

Text: Acts 12:24-13:5
Topic: The Message of God
Theme: The supernatural durability of God's Word
My purpose for this message: To reassure Christians that the power of God's message can never be contained or bound.
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[Book Thesis: The Power of God Spreads the Gospel]

God's Word is not Chained

Friday night after POWER NIGHT, Betty and I rushed over to Pequea Valley to try and catch the end of the boys' basketball game. As we left the parking lot, Betty asked, "Is it even worth going now?" Ohhh, baby, was it ever. For those of you outside our school district, here's what was on the line: we were playing Lancaster Catholic for the top spot in our section, we were playing last year's state champs, we were playing a team that hadn't lost in 46 games over a two year period, our guard Mike Schatzmann was expected to hit his 1000th career point, so, it was expected to be mildly interesting.

We arrived at the end of the 3rd quarter to discover that we were ahead by a basket. Throughout the fourth quarter as well as the overtime period, I... well, let's just say if I had been there the entire game, I'd probably have ended up in the ER. We'd go ahead and I'd be ecstatic. I was jumping up and down on a knee that had surgery 9 days before. I was ramming my fist into the air; heart was pounding, I was praying, I was talking nonstop... to no one.

We'd fall behind and my heart would sink: we're doomed. Then we'd get a turnover and come back and score, and my hopes would soar. And that's the way it was for about 45 minutes. We did finally win convincingly in OT. Even made the news. Took about an hour for my heart rate to return to normal.

Well, basketball games and teams come and go. However, other things that matter deeply, can produce the same kind of up and down spirit. Some things have happened recently in America that have created a great deal of concern in some Christians.

A piece of granite carved with the ten commandments was forcibly removed from an Alabama courthouse. Vermont, Massachusetts and New Jersey are all paving the way for legalized homosexual marriages. You're down. Then you read that your president says marriage is just for man and a woman. That someone's working on a constitutional amendment about marriage that will restrict it to a man and a woman. Now you're up.

With every byline, every sensational new report, your heart goes up and down, you worry, stress, and get angry. Wash your ears out with this: God's message, God's word, is not chained. His truth is not dependant on the US Supreme Court, US Congress, or the US president. Our country may change. Restrictions *may* increase against the Word in the days ahead, but it—listen—it will never be chained, never become impotent.

READ Acts 12:24-13:5

Background

Previous verses describe a King—Herod—who opposed God, and lost. Luke meant to remind insecure and despairing Christians that nothing—and no one—can stop the advance, the forward progress, of the gospel message. Luke immediately contrasts Herod's sorry end, by pointing out, "But the Word of God continued to increase and spread." Paul says it this way in 2 Tim.2:9 contrasting his own imprisonment for the gospel with the liberty the gospel *message* has. *"..but God's Word is not chained."* God's Word, God's message of deliverance through the Messiah; the gospel.

What v.25 briefly describes is the result of events in Acts 11:27-29. To refresh our memories, several Jerusalem prophets had come to Antioch where one named Agabus, predicted that famine would soon plague Judea (where Jerusalem was). Antioch Christians began collecting money and subsequent weeks or months, Saul, Barnabas, and Barnabas' cousin John Mark, delivered the money to the

Jerusalem believers. (By the way, this John Mark is the writer of the 2nd book in the NT: gospel of Mark.)

The Start of “Ends of the Earth” Missions

Something central to the message of Acts, happens when we get to chapter 13. I have about a dozen books on missions and every one of them exists because of what began in Acts 13. Acts is a missionary book, and this is where missions begins in earnest.

Antioch’s church leaders were meeting: Saul and Barnabas, Lucias, Simeon (whose surname or nickname “black” may mean he was African), and Manaen, a man who grew in the palace, a childhood friend of Herod Antipas who was ruling Galilee and Perea at the time.

5 men, presumably some of them teachers while others were prophets rather than 5 teacher-prophets. We know Saul and Barnabas had the gift of teaching, perhaps the other three were prophets.

One with the spiritual gift or ability of teaching, teaches God’s message. Because the New Testament had yet to be written, they were teaching about Jesus from the OT prophecies, as well what God was revealing *supernaturally* to people like Saul which would eventually be written in letters that became the NT.

Let me make a few comments here about preaching because there is some confusion about this gift and prophecy. Not all teachers are preachers in the sense of a large platform ministry, but all preachers have the spiritual gift of teaching—not prophecy. Prophecy is sometimes said to be the same as preaching but preaching uses the gift of teaching and in the Bible, the gift of teaching is quite distinct from the gift of prophecy (Eph.4:11;1 Cor.12:28-29).

