



Central Peninsula Church

Catalog No.
1307-22
Acts 12:25-13:12
Mark Mitchell
June 10, 2007

The Straight Ways of the Lord

SERIES: *Acts: The Rest of the Story*

RAY SUAREZ: *Ed, maybe we could begin with the latest from the U.S. military on their search for the missing service people.*

EDWARD WONG, *New York Times*: *Well, the U.S. military is saying that it's putting a lot of resources into the search for the three missing men. They say that there are 4,000 troops involved in the search, that they're sweeping through villages and towns that are south of Baghdad in this Euphrates River valley area. And they're using a lot of overhead resources. They're putting out aircraft. They're using surveillance drones, and they're having a lot of helicopters fly over the area. It's not an easy area to cover. There are a lot of palm groves in this area, in villages, as well as tributaries to the Euphrates River, and so they have a lot of work ahead of them.*

RAY SUAREZ: *Along with that high-tech surveillance I guess goes the more old-fashioned, door-to-door searching?*

EDWARD WONG: *That's right. There are some areas where they've been going to houses. We understand that they've been arresting groups of people, questioning them. It's very intense at the moment. Yesterday, we heard reports that they have surrounded the town of Yusufiya, which is fairly rife with insurgents, and that they were not letting people in or out of the town, and that they were going house-to-house there, searching for the abductees.*

What you just read is an interview describing the intensive search and rescue operation of the U.S. military as they look for what is now two missing soldiers in Iraq. What if I told you that God is also on a search and rescue operation? That's what the coming of Jesus was, not a search and destroy mission, but a search and rescue mission. Jesus said, "The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." And that's really what the book of Acts is about. Acts is about what Jesus continued to do and teach through the early church. He's still on a search and rescue mission, but now he does that work through us. He's not aloof or passive or indecisive. He's never in the maintenance mode, coasting or drifting. He's sending, pursuing, searching, saving. Acts is the story of his ongoing search for more and more people. Increasingly, I believe that this book is in the New Testament to prevent the church from coasting to a standstill and entering a maintenance mode with all the inner wheels working but going nowhere. Acts is an indictment of mere

maintenance Christianity. It's a goad and an encouragement to fan the flame of passion for the lost.

Churches have a choice to make. We can either get on board or we can be left behind. It's even possible that in being left behind we become an actual hindrance to the work God is doing. Imagine someone trying to hinder those search and rescue soldiers from finding those men. I think they would be very fierce with anyone who stood between them and reaching their goal. This morning we'll see what happens when someone tries to get in the way of God's search and rescue efforts.

In chapter 11 we saw how God use persecution of Stephen to push his people out of Judea all the way to Antioch to seek and save the lost. In chapter 12 we saw how God struck down Herod, who was trying to oppose the spread of the Christian faith. Today in chapter 13 we see God fan the flame of mission as he propels out Paul and Barnabas, who had just returned to Antioch with John Mark from Jerusalem (12:25).

I. The Holy Spirit sends his servants out of the church to reach the lost.

"Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away" (vv. 1-3).

Pay attention here to the activity of the Spirit. Remember, he's the third person of the Trinity. He's the Spirit of Jesus. He's God in work clothes. And here the Holy Spirit directs the church at Antioch to set apart Saul and Barnabas for the work he's called them to do. We're not told how this was communicated to them. Perhaps it was through some kind of revelation given to one of the prophets. Or perhaps as they prayed they all had a sense that this is what God was calling them to do. But somehow they knew this is what God wanted. Nor does it say specifically what the work was they were being called to do, though from what follows it's clear they believed it to be the work of reaching the lost. Nor are we

told exactly who it was who was involved in the whole process. Who is the “they” in vv.2-3? Was it just the prophets and teachers listed in verse one? Or was it the whole church?

We don't know the answers to all of the questions, but what we DO know is that the Holy Spirit was directing the church and they got the message. In a very fundamental sense this is what the church is always meant to do. The church is meant to discern what the Holy Spirit is saying and then to do it. As soon as we lose that sense of connection to the living voice of God we become nothing more than a human institution trying to do its best to make a difference, much like the Lions Club or the Kiwanis. There should always be this sense in a church of waiting for the other shoe to drop; where will the Spirit will lead next?

