

Into the Battle

Text: Acts 13:1-12

Introduction:

Gary Larson has a Far Side cartoon picturing two deer

(Put up slide)

You have a birthmark as a believer.

You are a target for Satan...

How do you live with that?

Once again the Bible is a wonderful commentary on the practical struggles of the Christian life.

Today we want to look at the activity of Satan, as he attempts to stop the efforts of saints. We see this clearly in this guy named Bar-Jesus or Elymas.

From this encounter we can learn two things:

When we share the gospel, we will engage in a spiritual battle and we must also be prepared for that spiritual battle.

Just to set the stage

The last verse of chapter 12 begins the story by writing of the return of Barnabas and Saul.

We are told, "When Barnabas and Saul had finished their mission, they returned from Jerusalem, taking with them John, also called Mark."

What mission are they returning from?

The mission to bring the collection of 11:27-30 to the elders in Jerusalem.

The account was interrupted by the story of Peter's second arrest and the death of Herod.

Now Luke returns to where he left off.

We read that the praying church commissions 5 men as missionaries.

Three of them, Simon Niger (Latin 'black'), Lucian and Manaen, we know little of.

But Barnabas and Saul were well known and will figure prominently in Luke's account from here on.

This is the first time that people go into mission willingly and freely.

Until now the spread was by persecution.

The people were forced out of tier cities (like Jerusalem)...

As they move around they preach the gospel and lives are changed.

This was quite a step in sending missionaries...

They could have stayed quite comfortable where they were.

So Paul and Barnabas, accompanied by John Mark,

head off on the first missionary journey.
No doubt they went with a sense of adventure and excitement about the mission.

Notice, too, that Paul and Barnabas did not go very far from home on their first journey.

This was hardly cross-cultural ministry.

Cyprus is about 60 miles off the coast from Antioch.

Not only that, it was Barnabas' home town,
and several in the Antioch church came from Cyprus as evangelists.

Paul and Barnabas start out by going to the synagogue,
where they are familiar with all the customs and traditions.
So this is not a great, frightening leap of faith for them.

Maybe that is a good pattern for our lives as well.

The journey of faith and mission can actually be close to home.

We were sitting down to lunch one day...
with 150+ primary school kids also in the dining room.
The comment was made...I wonder if they know the gospel?

At the conference we heard that only about 1-in-10 people are true believers.
That means that 9 out of every 10 people you pass in the shops, park, school,
streets...

Do not know Jesus Christ!
They need to know, they have a right to know!

You don't have to go far to be involved in mission...
What about your neighbours?

But they weren't far into the mission when they encountered a battle with the
spiritual forces of darkness.

And that brings us to our first point:

When we share the gospel, we will engage in a spiritual battle

They travel across Cyprus and arrive in the city of Paphos,
which was the site of the temple of Aphrodite,
and also the seat of Roman government there in Cyprus.

Now the reality of spiritual warfare set in.
When God's people seek to advance His purposes, satanic opposition is unavoidable.

It is here in Paphos that they meet up with a Jew who practiced black magic.
He claimed to be a prophet, and got a bunch of people stirred up.
He was perhaps in the employment of the Roman proconsul.

The proconsul was the leading Roman official on the island, named Sergius Paulus.

In recent history, a stone tablet was found on the island from about this time frame bearing the name Sergius.

Sergius was a learned and intelligent man, and when he heard about Paul and Barnabas teaching and preaching the gospel, he wanted to hear more, so he sent for them.

The sorcerer, Bar-Jesus, his name means “son of Jesus.” He is also called Elymas, took a stand against Saul and Barnabas and actively tried to turn the proconsul from the truth.

Elymas was determined to oppose and pervert the way of the Lord.

Finally the situation became more than Paul could stand, he exposed Elymas as a fraud, and declared God’s judgment upon him.

Paul says that he is no “son of Jesus” that he is in fact a “son of the devil.” He confronted Bar-Jesus with his spiritual blindness by imposing upon him a short-term physical blindness.

You wonder if Paul did not hope that this blindness would lead him to repentance and faith just as his own had.

When the proconsul saw what had happened, we are told that he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching of the Lord.

Whenever a believer ministers in the name of the Lord they will see both successes and failures.

So here was the clash of spiritual powers that the New Testament warns us about.

In the red corner the power of God’s Holy Spirit working through Paul; in the blue corner the powers of darkness working through Elymas.

The trophy they were fighting for was the soul of Sergius Paulus.

Elymas knew full well that if the governor was converted to faith in Jesus then it was all over for him, and the cause he represented.

1 John 4:1-3 Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. 2This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, 3but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.

There will always be opposition on a spiritual journey.
Sometimes the fear of opposition causes us to stop the journey.

As is always the case, when we run up against opposition,
we can forward or we can retreat and go home.

But we need to continue on, and bear witness to the gospel,
When we are sent by Jesus, we are able to walk with the one who is faithful, who
never leaves us.

So if we know that when we speak the gospel we will face a spiritual battle
We, secondly, must also be prepared for that spiritual battle.
God's way for preparing us, and strengthening us comes through his word and
sacraments.

Verse 5 tells that that Paul and Barnabas "proclaimed the word of God".
What was that word?

