

# **GOD'S SAVING PURPOSES PREVAIL BY THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT**

## **Acts 12:24-13:12**

### INTRODUCTION

Last week we ended our consideration of the martyrdom of James, the miraculous and humorous deliverance of Peter and God's just execution of the evil tyrant Herod with Luke telling us, in v. 24, that the word of God was fruitful and multiplied. This assertion of the gospel's progress was made in light of Herod's tyranny and death to show that the wicked opposition of men cannot stop God's word from progressing. However, the verse also anticipates the ongoing story of Acts. It foreshadows God's word being fruitful and multiplying throughout the world, even among the Gentiles. For that is where Luke takes us next. Beginning here in Acts 13 we find out that the word of God is now intentionally proclaimed to the Gentile world by God's command through the apostle Paul. The church, beginning here with the church in Antioch, aggressively and intentionally spreads the gospel outward, among the nations of the world.

Not only does v. 24 serve as a transition verse into the story of the evangelization of the Gentiles but it also informs us that the inclusion of the Gentiles into the church merely through faith in Jesus is the fulfillment of God's purpose for creating the universe. We noted last week that the verbs Luke used to describe the progress of the gospel were the same two verbs God used at the beginning of the world when he blessed that first man and woman and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it." God's creation purpose was to fill his perfect, holy, good earth with perfect, holy, good people who would rule it as his representatives. However, our original parents rejected God's good purpose and sinned and thus brought the entire human race and the world we live in into a state of corruption and decay. Thus, because of Adam's sin, human beings are by nature corrupt and we live in a cursed world.

But God's original purpose to fill his earth with holy people has not been frustrated by human sin. God promised in Genesis 3:15 that he was going to send a male descendant of Eve who would be wounded by Satan but who would destroy Satan and his hold upon this world. The history of the OT is the account of how God prepared the world for the appearance of that male descendant of Eve, who would also be a descendant of Abraham, who would be the royal Son of David and who would be the Savior of the world. Jesus is that promised Savior and he, by his life, death and resurrection has done everything that is necessary for God to justly create a holy people to live in his holy world. The new creation has begun. God is right now causing his holy people to be fruitful and to multiply through the proclamation of his word. When he has created enough holy people through his word to fill his earth then the end will come when Jesus will return and completely cleanse this world of evil and give to all of his people immortal bodies in which we will live with him in God's world forever.

In this story of the first missionary journey into the Gentile world we are witnessing the paradigm, the pattern of how it is that God the Holy Spirit, working through the church of Jesus, causes the word of God to be fruitful and to multiply among all the nations of the world. Here we find the divine pattern by which the life-giving Spirit of God, plants his life in his people by his word. This is a story that has been repeated tens of thousands of times over the last 2000 years and is even at this day being repeated around the world in thousands of local churches. It is a story that is being repeated in our own church.

### MAIN POINT

**The Holy Spirit causes God's word to be fruitful and to multiply by...**

#### **I. Leading the worshipping and dependent church through called and gifted men (13:1-2a)**

The story of the multiplication of God's word among the nations of the world begins with a description of the local church in the city of Antioch. Do not miss this simple, but profound fact. It is the local church that is the primary focal point of God's work in the world. The first thing we are told is that the local church is led by a

group of male prophets and teachers. We are not told that these men alone comprise the elder board of this local church. Presumably each of them would be considered to hold the office of elder in the church but we are not sure about that. We are not told which man has which gift or if they all have both gifts but we are told that these leaders of the church are characterized by these two gifts. In what way are these two gifts to be distinguished one from the other? We know what a prophet does because we were given a specific example of a prophet exercising his gift back in Acts 11:27-29. We saw there how Agabus prophesied in advance that there was going to be a famine in the Roman Empire. In response to Agabus' prophecy the church in Antioch took an offering which they sent to the church in Jerusalem by the hand of Barnabas and Saul to help that church when the famine came. So to these men also God reveals things that cannot be known through his word or through creation. A prophet receives divine revelation and then tells what God has revealed to the church so that the church will be able to take action. I'm not going to comment at this time on whether or not I think we should expect this gift to be in operation in our day. I preached an entire sermon on this subject back in June which you can read or listen to on the website. We are simply recognizing that some or all of these men had the gift of prophecy. The gift of teaching is the ability to take the written word of God and to explain it to God's people in such a way that the glory of Christ and his saving work are made plain. It should be remembered that this would entail explaining the OT Scriptures in light of the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus. Again, some or all of these men were exercising the gift of teaching in this church.