Sometimes it's not easy. Sometimes what tells us to do makes sense but not always. Saul and Barnabas were very important leaders in the church at Antioch. They had taught there for an entire year. But the Spirit says to the church, “Don't get too comfortable. I know you love your teachers but now I have something else for them to do. I'm moving them out of here.” And they don't have to take a vote. They don't have to get budget approval, though they would need to support them. Saul and Barnabas don't really have much to say about it either. They might be thinking, “You know I really don't like to travel. I get sea sick. I hate all that weird food. I'm kind of a homebody.” You don't hear any of that. They all just cooperate. Again, this is an indictment of mere maintenance mode Christianity. The Spirit is constantly shaking things up; pushing us beyond our comfort zones.

Notice two things about the church at Antioch that allowed them to hear and follow the Spirit's direction. *Notice that they had multiple gifted leaders who were focused on the word of God.* They weren't led by just one man. Five men are mentioned in v.1, all from different backgrounds. Barnabas was a Jew from Cyprus. Simeon, called Niger, was a black man. Lucius was from Cyrene, which is modern day Libya. Lucius is a Roman name so he was likely brought up in Roman culture. Manaen, having been raised with Herod, was probably from a noble family. And then finally, Saul, a former Pharisee and persecutor of the church. So they were diverse but the most important thing about them is that they were men gifted in relation to the word of God. Teachers and prophets are both involved in the teaching and preaching of God's word. The Spirit of God doesn't work separately from the word of God. As a matter of fact, it's the Spirit of God who distributes these gifts in the first place.

Notice also that *they were focused on the Lord.* Luke says they “were ministering to the Lord and fasting.” After they heard from the Lord they fasted and

prayed some more. To “minister” to the Lord means to worship him. We often think of worship as something meant to minister to us, but the purpose of worship is to minister to the Lord. We're not the audience; he is. Fasting isn't something they did to lose weight but as a means to focus their appetites on the Lord; it always goes along with prayer. When you fast, you get hungry, but then you take those hunger pains as a reminder to pray. It's not a way to impress God or get his attention, but rather to focus on him in prayer. So this was a worshipping church and praying church. They looked up before they looked out. As they cultivated their vertical relationship with God they were in a position to understand what he wanted them to do on the horizontal level.

Recently our elders had a very difficult decision make regarding our new worship pastor. We were really torn over this. So we took a day for fasting and prayer. Then we met together that night and we began to discuss where we were at. At the start of the meeting we were all still undecided. But as the night rolled along and we talked it out we slowly began to see that the Spirit was making it clear who he was setting apart for this job. It wasn't the one some of us expected going into the meeting, but it wasn't long before all of us were convinced that God had spoken to us.

And that's what the church at Antioch felt about Saul and Barnabas. So they sent them away and the first part of their journey is recorded in vv.4-5. **“So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus. When they reached Salamis, they began to proclaim the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews; and they also had John as their helper.”** Again, the key thing to see here is that they were sent out by the Holy Spirit. The church laid hands on them and sent them away and probably gave them some resources but the Holy Spirit is the One who was the driving force behind them being sent out. It was his idea. It was his mission.

After they went down to the port city of Seleucia they sailed off to the island of Cyprus. They came to Salamis, a commercial city on the east coast and they began to preach the word of God, starting in the synagogues, because their rule of thumb was to take the gospel **“to the Jew first and also to the Greek”** (Rom. 1:16). Notice that John Mark is also with them. He was a “helper,” someone to help with practical matters like food and lodging and travel arrangements.

Now when the Spirit spearheads a mission like this you would think that everything will go perfectly. But even when the Spirit is leading, we can expect to face obstacles.

II. There will always be people and situations that hinder the work of reaching the lost.

“When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they found a magician, a Jewish

false prophet whose name was Bar-Jesus, who was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence. This man summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. But Elymas the magician (for so his name is translated) was opposing them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith” (vv.6–8).

