assume, he was doing this because he enjoyed his position of importance with the proconsul and wanted to keep his job. The proconsul becoming a Christian wouldn’t exactly be a career boost for Elymas. Yet, what we’re seeing here, ultimately, is the work of Satan through Elymas to prevent the spread of the gospel. We’re seeing a manifestation of the spiritual battle that’s always raging, a battle for the souls of those who don’t yet know God.

Notice that Paul knows exactly what’s happening. He’s not oblivious to this spiritual battle, but addresses it head-on in his rebuke to Elymas. And it’s critical for us to be aware and keyed into that as well as we seek to lead people to Jesus. When you share the gospel with someone, understand that you’re not sharing that message in a spiritually neutral context. First of all, we know from scripture that the person’s heart, which Jeremiah 17:9 tells us is “deceitful and desperately sick,” is naturally in a state of rebellion against God until God, first, works miraculously within them to change that. But in addition to that, don’t doubt for a moment that

Satan's actively at work in the situation and willing to use every weapon at his disposal to keep that person from Jesus.

So sharing the gospel, as simple as it might be in many ways, actually involves an all-out war against the forces of darkness. And that shouldn't in any way discourage us from sharing the gospel, but it should lead us to make sure that our gospel witness is absolutely covered with prayer. This battle against the forces of darkness is won not by our cleverness or smoothness in sharing the gospel but rather on our knees in prayer. Our human abilities are no match for Satan's power. Brothers and sisters, and I heard this from another pastor some time ago, "Satan laughs at our abilities, but he trembles at our prayers." But not by the prayers themselves, as if we have to say the right magic words. It's not the prayers themselves that make Satan tremble, but by who we're praying to. Jesus has already won the victory, and so we pray in the power of his name, that is stronger than any power of darkness, for the lost to come faith in Jesus and let him do the work in their lives. So, although we don't see Paul praying in our text today, we know that he was a man of prayer, as evidenced by his writings in the NT, and that it was part of how he discerned who was really behind the actions of Elymas.

This moves us now to vs. 11, and we see that true conversion comes through the Gospel. After Paul rebukes Elymas for allowing himself to be used by Satan for such evil purposes, he is struck blind. At this point, we can't help but think Paul would remember his own experience with God on his way to Damascus in Acts 9. Certainly, those who resist God are blind spiritually, so God just gave Elymas a physical blindness that matched his spiritual blindness. Sadly, we never hear of Elymas repenting, as Paul did.

But the proconsul certainly takes notice. We read in vs.12. Notice what makes the biggest impact on the proconsul. We read that the fact of Elymas being struck with blindness had something to do with the proconsul's conversion, but it wasn't the driving force. According to the text, why did the proconsul believe? It says that "the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord." That word "astonished" is also translated "amazed" and "astounded." So, even though Paul's miracle was obviously a factor in the proconsul embracing the gospel, ultimately it was an authentication to the gospel message itself, "the teaching of the Lord," as it says that the proconsul found so convincing.

You see, at the end of the day, the gospel is self-evident and self-authenticating. What I mean by that is that when God opens your eyes to behold the glory of the gospel and to recognize the "astonishing" and "amazing" things it teaches, you instinctively recognize that this has to be from God. And it's this glory that the proconsul saw and that caused him to be "astonished" and "amazed," and ultimately to believe.

Perhaps there are some of you here this morning a lot like this proconsul in that your eyes are being opened to the glory of the gospel like never before. The question is, will you respond as the proconsul did by embracing this gospel message? That involves turning away from your sins and putting your trust in Jesus alone to save you and make you right with God. Or will you remain apart from God in your opposition to the gospel and in your spiritual blindness like Elymas?

And for those of us who are already walking with Jesus, hopefully all of this is an encouragement for us to share the gospel with boldness and confidence as Paul and Barnabas did. The battle is real. We need to recognize that we have an enemy whose goal is to "steal, to kill and to destroy." (John 10:10) But brothers and sisters, remember that although the battle still rages on, the war has already been won by our King Jesus! We do not have to be afraid of the enemy for, "no weapon that is fashioned against you shall succeed, and you shall refute every

tongue that rises against you in judgment. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord and their vindication from me, declares the Lord.” (Isa. 54:17)

Listen, you don’t have to know the answer to every question. You don’t have to be equipped with a bunch of sophisticated arguments to win people to Jesus. We certainly need to be prepared by being in God’s Word, but ultimately we just talk with people about Jesus. We need to help them see who he is, what he’s done, and everything that makes him so glorious. That’s what God uses to get ahold of people’s hearts and ultimately to bring them to faith.

As we look at Acts 13, we see that a spiritual battle is raging for the souls of those who don’t yet know God. Yet we have a weapon that can’t be overcome, the truth of the gospel that exposes the lies of the enemy. “For I am not ashamed of the gospel,” Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, “for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.”

As we are going, if we’re going to be a church on mission, we must realize that the battle is real, that we have an enemy that is against God’s mission of salvation. That we cannot fight this battle on our own but only through the power of Jesus who has already won the victory for us on the cross. So let’s be a church on mission, and as we are going, let’s keep on sharing the good news of the Gospel, for it alone has the power to save. Let’s pray.