The book of Acts gives several summaries of Paul's message.

He confronted the people with their sin.
But then he pointed to Jesus.

For example, in Pisidian Antioch he preached: "I want you to know that through
Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who
believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of
Moses" (Acts 13:38, 39 NIV).

Paul did not tamper with this message.
He spoke God's message of sin and grace.
He confronted the people with sin and the death and damnation that sin earns.
He pointed the people to Jesus for forgiveness.
Jesus who died to take away the sin of the world and rose from the dead in victory.

That same message is what you and I keep on hearing and sharing as well.
We see our sins.
We see our lack of love for the lost.
We see our sinful fear that fails to speak the message.
We feel our guilt. We know we deserve death and hell.

But God's grace brings you the message of Jesus.
Your sins' are forgiven. Jesus has died for you.

That's the message of God's grace in Jesus that is at work in our hearts.
That's the message we pray that others hear.
That's the message we share with others.

God's grace is at work through that message.

When the Lord gives us opportunities to speak his word to those around us, his grace is at work for you to strengthen you.

His grace, his undeserved love, enables you and me to overcome the obstacles of embarrassment, fear, busy-ness and to speak his word.

At those times remember God's grace.

We don't have the strength ourselves, but rely on your God who strengthens us.

Rely on your God who strengthens you and me, even though we don't deserve it. His grace is at work for us.

Preaching a sermon on this passage was harder than I expected.

Here is a great thing happening in the church...

Men set aside for the preaching of the Gospel.

Men blessed and sent on their way to proclaim the goodnews to people in other places.

But...wherever the message goes...so does opposition.

How well do you know that in your life?

You pluck up the courage to speak about Jesus Christ to a friend, a work colleague...

And there are problems.

The atheist steps in a laughs at your silly belief.

The Muslim says you've got it all wrong.

The self-sufficient Aussie says religion is a crutch.

The new ager talks about the great feelings when using incense and crystals.

The list is endless.

What do we do?

Do we pull back and shrink into our own little world?

Do we apologise for bringing up the subject and never speak again?

I've been there...I have done that...in the past...

But also in the recent past.

Why?

Am I ashamed of the Gospel? NO!

Are you ashamed?

But, you say, it's hard to talk about these things?

Yes it is hard...it is hard to talk about the faith...

Why?

Is that you aren't sure of the message?
Find out, pray for understanding and joy.

Or is that there is a battle to be fought?
Our battle is not against flesh and blood.

That is scary!
But how do you stand against that?
Knowing and loving the message of Jesus Christ.
Being overwhelmed by the love of God shown to us through Jesus Christ.

But what about the passion that lives in us?
The passion for lost souls?
The passion that none should be lost.

Ours is an age of tolerance.
Where pluralism tells us that there is no absolute truth...
Different ideologies are equal in the supermarket of different faiths and religions.
We can't say ours is right and others are wrong.

This attitude is expressed in the statement from Prince Charles, heir to the throne.
He calls himself a defender of the faiths, rather than 'defender of the faith'.

Today sorcerers, like Elymas, have equal status with ministers of the gospel.
Governments want to be fair to all faiths expressed by people...
In Dandenong we have 'Interfaith'.

All this is rubbish.
We have the authoritative word of God, we have God's revelation of himself.
We have the only message of hope and salvation.
It should be our commitment 'to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints' (Jude 3).

If the gospel is truly the only way to salvation, then our task becomes urgent.

As urgent as it was to Paul when he said 'I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I don't preach the gospel!' (1 Cor 9:16)

We are influenced by our pluralistic world to view evangelism as the exchange of ideas or views among people of different faiths.
We are almost apologetic about the faith we have.

Instead, we should view the gospel we have, and believe in, as holding the key to salvation and eternal life.

Will we stand by as people miss out on hearing the message of Jesus Christ?

Conclusion

“There is a cost to sincere service for Christ. Never share your faith and you will never look like a fool. Never stand for righteousness on a social issue and you will never be rejected. Never walk out of a theater because of a movie or play is offensive and you will never be called a prig. Never practice consistent honesty in business and you will not lose the trade of a not-so-honest associate. Never reach out to the needy and you will never be taken advantage of. Never give your heart and it will never be broken. Never go to Cyrus and you will never be subjected to a dizzy, heart-convulsing confrontation with Satan. Seriously follow Christ and you will experience a gamut of sorrows almost completely unknown to the unbeliever. But of course you will also know the joy of adventure with the Lord of the universe and of spiritual victory as you live your life of allegiance to him.” [R. Kent Hughes. Acts: The Church Afire. (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1996, p. 178.)

As I said at the start...

You have a target on you...

How are you going to respond to that?

Live with and work with it trusting in the Holy Spirit?

Or back out of speaking about Jesus Christ?

That's precisely the response that Satan wants you to have!

He doesn't want the gospel message to go out...

Because he knows that God will use it to open people's eyes...

They will turn from darkness to light.

They will receive the forgiveness of sins, and eternal life.

Our only real option is to go into battle...

Armed with the gospel of truth.

With Paul, at the end of his life, you will be able to say, 'The Lord will deliver me from every evil deed, and will bring me safely to His heavenly kingdom; to him be glory forever and ever. Amen' (2 Tim 4:18)