Notice that vv.2-3 use the pronoun "they", repeatedly. The question is to whom does the pronoun refer; the church or these five leaders? Most likely it refers to the church. The main reason I say that is because in every other case in the book of Acts when worship is occurring or when Christians are set apart for ministry of any sort the entire church is involved. Also, in 14:27 when Paul and Barnabas return from this journey they report to the entire church, not just the leaders of the church. So it seems to me it is while the entire church is worshipping and fasting that the HS speaks.

The word translated worship is a word that is regularly used in the OT to describe the service of the Levites and priests at the temple. They "serve" the Lord in offering sacrifices, prayer, singing and performing all the other religious ceremonies associated with the temple. In the NT we discover that Jesus is our priest and sacrifice and temple. He is the one who fulfills those OT symbols. We learn by looking at Jesus what each of those things and persons typified. However, Christians become, in Christ, God's priests (1 Peter 2:5 & 9). The NT describes a variety of ways that we engage in the worship or service of God as his priests. We worship God by offering our bodies as living sacrifices (Romans 12:1-2); we worship God by offering praise to God with our mouths (Hebrews 13:15, 1 Peter 2:9, Ephesians 5:19-21); we worship God by the preaching of the word which creates believers who are a sacrifice to God (Romans 15:16-18); we worship God by our prayers (Luke 2:37). It seems most likely to me that when it says that the church was worshipping that we should understand they were gathered together to listen to God's word preached, to praise God in song and word, to celebrate communion and to give themselves to God anew. Fasting points toward their God-dependence for fasting is always associated with earnest prayer in the Bible. So it is to a worshipping, praying church that the HS speaks and through which the HS sends out the word into the world.

As I was thinking about this picture of the church I was reminded of the first paragraph in John Piper's book, "Let the Nations Be Glad." This paragraph changed my life and I regularly think about it. You may have heard me quote it before but it bears repeating for it contains a biblical truth that is often neglected by modern, mission-minded churches. Here is what he says, "Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn't. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man. When this age is over and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more. It is a temporary necessity. But worship abides forever. Worship, therefore, is the fuel and goal of missions. It's the goal of missions because in missions we simply aim to bring the nations into the white-hot enjoyment of God's glory. The goal of missions is the gladness of the peoples in the greatness of God... But worship is also the fuel of missions. Passion for God in worship precedes the offer of God in preaching. You cannot commend what you do not cherish. Missionaries will never call out, 'Let the nations be

glad!’ who cannot say from the heart, ‘I rejoice in the Lord... I will be glad and exult in you.’ Missions begins and ends in worship.”

This is exactly what we are witnessing in this church in Antioch. It was called into existence by the proclamation of the gospel. It is a worshipping church and a praying church that is brought into existence by the good news about Jesus. Whenever you see the word worship or praise in the Bible you should always recognize that it is describing the joy and delight that people have in God which then results in acts of devotion towards God. It is the inward heart of joy in God that is always being referred to whenever worship or praise is mentioned. Everyone worships and praises and trusts in those persons or objects that they love or are impressed with or admire. The gospel is the message of how God has made a way for himself to become our treasure. Thus worship always is the result of faith in Christ. At the same time you can also see that not only has the gospel created a worshipping church but it is this delight in God that is the fuel and foundation and impetus for sending out Paul and Barnabas. The church does not obey the HS reluctantly or dutifully, like good soldiers obeying the unpleasant order to go into battle but with joy because the church is like a stadium full of Packer fans that want everyone to praise the green and gold.

