

Acts 13:4-12

“Two Responses to Christ: Power-Seeking Blindness and Power-Giving Sight”

August 27, 2017

Acts chapter 13 is the beginning of a new section in this narrative of Luke’s hand. The gospel had been declared from Jerusalem, into Judea and Samaria, and now we see the great missionary movement into the greater world of the Roman Empire. It begins from Antioch, from this multicultural and multiethnic church. Now, I know that we use the term missionary according to our Christian context, which has, as is typically the case, taken on a meaning different than the original usage. The word used here is “sent”. It is a sending work, a going work, a preaching, or announcing work. **In a much more accurate sense, our global missionaries are “announcers”, or “heralds”.** That is the root of all “missionary” endeavors of the Church according to the Scriptures.

And we know the content of this announcement: Jesus is the Christ who was sent from God, who died for our sins according to the Scriptures, was raised from the dead according to the Scriptures, and ascended to reign over all things with all authority, and who gives His Holy Spirit to those who entrust themselves to Him as their ruler and Savior.

And people will respond to this message in one of two ways: they will believe that He is what is proclaimed, or they will not. Now, some may try to alter the

message, making Jesus something which the apostles have not proclaimed, but still absconding similar language or forms. But that is still not believing the announcement. Some will reject it and turn aside, or like we see here with Elymas, some will seek to turn others aside from believing it.

What does it mean, then, to *believe* the gospel, the announcement of good news? Well, it simply means **to so value Christ Jesus as authoritative and significant that we live in the light of it**, to humble ourselves and entrust all things to Him and to His revelation of what is real, good, and true. You see, you don't "live the gospel." You live according to the gospel. The gospel is simply the announcement of who Jesus Christ is and what he has done in history and all the implications of those actions. You don't live that. He does. However, to believe it means that we live according to it. And it changes everything. To believe is to live as if He is the authority over all things, the Christ who reveals the Father, the one who rescues us from sin and death, who gave us His Holy Spirit as a guarantee of His complete redemption of us, the very radiance of God expressing His holiness, love, and justice, etc.

In this historical narrative we see two men, a sage and a politician. One who humbly submits to the Truth and desires to live accordingly, and one who loves and seeks power for himself and lives accordingly. One sees and one is blind. Let's take a look.

First, Paul, Barnabas, and John sailed out of the port of Seleucia, the port nearest to Antioch, on the Mediterranean Sea. They headed west from there, about 80 miles over sea to the island of Cyprus. **[IMAGE]**

Cyprus was Barnabas', Joseph the Levite's, homeland. Others who helped plant the church in Antioch were from Cyprus (Acts 11). Thus, Cyprus was a natural place to begin proclaiming the gospel. It was a land which they understood, where they had people whom they knew, and the geography with which they were familiar.

Cyprus was also quite influential. There is archeological evidence of large dwellings all the way back from the Bronze Age. Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love/desire, was believed to have been born there. It was an important island in the Mediterranean and therefore already had an established and ancient history when Paul, Barnabas, and John arrived. It was wealthy and modern, trading with countries all over the world who travelled through the Mediterranean. It was founded by the Sea People, and ruled by various world empires, including the Assyrians, the Egyptians, the Greeks, and the Romans.

The first city in which they arrive is Salamis **[IMAGE]**. Salamis was, from as early as 1100BC (the time of King David), the capital of Cyprus. When we think of these men, sent by the Holy Spirit, travelling about this Mediterranean island, we must avoid two possible errors in our imagination.

The first would be to assume that they travelled easy, as if they stayed in the modern Cyprian Hilton's on the shore as they travelled. Though Barnabas was a native here, and they most likely stayed with friends, this is more akin to couch-surfing than it is to a Mediterranean cruise.

The other extreme is to consider that they travelled in rugged country and slept under bridges or in hostels. No, Barnabas knew people and knew this land. What we know of him would give us credence to hold that he had friends in many places and the means to travel fairly well. There were believers in Cyprus, as indicated by the fact that Cyprian people planted the church in Antioch. So, they had friends, and probably brothers and sisters to help them in their travels.

Salamis was a city of 150,000 people. It would be like coming into Eugene. In fact, the theatre, which still stands today **[IMAGE]**, was built during the same time of this story. It may have been just completed, or almost completed when these three travelled through. It was slightly larger than Matthew Knight arena. It could hold about 15,000 people. Drama, politics, entertainment, sport, and business were all important to these people.

