

God's Vessels
Acts 13:1-12

Romans 9:1-24
Ephesians 2
Responsive Psalm 93

This morning we are going to be looking at chapter 13, in the book of Acts. In this chapter we will start to see a shift in narrative a bit. Up until this point, the author was largely following the accounts of Luke's ministry and the church in Jerusalem and the subsequent persecution and the spread of the gospel throughout the surrounding area. But even in that spread, as we saw in the account of Peter and Cornelius, the gospel was largely only taught among the Jews. Chapter 11 verse 19, says "Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, preaching the word to no one but the Jews only, but some of them were men from Cyprus and Cyrene who, when they came to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists, preaching the Lord Jesus.

So it isn't that the gospel was shared exclusively to the Jews only, but reaching the Jews in these various regions was the primary focus. And this honestly makes sense, for as we all know it was considered unclean that a Jew would have much contact with a gentile, we also saw that in the controversy with the account of Peter and Cornelius, for Peter lodged in his house, and ate with Cornelius and his household, which was something that is expressly forbidden for a Jew. So in light of this understanding, we can easily see why the Jews that fled Jerusalem would be seeking out and witnessing to other Jews, for it was the circle in which they traveled and surrounded themselves in. Not to mention, the majority believed that the idea of the gospel was for the Jews only, before the controversy of Cornelius, for it was the fulfillment of the promises that was given to them, it was tied to their history, to their lineage, and would in a sense appear to be something exclusive. Yet, through the vision given to Peter, and the confirmation of faith by Cornelius and his household it is apparent that God's intention was not to bring salvation to the Jews only, but to every race, and creed. For as he told Peter, "Do not call unclean, what God has cleansed." As Peter recounted this event to the church, it was very apparent that this was God's working in the Gentiles, that the gospel had now come to them as well as he said in verse 17 of chapter 11. "If therefore God gave them the same gift as he gave us when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God? Then, when they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life."

So now, going into chapter 13, there is a shift as Luke begins to focus more upon the ministry of Paul and those around him, and we see Paul actively preaching and ministering to the Gentiles. They were no longer on the fringes, and on the outside listening in, but rather directly being ministered to. But, that being said, Paul never abandoned the ministry to the Jewish communities he encountered either, While the thrust of his ministry focus may have been to the gentiles, that did not stop him from entering into the synagogues in each city that he went to and to reach out to the Jews who were there as well. In each case, it is the Jewish opposition to the gospel that brings Paul to minister to the Gentiles, yet Paul's pattern in each new situation and city he goes to is to minister to the Jews first, and then upon rejection he would go to the Gentiles.

Since this was the case, the synagogues were no longer a place that those who were believing in Christ could gather to worship for the strict ruling of access by the gentiles. So often times Paul and other disciples would set up other gathering points where those who were believing in the gospel would come together. But it is not as though they were setting up 2 separate churches, one for the Jews in the synagogues, and another outside for the Gentiles. But rather it was a place of gathering for both Jew, and Gentile to come together and worship.

Though he may have turned to the Gentiles in his ministry upon the rejection of the Jews, that does not mean that he fully rejected the Jewish believers replacing them with gentile communities, but rather was working to create a larger broader community, one of which comprised of both Jew and Gentile who would gather together in one common cause, to worship and praise God, and to teach and be a ministry outreach of the gospel of Jesus Christ. A community, brought together by the blood of Christ, and bound together in his love, and thereby fostering that love for one another. But having this dual ministry that Paul had, was not without issue, for the opposition of his teaching not only came from one people group, but from both Jews and Gentiles. He was a man persecuted on both sides, which ultimately was foretold by God in chapter 9, where God indicates that Paul will suffer many things for the sake of his name. But the prospect of persecution and rejection did not deter him, in fact he bucked down and pressed even harder.

Before we get into our study this morning, let us go ahead and read our passage this morning. Acts 13:1-12. In this passage this morning we are seeing the first account set out here of Paul and Barnabas being commissioned by the local body to be sent out with the expressed goal of being missionaries, of going out into other cities to preach the word, establish churches, and encourage and exhort the believers they come across. Up until this point we have seen that the gospel has spread out from Jerusalem and even into some of the further regions with the Ethiopian Eunuch. But much of that was powered by the fleeing of persecution which God used as a tool to spread the gospel into the world. Just think on that for a minute, something as horrific as persecution, designed to control, and deter the spreading of the gospel and to crush the fledgling church, having those who confess Christ being beaten, imprisoned, and some even put to death. Yet as we have noted by the sovereign design of God it had the opposite effect. The more the world attempted to suppress and push down the gospel message, the more it spread and was believed.