When they get to Paphos they encounter two men. I’m sure they encountered other people but Luke wants to focus our attention on this encounter. One of these men was named Elymas. Sometimes he was called Bar-Jesus, which means “son of salvation.” That was his “stage name.” He was Jewish and he was a magician, which doesn’t make a lot of sense because magic was banned in the Jewish Scriptures. Luke is rather forthright and calls him a false prophet. There were many like him in the ancient world. They would get into positions of power because they pretended to have special insight into what was going on and could offer wise advice. The most legendary person like this in recent history was Rasputin, the adviser to the last Czar of Russia.

Elymas was with the proconsul of that area, Sergius Paulus. He was the highest ranking Roman official of the whole island. He’s described here, in contrast to Elymas, as “a man of intelligence.” And perhaps for that reason he was curious about this new message and so he summoned Barnabas and Saul to hear the word of God. But Elymas was opposed to that, and Luke says he was trying to turn Sergius Paulus away from the truth. We’re not told why, but we can guess that if Sergius Paulus embraced the Christian faith Elymas would be collecting unemployment. He had a personal stake in this.

So Jesus Christ is on a search and rescue mission. He’s using Barnabas and Saul. It appears he has his eyes on this important politician named Sergius Paulus. The goal is for him to come to faith in Christ. But someone, Elymas, is trying to get in the way of this mission. He’s trying to turn him away from the faith. It’s like a husband who doesn’t like his wife going to church so he tries to turn her away from it. He plans things for them to do on Sunday mornings or he points out all the flaws of the pastor. It’s like a college professor who tries to turn his students away from the faith by showing how faith cannot be reconciled with science.

This kind of thing happens all the time. You might be in a position today where someone is trying to turn you away from the faith. Or you might be trying to share your faith with someone and someone else is trying to turn them away. There will always be people who try to get in the way of the work of reaching the lost. The question is, how does God deal with that? How do we deal with that?

III. God will fiercely oppose and overcome anyone who gets in the way of God’s efforts to reach the lost.

“But Saul, who was also known as Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, fixed his gaze on him, and said, ‘You who are full of all deceit and fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness,

will you not cease to make crooked the straight ways of the Lord? Now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and not see the sun for a time.’ And immediately a mist and a darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking those who would lead him by the hand. Then the proconsul believed when he saw what had happened, being amazed at the teaching of the Lord” (vv.9–12).

Several things are of note here. *Notice that Saul is filled with the Holy Spirit.* By the way, Luke also tells us here that he was also called Paul, which was his Roman name. As a Jew he was called Saul, but as a Roman citizen he was called Paul. From now on Luke will call him Paul because he’ll serve in a mostly Roman environment. But the important thing to see here is that he’s filled with the Spirit. You can see how active the Spirit is. He speaks, he sends, and now he fills. He’s all over this story! This filling is like an immediate power surge for this particular situation. It wasn’t that Paul wasn’t filled prior to this, but this is a special endowment for this challenge. We don’t know if Paul felt anything happen to him or not, but Luke wants us to know that what he’s about to do came from the filling of the Spirit. And that’s important because what Paul does seems pretty extreme.

Notice how fiercely Paul confronts Elymas. He says several things about him that really aren’t very nice at all. “Nice” is not always good. Paul says he’s “full of deceit and fraud,” basically meaning he’s a charlatan. Next he says he’s “a son of the devil.” No, he’s not a son of salvation as his nickname implies; he’s a son of the devil. Next he says he’s “an enemy of all righteousness.” Finally, he says that he “makes crooked the straight ways of the Lord.”

That’s a fascinating phrase. What are straight ways of the Lord? How do you make them crooked? The answer is clear when you discover that the word for “turn away” in v.8 and the word for “make crooked” in v.10 is the same Greek word (*diastrepho*). What does it mean to make crooked the straight ways of God? It’s what Elymas was doing in v.8—he was trying to turn away Sergius Paulus from the faith. “Turn away” in v.8 corresponds with “make crooked” in v.10. And “from the faith” in v.8 corresponds with “the straight paths of the Lord” in v.10. So the way you make crooked the straight ways of the Lord is to turn people away from coming to faith.