It was a wealthy port city and many marble statues dotted the city, Roman bathhouses near the gymnasium **[IMAGE]** and theatre were social gathering places, literal water-holes where we might have pubs. Wealthy nobles built homes in the hills to gather the sea breezes and many of the common people

had homes along the streets of a city that stretched over a mile down the coastline. And many Jews lived here as well, being dispersed by the usual fare and settling down to live and work where they were treated with respect. It is clear that there was already a strong Jewish presence here. So many Jews, in fact, that in 115AD, around 70 years after Paul and Barnabas visited and 50 years after the Judean revolt, the Jews revolted against the Roman powers in Salamis and the result was that 250,000 Cyprians were killed by the Empire and all Jews were deported from the island and not allowed to return. That takes more than a few upstarts.

Note that Luke uses the plural *synagogues*. That is, Paul and Barnabas preached to many synagogues during their stay in Salamis, requiring a number of Sabbaths to do so. So, they didn't just pass through the city on a weekend and move along. They must have been in town for a number of weeks at least, seeking to persuade Jews and God-fearing Gentiles in the synagogues that Jesus is the Christ. Of course, during the week they would have also met with Greeks, Romans, and other Gentiles from around the world living in, or travelling through the cosmopolitan port city of Salamis.

So, we must imagine these men like we would imagine you and me walking through Eugene, seeing the idols of their day plastered along the busiest street, the worshippers of other so-called gods beating their drums and selling their wares, the selling of sex and deception apparent in the public sphere. Who

knows, maybe people were calling for the removal of some statue of some god or noble to be replaced by a more current god or noble in an effort to appease some angered power, be it divine, political, or cultural.

My point is that **these three faithful men would have been announcing the exclusive authority, superiority, and sufficiency of Jesus in a world much like ours.** They travelled through a pagan, polytheistic, and political city just as we do, flush with the arts and entertainment, commerce, and politics much like ours. And they went to the synagogues first, because the synagogues needed to be reformed under the authority of the Messiah, Jesus, first. They did not know him, most rejected him, but they continued to announce Him, to logically and reasonably present the case that He is the Messiah to people who feared God already, and they were being empowered by the Holy Spirit to do so.

Now, we are not told what kind of reception that the gospel received in Salamis. There are ancient churches present in Salamis, although this doesn't prove the efficacy of their first preaching. However, it does show us that **the Lord works His will in times which we cannot see how it fares at present.**

I also love the fact that Luke continues to include John in all of this. Saul and Barnabas are preaching, together as a team, which is something to say about how churches are planted in new lands – together, not alone. They are striving in words, preaching and persuading, encouraging and convicting,

calling forth the history of God culminating in the sending of the Son as the Savior of the World and the Lord over all people. And John? John is “assisting” them.

What does this mean, assisting? Well, it is a nautical term which means “under-rower”. It came to be used in classical usage as one who serves another, who helps another achieve his goal. For example, every soldier in the Greek army had an “assistant” to carry the extra weapons. They weren’t the gifted fighters, but they were necessary for the fighter to do his job well. This was John Mark.

He wasn’t the gifted speaker, the preacher, the debater, or the pronouncer of the gospel. He wasn’t going to enter into the synagogues and preach or step into the philosopher’s circle and make an argument. Yet, what he did was necessary to the work of gospel proclamation. Paul and Barnabas would not have been able to work as well if they had not had John Mark with them. This is probably why Paul gets so upset when John Mark needed to head home. It wasn’t merely that John Mark left, but rather that he was so necessary and his loss was keenly felt by the apostle. It wasn’t merely a personal upsetting, but a missional one.

I don’t know if it’s possible to assume with any kind of certainty *how* John assisted Saul and Barnabas. It does seem, however, that **he did whatever needed to be done so that they could proclaim the gospel well.** He pulled on

his oar with all his strength so that Paul and Barnabas could steer the ship where it needed to go. Maybe he pulled his oar to find lodging and libraries. Maybe he located dinners or picked up extra parchment, or made sure their packs were set for the road. The point is that he is included in the team's efforts and the team's successes as one of equal importance, though he was an under-rower.