A teacher teaches God’s message, whereas a prophet reveals God’s will. A prophet speaks God’s words into a specific situation or setting, may describe God’s plan for the future, or pronounce God’s expectation/judgment for the present. The prophet may even refer to something in the past as a reminder of what to do in the present. There *can*, be some overlap of teaching with prophecy but biblically, the gift is distinct.

(On a related note, unlike OT prophets, the NT prophets did not write Scripture, the apostles did.)

5 men holding a leaders’ meeting. Only instead of making their *own* visionary plans for the future, they were seeking *God’s* plans. They were fasting, worshipping, praying, studying the prophetic books that talked about Jesus, glorying in the grandeur of gospel. In the midst of that, the Holy Spirit said they were to send out Saul and Barnabas as missionaries. Perhaps he spoke audibly but it seems that since there was additional fasting and prayer *after* he commanded this, command, that rather, the Spirit impressed His message on one or more of the *prophets*, and after he told the others, they all sought God’s confirmation through prayer and fasting.

The two missionaries were commissioned and sent. Luke’s admittedly thrifty with his words, but it appears to have happened quickly. To the early church their work was urgent. Most believed there was little time before Jesus returned. Time was of the essence. Their watchword was maranatha, ““come quickly, Lord Jesus.” Is that us? Or do we prefer the prayer, “Take your time, Lord Jesus.”

Catching a ship to Cyprus, Saul and Barnabas began their “ends of the earth” mission. The Holy Spirit had not identified *where* to go; why Cyprus? For one, it was where Barnabas had grown up. He knew the place, *and* there were people in their home church in Antioch from Cyprus. So it was a place they could go and immediately have some contacts, some open doors or relationships.

Does evangelism sometimes seems daunting? Not in that it’s hard to do, but it’s inconvenient. How can I fit one more obligation into my busy life; one more activity. See, I don’t think God ever meant it to be an “activity” for most of us: he meant it to be a lifestyle. One by which we enjoy and enrich the relationships we already have with unbelievers—our families, our peers at school, our coworkers, our employees, our hair stylists, our banker, the people that sit beside us at high school basketball games, our school teachers or coaches, you name it. And over time, we pray for these folks, give them a few minutes or hours as God leads and opens doors, and by paying attention the Holy Spirit, make the most

of the opportunities He gives us. That's not adding *anything* to our schedule; it's simply being attentive to that *portion* of our schedule instead of racing through it to get to the next appointment.

One thing of course, this kind of lifestyle demands *involving* ourselves in the lost world that surrounds us, rather than *insulating* ourselves from it. And so instead of always picking Christian friends, Christian babysitters, Christian hairstylists, Christian companies to work for, or even Christian schools, we look for ways to invade our world.

In Cyprus Saul and Barney started preaching someplace familiar: local synagogues. *We* know that Saul had worn out his welcome in synagogues from Damascus to Jerusalem, but this is the ancient world and news didn't travel either fast or far. So, they used Saul's great knowledge of the Law, his stellar education, his standing as a Pharisee to gain favor with the Jews at the synagogue. These were not Gentiles but Jews despite the fact that God had made it clear Saul would have a great harvest among Gentiles. But Saul never lost his deep burden for his own people (re: Rom.9:1, 10:1). Furthermore, he had a mandate from God that we still have: (quote Rom.1:16).

What did the missionaries preach? The word of God; the message of God. Herod *fought* that message and lost. Earlier the Sandhedrin had fought it, and lost. In Acts 5:39 Rabbi Gamaliel darkly warned the council that if the apostles' message was from God, to oppose it would mean their defeat; *no* one can fight God and win; no one.

Concl:

Here in Acts 13:1 is the start of Paul's "first missionary trip." It's where the Gentile mission begins in earnest, the effort to reach the "ends of the earth." In the days ahead, their efforts—and *subsequent* missionaries—would face opposition, outright persecution, apathy, misrepresentation, and often the hostility of entire cultures. Yet statistically, there has never been a missions movement—proportionately—that's been as successful.

The power of God is not contained in the U.S constitution. Not contained in the American ballot box or the editorial column of your local liberal newspaper. The power of God does not reside in the behind-doors meeting room of the United States Supreme Court.

God's power resides in God's message. *We* bear that message; you and I. And even if we are locked up like Paul later was, God's Word will never be chained. And perhaps all the rumblings in our culture that so deeply unsettle us, will force us to trust less in less in that which *can* be taken or chained, and instead trust more and more in what cannot be: God's Word, God's message. Love America; vote; promote your candidate; write your letters. But my friends, nations come and go. God's Word endures forever (1 Pet.1:25). And it will never be chained.