For the first time in the book of Acts, Luke is recording this account of these men going forth with the express purpose of ministry. They are not fleeing persecution at this time, but rather are going out into the world solely for the purpose of ministry. And this too, is lead by the Holy Spirit, for it says, "as they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, separate to me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them" The Holy Spirit's request here is for the leaders of the church to acknowledge by their actions what God had already decided and revealed. Paul in his own writing used this same term, to be "set apart" to describe God's work in his own life. In Roman's he opens that letter with a greeting, saying "Paul, a bond-servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated to the gospel of God." Having been called out, and separated, set apart for the purpose of the Gospel. And again in Galatians he writes, "But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mothers womb and called me through his grace, to reveal his Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles. Again separated, set apart to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. In both of these is the focus on the divine initiative in being set apart for that ministry, showing that it is from God, and acknowledged by the saints in the laying on of hands and sending them on their way.

This sending away is the Greek word used here, *apelysan* which is translated to send them away, is used with a sense of release, or dismiss, instead of a command to go, Which makes sense for we already know that Paul has been separated for this mission, having already been commissioned as an Apostle of Christ. The Holy Spirit's revelation to those men at Antioch who send Paul and Barnabas was God's way of showing them a bit of his plan for these 2 men so that they might willingly release them from their ministerial duties there among that body in Antioch, and prayerfully support them in their God-given mission for which they had been called.

This is one of the functions of a body of believers, it is to recognize those who are fit for the ministry, who are able and apt to teach, and to foster their mission, and to support their calling. These are the examples we see in this passage this morning, a fellowship of believers, a local church body who separates from themselves these 2 men and sends them out to go and be a witness, to encourage others, to preach the gospel, and to establish new churches. This is a working together to further the gospel, each playing the role that God has given, some to go, some to support with prayer and I am sure even though it isn't mentioned here, also financially, for I doubt they would send Paul and Barnabas on their way without means to support their travel.

In his writing Luke sort of glosses over much of this first missionary journey, only making mention that the word of God was preached in the synagogues, without going into any detail about the reception, or even any establishment of a church in some areas. In many of the areas that they were traveling the gospel had already been brought to the Jewish communities from previous Christians who had fled persecution, but as we see in every account Paul always makes a point to first stop at the synagogue before reaching out to the gentiles. While Luke doesn't give any detail or reason behind this practice we see that Paul does in verse 46 of this chapter. Where he says, "It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first, (speaking to the Jews) but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles." It would seem that Paul is fulfilling the very thing that Isaiah wrote in chapter 49, where he said, "Indeed He says, it is no small thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also give you as a light to the Gentiles, that you should be y salvation to the ends of the earth."

Paul preached to the Jews first for he believed that his calling was in restoring the tribes of Jacob and gathering a renewed Israel to God, before being a light for the Gentiles. And we even see that in the gospel presentation in this book, as Luke unfolds the history of the gospel spread throughout Jerusalem, and the surrounding areas, and into the further reaches of the world it started at the core of the Jewish faith, in Jerusalem, then outward to the Jewish communities in various cities, and eventually to the gentiles. In the first 7 chapters of so of Acts, Jesus is shown to be the fulfillment of God's promise to Israel as the promised messianic salvation. And again this priority of the gospel to Israel is spoken of again in chapter 3 of Acts, verse 22, "For Moses truly said to the fathers, The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your brethren, Him you shall hear in all things, whatever he says to you. And it shall be that every soul who will not hear that Prophet shall be utterly destroyed from among the people." It is clear that he is talking about Christ, and his redemptive work and the gospel which brings salvation. For all those who reject Christ, and his word will face eternal damnation, will be set apart from the people of God and cast into everlasting darkness. Then he goes on to show, that this was the point from the beginning, that God had foretold these very days, but many are dull of hearing and reject this prophet who has brought salvation and eternal life. Verse 24 of chapter 3, "Yes, and all the prophets from Samuel and those who follow, as many have spoken have also foretold these days, the coming of the Lord, the establishment of a new Israel by his blood to whom they rejected.

Though being Sons of the prophets and of the covenant which God made with our fathers, saying to Abraham, And in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed. To you first, God having raised up his servant Jesus, sent him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from your iniquities.” Yet, being descendants of the prophets, of Abraham, and heirs of the covenants....they rejected the very one that all of these foretold, but there was yet a remnant that was saved, out of the unbelief of Israel, God yet separated for himself a people,, and made a new Israel, not by ancestry, or genealogy, but by his blood, bringing together both Jew and Gentile into one faith, to be one people, a nation of priests, and heirs of his kingdom. So therefore we see Paul's practice of first preaching in the synagogues, to the Jews first to fulfill the covenant of God to his people, to tell them that the Messiah has come, but also he is not the savior of the Jews only, but of the whole world, and having rejected Christ, the gospel outreach is then brought to the gentiles.