Maybe you're not a Saul or a Barnabas. Maybe you're not one to stand up and debate the philosophies of the mind or of the heart to a world bent on its own path of self-love and self-destruction. Maybe you're not a preacher or a small-group leader. Maybe you're good at organizing, or writing, or collating. Maybe you're good with numbers or spreadsheets. Maybe you love to cook and the laughter around the dinner table makes your heart soar. Then **put these gifts to work for the proclamation of the gospel!** Grab a Saul or a Barnabas and have a neighborhood meal. Do you draw or paint? **How can you work together with others of varying gifts and strengths to see the gospel presented and heard by those who have not yet believed?** That, my friends, is how the church works. Everyone gifted by the Spirit of God, with varying gifts as He has given according to His own will, to work together in mutually interdependent community, so that the gospel of Jesus Christ might be heard, believed, and obeyed. If you are John Mark, don't fret because you're not a Saul or Barnabas. Maybe you don't like the way the overseers are steering the ship. Are they faithful to the gospel? Then use your gift to play your part on

the team, and together we faithfully proclaim the Word of God and together we faithfully live according to it, so that He might be glorified in whatever work which we do...together.

The team then travelled throughout the island, from the Eastern port of Salamis to the western port of Paphos. Paphos, like Salamis, was another large metropolis with great influence. Under Greek and Roman rule it became the administrative capital in which the Senate's proconsul, or governor, was located.

What is interesting in this case, however, is the **two men** whom the team encounter. On the one hand, we have another magic versus Jesus encounter with a false prophet with a Jewish epithet. In this, Luke shows how Jesus has all authority in a demonstrative beat-down of a false prophet. On the other hand, we have an inquiring and open-minded Roman political figure who wants to hear the Word of God.

Look how the two figures are describe by Luke: Elymas (the language and ethnicity is unknown), whose name means "magi" or "magician" (like Simon in Samaris), who has taken the name Bar-Jesus, or Son of Joshua, is called by Luke a "false prophet", and by Paul "a son of the devil" and "an enemy of all righteousness" and "full of all deceit and hating all righteousness". These labels are given, not because of his name or history, but because of his present and active "opposition" to the gospel preachers and "seeking to turn the

proconsul away from the faith.” This man was **actively working against the gospel, and particularly was trying to turn away another man from believing it.** This is why the words which Paul attaches, being full of the Holy Spirit, are connected to deception: deception, guile, and hating what is right, i.e. loving what is not right.

This man reminds me of J.R.R. Tolkien’s character Grima Wormtongue in the novels, *The Two Towers* and *The Return of the King*. You can almost see him whispering in Sergius Paulus’ ear, trying to keep him asleep and ignorant of the reality around him, the great authority of Christ Jesus and His victory over sin and death, as if to keep the seeking Roman enslaved.

This is why Paul uses such severe words, such rude words, such powerful judgmental words! And look at the tension which Luke describes, and ask yourself how this would look today, and how would you have treated Paul, who was, by the way, filled with the Holy Spirit for this particular purpose. He “gazed intently at him”. Epic stare-down. Can you see the frustration in Paul’s eyes? The furrowed brow and set jaw? Can you see the anger flare up in the apostles’ eyes at a man who would actively attempt to hinder another man from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ? Can you see his mind turning – the one who blinds men’s eyes is the “god of this world”, and the one who slanders the Christ is the Devil, and the one who flatters men to see them die by their own self-love is the ancient

“enemy of God”, the Serpent in the garden. Do you see now why he calls him what he does? He is not a son of Joshua! He is a son of the Devil! **He, too, is trying to steal, kill, and destroy by keeping this seeking man from believing the good news of Jesus Christ’s authority and salvation.**

You see, when a person either took, or was given an epithet “son of something”, as Barnabas was given, Bar-Nabas, “son of encouragement”, it indicated a characteristic described by that term of which one was a son. So, when Simon Peter was given the epithet “Simon Bar-Jonah” by Jesus in Matthew 16, he was attributing the prophetic revelation of God to Jonah as the describer of Peter, who like Jonah, had received the revelation that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, as true and trustworthy and would carry this message to the Gentiles for their repentance, just like the Ninevites. He may have been describing Peter’s denial of Him three times as the three days in the fish’s belly before coming to his senses and repenting.