*The Holy Spirit causes God’s word to be fruitful and to multiply by...*

- *Leading the worshipping and dependent church through called and gifted men*
- *And by...*

## **II. Sending out proven and potential leaders as missionaries (13:2b-5)**

While the church is gathered in worship, the HS speaks. What does the HS say to the church in Antioch? He says that he wants them to separate out, to set apart, to appoint Barnabas and Saul to go do the work to which he, the HS has called them. I cannot pass this by without helping you to see the identity of the HS. First, do you see that he is clearly a person? The HS spoke. Only persons can speak. The HS made a decision to call Barnabas and Saul to a particular work. Only persons make decisions. The HS uses a first person pronoun to refer to himself. Set them apart to “me”. Second, do you see that he exercises the same authority that God the Father and God the Son exercise? Who called Saul to preach the gospel to the Gentiles? In Acts 9, when Saul asked who it was that was speaking to him on the road to Damascus, the answer came back, “I am Jesus.” So Jesus is the one who called Saul to preach to the Gentiles. In Acts 22 when Paul is recounting his conversion to the mob in Jerusalem and relates Ananias’ visit to restore his sight he records Ananias as saying, “The God of our fathers has chosen you to know his will and to see his Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth.” So God the Father is the one who has set aside Saul to be a missionary to the Gentiles. You should never be intimidated by those who claim that the doctrine that the one true God is a trinity of persons is not in the Bible. There is no other explanation for this kind of language than the doctrine of the Trinity. So it is the personal, divine HS, the third person of the Godhead, who commands the church to set apart Barnabas and Saul to him for the work he has called them to do.

The two men whom the HS chose to take the gospel to the Gentile world are without question the most prominent leaders/teachers in the church at Antioch. The HS did not ask for the least qualified but for the most qualified men to be sent out. He did not ask for men who were not engaged in doing the work of teaching and shepherding the church but for men who were fully engaged in that work. He asked for men who had demonstrated both God’s call and God’s gifting for the work. There would be a lot less trouble on the mission field and in our churches if we observed this simple rule: the only people who should be sent out as missionaries or sent to be trained as pastors are those who are obviously called and gifted by God to do this work because they are already doing the work in their own church. This requires that every local church have the processes in place through which those whom God is calling to serve as teachers of the gospel, whether as lay leaders or in vocational work have the opportunity to engage in that work in their own church.

While Luke clearly wants us to see that the HS chooses the most qualified men to do this work he also wants us to see that this work is not reserved only for those with the most experience. Twice in our passage we are told that the young man, John, who is also called Mark, accompanies Barnabas and Saul as their assistant. I would

not draw your attention to this fact except that Luke clearly does in v. 5 and John Mark is not the only young man who accompanies Paul on his preaching tours. This is a very common pattern. Paul always has young men along with him who are quite obviously being trained by him in the work. He does as a lifestyle exactly what he commands one of his young apprentices, Timothy, to do when he is a pastor: “The things you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.” It is the principle of the multiplication of leadership. Paul is not only a preacher of the gospel he is also a trainer of preachers of the gospel. In the same way we are working, in our church, to create a process, led by Pastor Steve that will result in multiplying the number of spiritual leaders in our congregation. I fully expect that the HS will call some of those leaders to engage in full-time vocational Christian work as pastors and as missionaries.

Finally, I want you to notice the unity of the human and divine action that is revealed in vv. 3 & 4. In obedience to the command of the HS, the church fasts and prays for Barnabas and Saul and the success of the work they are called to do. Just imagine, this is the first time the church has intentionally sent out two of its members to proclaim the gospel to people beyond the scope of the present church. They know that only God can make successful the work and so they pray and fast for God’s blessing on his servants and the word they will preach. Then they place their hands upon them as an act of commissioning and a symbol of fellowship in the work. With this the church sends them off. However, the very next verse says it is the HS who sends them off. I think we often do not see God’s work because we assume that because humans are doing the acting, then the HS is not acting. It is the HS who lays hands upon them when the church lays hands upon them. We are the body of Jesus. We are the temple of the HS. When we send people out to do God’s work it is God himself that is sending them out.

Notice that immediately following this statement that the HS sends them out we are given their travel itinerary. Who decided where they should go? We are not told that this info was given by the HS. I think we must assume, as this is the regular pattern in Acts, that Barnabas and Saul, perhaps in consultation with the leadership of the church prayerfully decided to go to the island of Cyprus. Cyprus is Barnabas’ native country. There has already been evangelism taking place on the island. So, while the mission is clearly to take the gospel outside the current extent of the church, yet the first region visited is not entirely strange. The leading of the HS often is through what appears to be very mundane and ordinary human reasoning. Yet, our confidence is that he is intimately involved in directing our thinking and planning even if we have not received a direct revelation.