In verse 6 in our passage this morning, Luke mentions that Paul and Barnabas have arrived at Paphos, here he does not mention the normal practice of preaching at the synagogues and then to the gentiles as what seemed to be the practice before, but rather Luke in his narrative has chosen to focus on one specific encounter instead. That Roman Proconsul. Sergius Paulus was the Roman consular governor of the Island, would have been well known and a man held in high esteem. Even Luke makes mention in verse 7, that he was “an intelligent man” Not a distinction that we see in the scriptures when describing someone inquiring of the gospel. But here we see this high ranking Roman Gentile who had heard of this new Christian faith, and was seeking to know more, he was curious as to what he was hearing. So he called for Paul and Barnabas so hear the word of God.

However, before Luke tells us of this encounter with the Proconsul, we are told that there was a certain adviser to him, a false prophet a Jew whose name was Bar-Jesus, which means Son of Jesus. Luke also goes on to mention that he is known by the name Elymas, and his is a sorcerer. This idea of a Jewish Sorcerer is a contradiction, because all of scripture has condemned those who were involved in magic or the occult, so it is likely that he was an apostate, who had left his Jewish faith and has instead embraced the paganism of the gentiles, and using such power and influence for his own gain as an adviser to the Proconsul. He may have very well been the courts magician, or astrologer, holding a position of power and authority...so when this Roman Sergius Paulus calls Paul and Barnabas not only are they a spiritual threat to Elymas, they would also be a threat to his power and influence over the Proconsul if he would come to believe in Christ, therefore rejected the pagan rituals and sorcery. As we see the rivalry of the early Christian's was not merely the Jewish faith, but also the beliefs and practices of the pagan gentiles.

But as we see in this account, Paul is presented as the Lords prophet, who by invoking the name of God supernaturally overcomes the influence of Elymas and shows God's sovereign power in the silencing and this sorcerer. Verse 9, “Then Saul, who is also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit looked intently at him, and said. “oh full of all deceit and all fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease perverting the straight ways of the Lord? And now, indeed, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you shall be blind, not seeing the sun for a time.” And immediately a dark mist fell on him, and he went around seeking someone to lead him by he hand.. Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had been done, being astonished at the teaching of the Lord.”

There is no power, no authority above the one who has made this world. As we all know, the world is full of Elymas' who go about twisting, distorting, deceiving and lying. Yet, none of this thwarts God's purpose, for God is sovereign even over them despite their rejection, or denial. By a word, through Paul God had made this prestigious adviser to be humiliated and brought low....being one who commanded respect to now be one who is feeble and must be led by the hand.

While the world may mock God, he is not one to be mocked and those who do are in danger of severe punishment, if not in this life, for sure the next. But even these who actively reject God, who mock him and his followers serve a purpose in God's economy. Roman's 9:22 "What if God, wanting to show his wrath and make his power known, endured with much long suffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction. And that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had prepared beforehand for glory." Prepared before hand, the vessels of wrath...yes, that's right, God has not only allowed, but prepared those in whom he will demonstrate his righteous judgment, so that we who are his people may know with what exceedingly great mercy he has given so that we may believe. But that being said, it is not truly apparent to us who these vessels are that he has set aside for wrath or mercy until judgment is given. As far as we know, those who appear to have been set apart for wrath, may very well be the ones who God has set aside for mercy, he may very well yet call them into the fold, therefore it is not for us to judge who is worthy or unworthy of the gospel, but instead to preach to all of mankind, and it is God who will prepare the heart to receive the message.

And no matter how Satan may try, no matter how much there may be an Elymas seeking to deceive, even in that God is sovereign and will never be frustrated...we have a good example of this concept of the vessels of wrath right here in our text this morning...the gospel was shared to the Roman Proconsul, and to this apostate Jewish Sorcerer...one, received a judgment, he was struck blind losing his ability to even move about on his own...while the other, it says+he believed when he saw what had been done. God used the wickedness, and a judgment of Elymas in the drawing in of the Proconsul. "What if God wanting to show his wrath, endured with much long suffering the vessels prepared for destruction, that he may make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy.

This is a humbling reality, and should drive us ever more to prayer and praise of our father. Knowing that each and every one of us deserve punishment for our sins, but God by his mercy has stepped in and took that punishment upon Jesus Christ, so that we may be these vessels of mercy for his glory. What a sobering thought, that our very salvation is not our own, but by God's grace he has shown mercy toward us.. and as scripture says, before we were even born, he knew us....and while we still hated him, he loved us. Praise God for his loving kindness, for his mercy, and his grace for without it we all would be hopelessly lost, bound in sin, and prepared for destruction. May we ever be mindful of this reality, may it be known that we are the children of this almighty, powerful, sovereign God and may we live as those who have been redeemed, not in a air of haughty righteousness..but rather in humble grace knowing that our faith, our salvation is not of us but of God alone. And may we be set forth as examples of this, may we be known as a people defined by this love of God, a people of compassion and mercy, showing grace to those who do not deserve it just as God has shown grace toward us. And may it be, that the reflection of God's love and grace flowing from us, may be a witness to others, so that they may see the light of Christ, and believe.