So, this Elymas the magician likened himself to Joshua, the warrior leader of Israel, who led the people of Israel to victory over their land-occupying enemies. Do you see his political ambition? Do you see how he considers himself? He loves power! He seeks to gain salvation (Joshua means the Lord saves) through power! His ambitions are to lead others, to gain power and to do so in the name of God. Don’t miss this! He does what he does in the name of God. He claims to be righteous, which is why Paul particularly condemns

him of unrighteousness and opposed to righteousness. Just as God gave Joshua the command to seize the land of Canaan from unrighteous nations, so this man had improperly interpreted the Scriptures to apply this command to himself!

Therefore, Paul, who Luke casually mentions here is also called Paul, his Roman name because he is a Roman citizen, is filled with the Holy Spirit, angered with the anger of the Holy Spirit, towards those whom actively seek to keep others from seeing the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. **God is so opposed to those who seek to blind others, the blind deceiving the blind to keep them blind, that He gets very angry,** the Holy Spirit in Paul condemned this deceiver with powerful forceful words and the judgment of God which followed. There is a time, when people are being deceived by such a person, to announce such harsh words.

And, of course, God wins. Magi or not. He is not as powerful as he assumes, nor is God on his side. **Nobody can hold back the Holy Spirit of God.** He who hovered over the deep when the earth was founded, who raised the dead body of Jesus to life, who took back the breath from Ananias and Sapphira; who has the power of Life, to give it or to take it, in His very being. Paul pronounces a curse upon this religious leader to show that the authority of Jesus, the Spirit-welded Son of God, is over all powers, and the wise man is blinded. How apropos! And look how perfectly Luke describes this. The curse for keeping

people spiritually blind is physical blindness. The mist and darkness, particularly described by Luke, is a type of the blinding fog of deception regarding the Truth, the love of men's hearts for power and self-exaltation which blinds us to the glory of God. Elymas is made an object lesson of the authority of Christ Jesus as the light of God's glory and all opposition to His exclusive authority as the foggy mist of darkness.

Yet, though the words are harsh and condemnatory, there is mercy here.

Elymas is not struck down like Ananias and his wife. He is given a chance to be led away, groping in the dark, in the hopes that he will find his way to humility, that the lesson of his blindness might be heard and heeded in his heart. I think that this moment had a profound effect on Paul, as well, for when he preaches to the Athenian philosophers, the wise men of Mars Hill, he uses the same analogy: **“From one man he made every nation of the human race to inhabit the entire earth, determining their set times and the fixed limits of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope around for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.” (Acts 17:26 NET)** Alas, we do not know if Elymas searched for God or continued to search for self-power.

Now, on the other hand, we have the man Sergius Paulus whom Luke describes simply as: “intelligent” and “wanting to hear the Word of God.” He is a man who is discerning and thoughtful, open to reason and submission to

the Truth. That is, while Elymas wanted truth to bow to power, Sergius Paulus was willing for power to bow to Truth. Thus, he wanted to hear what God had to say so that he might submit to the truth, if indeed it is true. He was searching for God in order to submit to Him. Now, some people appear to search for God, but it is not to submit to Him or to how He has revealed Himself. They are looking for a god-like-them, a cosmic assistant to their goals. This is not the type of seeking which God honors. Yet, to those who truly seek God to submit to Him, as He has revealed Himself in Christ Jesus is honored by God with the promise, “When they seek Me they will find Me, when they seek me with all their affections.” (Jer 29:13) When our hearts are set upon God *as God*, one will find Him.

How do you approach God’s Word? Do you want to hear it in order to submit to its truth, or are you only looking to gain power, to obtain a means to some other end? Do you approach the Word of God as enabling your deepest desires, or do you approach the Word of God to have your desires reborn and refocused? **Do you come to Him to be *taught*?** Do you see and savor the Word of God as “useful for all teaching, reproof, correction, and training in what is right”? (2 Tim 3:16)

Because when the authority of Christ is demonstrated before the proconsul, he is amazed at “*the teaching of the Lord*” and “he believed”. Note that he is amazed at *the teaching*, even though it was the expression of judgment upon

Elymas that clarified it for him, that Jesus truly is the Lord, the authority over all from whom he needed to be taught. It is the teaching of God, the Truth expressed from God, as the Word of God which he sought, and in particular the Truth expressed concerning His Son Jesus and in this Anointed One that amazes him and fills this man of intelligence and reason with wonder and awe. The Roman politician believes the gospel! There IS hope for politicians, if they will humble themselves and seek the Lord *as the Lord, the absolute Master!*

And here again is another great irony in Luke's telling: The supposed wise man, the Magi who is supposed to love and seek knowledge and Truth, instead loves and seeks power for himself and is condemned for it; and the supposed power-seeker, the politician of an occupying nation, does not seek power, but Truth overall and submits to Christ as the Truth. The politician believes while the "spiritual man" rejects.

