

ReStart Week 6: Overcoming Opposition Acts 13:1-12

David Bawks - Pathway Community Church (April 11, 2021)

Good morning Pathway! Welcome to our service today. Today we're moving to week six of our series ReStart. As we move through 2021, we're praying and seeing God's guidance as to how we can restart and revamp what we're doing this year. We've been exploring the book of Acts to learn how the Holy Spirit lead the early believers through persecution and other challenges to reach people for the gospel.

Let's review, who was the focus of our message last week? Where did he have an experience with God?

- 1) No one is beyond the reach of God's transformation.**
- 2) Let's welcome those transformed by God.**

Today we are moving on to chapter 13, verse 1 - 12.

13 ¹ Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. ² While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." ³ So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

⁴ The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus. ⁵ When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues. John was with them as their helper.

⁶ They traveled through the whole island until they came to Paphos. There they met a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus, ⁷ who was an attendant of the proconsul, Sergius Paulus. The proconsul, an intelligent man, sent for Barnabas and Saul because he wanted to hear the word of God. ⁸ But Elymas the sorcerer (for that is what his name means) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith. ⁹ Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, ¹⁰ "You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord? ¹¹ Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind for a time, not even able to see the light of the sun."

Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he groped about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand. ¹² When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord.

There's a major shift in the book of Acts that starts with the last verse of chapter 12 and continues to the rest of the book. Saul becomes the main character and the narrative focuses to his missionary journeys around the Mediterranean. We have moved beyond Jerusalem, Judea and Samara and moved to the fourth area listed in Acts 1:8 - the ends of the earth.

Antioch became Saul's home base and his home church, as the term is used in missionary circles. Antioch was the starting and ending point of Saul's first and second missionary journey, and the starting point of his third missionary journey.

Five significant leaders are identified in this church as prophets and teachers. One way to distinguish these two roles is by saying that “the teacher provided basic information for living the Christian life, while the prophet provided special guidance from the Lord as needed” (Fernando, *Acts*, location 7488). These five leaders are Barnabas, Simeon, Lucius, Manaen and Saul. There are two aspects of this text I’ll focus on this morning.

1) Let’s prioritize sending over seating.

During their worship and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” They continued to fast and pray, laid their hands on these two who had been designated, and then sent them away. Now imagine being a part of this church. Of your five main leaders, two of them are being sent away! You’re already a new church, figuring out a lot of new things. Many of you have fled from Jerusalem and other cities away from persecution, leaving behind your homes, your friends, your job, and everything you had known. You’re settling into this new city, and your church community is a huge source of stability and structure for you.

Now, adding to the changes you’re already facing, you’re losing almost half of your leadership from church. Barnabas is listed first, and perhaps he was the primary leader at the church, although we don’t know that for sure. I am sure that losing the two of them would be disruptive, and that some of the people in the church were sad to see Barnabas and Saul go.

A few years ago, at one of our church planting conference we held at Nairobi Chapel, one of the speakers said this, “We shouldn’t measure a church by its seating capacity, but by its seating capacity.” We almost always default to measuring a church by the number of people who attend on Sunday morning. We say that’s a church of 1000, that’s a church of 200, or of 50. Now with covid, that measure is harder to count and even less meaningful that it has ever been. For our annual report at Pathway, I need to tell our denomination our average worship attendance during 2020. But what exactly does that even mean? We did not meet in person for about 9 months of last year. I could average the number of machines that tuned in to our church online platform, but that does not exactly equal the number of people does it.

The fundamental focus of building seating capacity is to get as many people as possible on a Sunday morning. But what is our goal as a church? Our mission as Pathway is to be a multiplying community of Christ followers. That means that we are growing outside and beyond the church building or the Sunday service. That requires making disciples and planting churches, which means an even higher goal is how many people can we train up and send? There is great value in getting people here to worship as a community as Sunday morning, but my hope is to invest even more resources in sending people out to minister in the Bay Area, and around the world. What if we were to count the number of people we’re equipping to live out their faith and spread the gospel here and all around the world?

That is why we have made leadership development such a high value here at Pathway. That is why we want to bring in leaders like Francis and Grace from Nairobi to serve with us, because even if they can’t stay here long term, we can still be a part of their growth journey, and then can be a part of our church life and church family as well.

To do this, we must be praying, listening to the Holy Spirit, and fasting. That means being open to saying goodbye and the disruption and loss of sending people. That may mean sending someone like Javier and Isabella out to plant a church at some point, and others as well. But although it is hard, it is

worth it. That has been our story for BG and I, and I know Pathway has been involved in planting churches and sending out people in the past, so it is not new for us here.

As we restart, I think a key re-orientation we need to make is to see what we do during the week as even more valuable than what we do here on Sunday. I think doing outreach, meeting for life groups, and connecting one on one is living out the gospel mission even more than coming here on Sunday. The reason we come together on Sunday is for preparation and training for what we do during the week. I know my default is to focus on what we're doing on Sunday, and in some ways that is a lot easier, but I'm working to prioritize as much as I can what we do during the week.

After being commissioned and sent out, Barnabas and Saul sail to the island of Cyprus. At this point in the story, Luke notes that Saul is also called Paul, and then uses this name from now on. It has been popular to say that Paul was his new name after becoming a Christian, but really it is just the English version of his Greek name, Paulos, instead of his Jewish name Saul after the first king of Israel. Since Saul was used numerous times after his conversion in Acts 9, this is not a case of being given a new name by God, although others in the Bible were given new names. Since Saul is now ministering in a Gentile context, his Greek name is now being used.