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### **III. Making the proclamation of the word effective (13:6-12)**

It is somewhat surprising to notice that when they get to Cyprus, to the coastal city of Salamis, that they preach in the Jewish synagogues. As we have followed Luke’s story we have been prepared for a radical break from Jewish centered evangelism and yet it would appear that it continues here. Why does Luke inform us of this instead of just telling the story of the conversion of the Roman governor? There are two reasons we are informed of this Jewish evangelism. First and I think foremost, as Paul says in his letter to the Roman church, the gospel is first for the Jew and then for the Gentile. Just because it is God’s determination that people from every tribe and tongue and language and nation are added to his church does not mean that he has turned his back completely on the Jewish nation. God announced the gospel first to the Jews and so Paul continues that pattern. Second, this is Paul’s basic strategy wherever he goes in the Roman Empire. He begins with the Jewish synagogues because he knows there are always God-fearing Gentiles there through whom he will be able to connect to the broader Gentile community as they come to faith.

But the main emphasis in Luke’s story of what happens on Cyprus is seen in his confrontation with the Jewish false prophet and sorcerer, Bar-Jesus and the conversion of the Roman proconsul of Cyprus, Sergius Paulus.

While this proconsul is an intelligent man, yet he has been ensnared by the sorcery and false prophecy of the Jewish magician. Bar-Jesus is an adviser of some sort to the proconsul, probably using various pagan practices to advise the proconsul. This calls to mind the numerous occasions in the OT when false prophets give advice to the kings of Israel and are confronted by the true prophets of God (Jeremiah 26 & 28). Bar-Jesus realizes as he listens to Barnabas and Saul explain the gospel to Sergius that if the proconsul believes this message he will no longer listen to him and so he will lose his position. Therefore, he works to turn the proconsul away from the faith. He seeks to distract him and to divert his attention from the message of Christ by his false teaching and claims of divine revelation. Like King Herod before him he does not oppose the message out of religious conviction but out of selfish political ambition.

Apparently, Bar-Jesus has sought to turn aside the proconsul in a public way. Paul must have witnessed the sort of cunning deception he was engaged in because he publicly rebukes the magician. Notice that what Paul says is because he is filled with the HS. In other words, the words which Paul speaks are the words of the HS. Paul uses incredibly strong language to denounce the Jewish sorcerer. This kind of language sounds so harsh and wrong to our modern ears. Yet, these are the words of God himself. The HS is angry with this magician and denounces him in the strongest possible language through Paul. The HS, through Paul, says that he is a son of the devil, that his whole way of life is nothing but deceit and trickery which is what you would expect from one who is the son of the devil, who is the father of lies. He is continually perverting the way of the Lord. The Lord has set forth a way to be saved and he, by his lies and false prophecies continually obscures that way and makes it crooked and difficult to follow. Finally, the HS declares through Paul that he will be temporarily blind for his deception and perverting God's truth. His physical condition will match his spiritual condition. So how does God feel about the content of what people believe? Is God tolerant of the faith of Bar-Jesus? Paul denounces this sorcerer for what he believes. He calls him a child of the devil not because of his evil conduct but because of the evil content of his faith. While God probably will not blind you for believing falsehoods or for promoting falsehoods, you can be sure that if you do not embrace the truth of the gospel, you will be as certainly condemned by God as the Jewish sorcerer Bar-Jesus.

When the proconsul saw what happened to Elymas he was set free from the blinding effect of his deception and saw the glory of the gospel and believed. He would not have believed without the work of the HS, that is the point of the story. The HS, by rebuking and blinding the deceiver, the son of the devil, overcame the blindness of Sergius and he believed. A fully Gentile, Roman official became a follower of Jesus. From this point on in the book of Acts Luke only refers to Saul as Paul. By this simple literary technique he shows that this conversion marks the advancement of the gospel among the Gentile people through Paul. Also, by showing that Paul, like Peter before him, overthrows a magician, has the power of the HS to condemn those who oppose Christ and to convert powerful Roman authorities, indicates that he also is an apostle. The message he preaches is the same one that Peter preached and thus these Gentiles are equally the children of God like the Jews who were converted by Peter. This won't be the last time that Luke draws out the parallels between Paul and Peter's ministries. In doing this he continues to emphasize the unity of the gospel and of the church. The church is one because it is the same HS who is working all these things. So while the church advances among the various cultures of the world and thus becomes an increasingly diverse institution, yet it remains a united church because we share the same life, God's life and we share the same faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

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