It doesn't matter one's class, or position, or ethnicity, or wealth, or poverty, or authority, or weakness, or strength. **What matters is a heart that submits to Christ Jesus as the Truth, the only authority from which we know and see Reality.** The only one who can deliver on His promises, because even Death submitted to Him, and entropy could not reel him in.

And **what kind of authority is this Christ? What *kind* of master is this King?** He is the *crucified King*, the one who earlier had claimed, "The Son of Man

must suffer...” We know the reason, “For God so loved the world that He sent His only begotten Son...” Christ is the supreme authority in all the Universe, sent by the Father and anointed with the Holy Spirit. He alone is worthy of our adoration, our joy, our honor, our praise. Yet, **He is the kind of King who bore the sins and debts of His people and died in their place.**

And what is this *kind* of love? Love is only truly love when its object is unneeded by its lover. Think about it. What did Jesus get out of dying for us? He already had a community of joy, glory, delight, and love within the triunity of the uncreated God. He existed in the form of God from all eternity. He already ruled over all! He already had supreme authority. He didn’t need us to gain any worship that he needed, to gain some kind of love or respect when he already possessed a superior quality (eternal) of both from the Father and the Spirit, who, frankly, love and respect better than you or I could ever do. **So, what necessary benefit for himself does he derive from this death?**

NOTHING. That means that when the eternal Son came into our world and died upon that cross as one of us to rescue us from His own just wrath and defeat the curse upon us because of our mutinous ungrateful hearts, **he was simply serving us and not Himself.** He told the Father, “I have given them the glory that you gave to me...” (John 17:22) He set out to do with us what He had been doing for all eternity with the Father and the Spirit. He loves us without gaining anything necessary for Himself. In fact, He just keeps on

giving, His own Holy Spirit upon those whom He has chosen, who humble themselves and come to Him by faith alone – no performance but the Christ's.

This means that **one aspect of God's view of authority is to love radically, contra-conditionally, and to spend ourselves for the joy of others when we gain nothing from it that we need or have to have.** Is it a wonder that this moves this proconsul who knew Roman political intrigue, had seen the insane pursuit of power in the world; of rage and mobs and violence and hate?

John Stott wrote of this in his book, *The Cross of Christ*:

“I could never myself believe in God, if it were not for the cross. The only God I believe in is the One (Friedrich) Nietzsche ridiculed as ‘God on the cross.’

In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it? I have entered many Buddhist temples in different Asian countries and stood respectfully before the statue of the Buddha, his legs crossed, arms folded, eyes closed, the ghost of a smile playing round his mouth, a remote look on his face, detached from the agonies of the world.

But each time, after a while I have had to turn away. And in imagination I have turned instead to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs

wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn-pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged in Godforsaken darkness.

That is the God for me! He laid aside his immunity to pain. He entered our world of flesh and blood, tears and death. He suffered for us. Our sufferings become more manageable in the light of his.

There is still a question mark against human suffering, but over it we boldly stamp another mark, the cross that symbolizes divine suffering....”

And in the words of the poet Edward Shillito: **‘The other gods were strong; but thou wast weak; they rode, but thou didst stumble to a throne; But to our wounds only God’s wounds can speak, And not a god has wounds, but thou alone.’**

So, the question before us today is fairly simple: Will you behold the light of the glory of God in the face of this Jesus today? Will you love and seek and submit to the One who died in your place, and has been raised up the conqueror of death with authority over all? Or, will you choose mist and darkness, groping around, loving and seeking your own power to cling to the things which rule you?

Will you approach God’s Word as the Truth to which all your affections and valuations and power under-ow, which you will serve? Or, will you

approach God's Word as something which assists your own values, affections, and delights, which serves your goals?

I place before you today life and death, blessing and curse, sight and blindness. And the fulcrum is Jesus. Jesus is trustworthy, for He is the sovereign King who gave His life for you, though He didn't need you. He alone is worth it. Death could not hold him. The veil tore before him. He silenced the curse of sin and grave. He has no rival, no equal, now and forever God reigns. His is the kingdom. His is the glory. His is the name above all names. **Behold your King and live!**