On the island they get an audience with the local Roman proconsul, basically the governor, called Sergius Paulos. He wants to hear the word of God from them, but their efforts to lead him to faith are opposed by a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus, which means son of Jesus. Philip and Peter had also encountered a sorcerer in Samaria in an earlier part of Acts. This is what Paul said to Bar-Jesus or Elymas, "You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord?"

Wow, those are strong words! Tell us how you really feel. Paul did not hold back from condemning his efforts to subvert and oppose the gospel of Jesus. Here's my application for us from this section:

2) Living out the gospel requires us to be bold and firm.

We live in a highly pluralistic and postmodern culture that elevates tolerance as one of the highest values. That makes evangelism and any form of church discipline or confrontation very difficult. I believe we can be both gracious and firm as we take a stand for the uncompromising truth of the gospel.

Have you noticed that the strongest rebukes in scripture tend to be for religious leaders? Jesus had very harsh words for the Pharisees, but generally did not publicly condemn those guilty of moral failure. But when it comes to religious leaders who either abuse their position or mislead people from the truth, Jesus, Paul and others in the Bible are uncompromising in confronting them in clear terms. Jesus said that "if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea" (Matt 18:6).

Notice that Luke specifies that Paul is filled by the Holy Spirit when he speaks to Elymas. Saying such strong words of condemnation needs to be done carefully, and under the clear direction of the Spirit. We need to know when to confront, and when to correct someone more graciously.

Elymas is identified as a sorcerer, and spiritual opposition like this comes up regularly in Acts. They had to engage in both verbal and spiritual warfare as they brought the gospel into new territories and broke into the devil's domain. But what does that look like today? How should we handle spiritual opposition now?

Before I went to seminary in Kenya, I read through their class descriptions, and one that caught my eye was called Power Encounter, about spiritual warfare. I thought awesome, I have never been trained in a Power Encounter, so I was sure to take that class, and it was good.

We may imagine spiritual warfare in this way as a power encounter, a chance to take on the devil and his demonic soldiers in a loud and dramatic showdown. You've probably seen movies or stories about exorcisms and things like that. Once when I was on a mission in northern Tanzania, just south of Kenya, in 2012, we were doing house to house evangelism. This family invited us in, and we talked for a while, shared the gospel with them and then I prayed. We were all standing around a coffee table in their living room, about 7 of us. While I was praying, a young woman jumped across the table and attacked me, grabbing at my neck and trying to choke me. The others had to grab her and pull her off of me, and restrain her. I prayed that she would be delivered of any demonic presence, and she eventually calmed down, and we prayed with her to accept Christ. Her family said she had been to a witch doctor and had participated in witchcraft in various ways, and they appreciated our prayers.

But I believe this is only one aspect of spiritual warfare, and that it is not the most important one. I think that scenes like that can even become a distraction from the real fight. I have learned that spiritual warfare is first and foremost a battle of the mind. One of the main things I learned from my power encounter class and other experiences is that it is more important to have a "truth encounter" than a "power encounter." Ultimately is the truth of the gospel at work in our minds and in our lives that does the work of spiritual warfare.

I've been considering what spiritual opposition looks for us today, and I do wonder why many of us do not tend to have the type of experiences that Paul had. I believe that we do face external spiritual opposition, but that opposition is often more subtle. One of the most effective strategies the devil uses is to disguise his work as something else. He is the father of lies, the champion of deception. Maybe you've heard the line from the movie *Usual Suspects* – "The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist."

I've struggled in fasting here more than any other time or anywhere else I have lived, and many days I've set out to fast and wasn't able to make it through the day because I felt sick and was completely unable to concentrate or do any work, so I ended up eating. Sometimes when I'm with the girls I end up so upset and angry with them, keep telling them to stop doing stuff and I'm not able to work effectively or connect with them and get very little joy from the experience. Sometimes a headache is just a headache, but sometimes it is spiritual opposition. Sometimes there are medical and other reasons for discouragement and despair, but sometimes it is a spiritual attack on you.

So when we do experience obstacles in connecting with a neighbor or sharing the gospel with someone, sometimes that is a form of spiritual attack. What we need to pursue and pray for and strive

for is discernment – to realize what we need to call out as spiritual opposition, and to combat in our prayer life, and then when we need to seek other forms of treatment or help. But we must be operating in the Spirit, as the church at Antioch was, and as Paul and Barnabas were. We must be praying and fasting, focused on what is saying and removing the other distractions from our life, which is what fasting achieves.

Reaching Sergius Paulos was worth it for Paul and Barnabas to stand up against Elymas. Living for the gospel will always have a cost. After Paul declared that the hand of the Lord was against Elymas and that he would be blind, that's exactly what happened. Because Paul's declaration of blindness came true, Sergius Paulos believed and was amazed at their teachings.

This should sound familiar to us, because last week we saw how Saul went through the same experience of blindness following his encounter with Jesus. For Saul, that led to a new understanding of God and a new life as a Christian leader. We are not told what happened to Elymas, but my hope is that he also found the truth following this experience.

As we figure out what ministry looks like in this new season, we will need boldness and firmness to navigate these uncharted waters. We need discernment to what to do and how to do it. We can't compromise when it comes to our message and our core convictions. And in God's strength, He will use us to reach people. Please pray with me as we close.

Benediction:

“The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.”

Matthew 28:18-20 ¹⁸ Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”