Notice that God has straight paths for himself that lead to faith. This is the “search and rescue” heart of God. God sees a Sergius Paulus in Paphos. He means to seek and rescue him. Two hundred seventy-five miles away he sees prophets and teachers ministering to the Lord and praying. And he sees a straight way that leads to faith—speak to those men,

send them out, guide them to Paphos, arrange a meeting with the proconsul, and bring him to faith. That's the straight way of God. But someone named Elymas is trying to get in the way of that.

We have in this passage some of the fiercest words in all the Bible: "You're a fraud. You're a son of the devil. You're an enemy of all that is right." Those are fighting words. Why was Paul so fierce in his words and actions towards Elymas? Because Elymas was trying to "turn away" Sergius Paulus from the faith. He was "making crooked the straight ways of the Lord." Some of the most severe words in the Bible are reserved for those who try to stand between God and those he seeks. His ferocity stems from his love for sinners; his absolute commitment to search for and rescue the lost.

Finally, notice that Elymas does not succeed in his attempt to make the straight way crooked. He would like to see the path of Paul and Barnabas go out the back door of the palace and drown in the Mediterranean Sea. But it won't happen. Instead Paul pronounces a temporary judgment upon Elymas—he'll be blind and not see the sun for a time. Paul knew what that was like because the same thing had happened to him once. That darkness, of course, would represent the condition of his heart. And it happened. Immediately he's groping around trying to find someone to keep him from bumping into the wall. The final result of all this is that Sergius Paulus comes to faith. And notice what convinced him. Two things: he saw what happened to Elymas and he was "amazed at the teaching of the Lord."

The good news of this story is that opposition will not succeed in making crooked the straight ways of the Lord. There will always be people who make crooked the straight paths of the Lord. There will always be hindrances. There will be Herods and Elymases. But the point again and again is that God overcomes these things and even uses these things to reach the lost; he takes Herod out of the way; he strikes Elymas blind and through that he brings Sergius Paulus to faith.

CONCLUSION

God is a searching and saving God; he's on a mission; he has straight paths that lead to faith. He's not aloof or passive or indecisive. He's never in the maintenance mode. He's sending, searching, saving. And he calls us to join him. We must not think maintenance, but mission. "The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." If we don't join him, he'll leave us behind. There will be people and situations that make crooked the straight paths of the Lord.

There will always be hindrances. God will overcome them.

Some of you are like Sergius Paulus. He was a man of intelligence and of importance. As far as we know, he had it all, but he knew something was missing. What you need to see from this story is that God has a straight path for you that leads to faith in his Son, Jesus Christ. He's the one who has been seeking you. He's the one who is behind your discontent. There may be people in your life who are trying to keep you from faith; trying to make crooked the straight ways of the Lord, but like Elymas they're really just blind. Be like Sergius Paulus and listen to the teaching of the Lord. It IS amazing! This teaching of the Lord is very simply that God sent his Son Jesus to rescue you from your sins and all you have to do is accept his free gift of salvation. The teaching is not about religion. Religion means we contribute something to the equation. Religion means that Sergius Paulus will now try hard to be a better person. He'll now try hard to obey Jesus. That teaching is NOT amazing because that's just another version of what all religions teach. But the gospel IS amazing precisely because there is nothing WE can do. It's all about grace. It's all a gift. It's all about what someone else has done for us.

We're like the soldier who has been lost for months; held captive by a power greater than ourselves. When the U.S. military finds him he doesn't say, "Wait a minute. Before you rescue me I want you to know that from now on I will try really hard to be a better soldier." No! He just lets them do for him what he could not do for himself. That's what we do. We don't say, "God, from now on I'll be a better person." We simply say, "God, I can never be good enough to save myself. I need you to do it for me." That's what he promises to do in Jesus. Jesus died to rescue you. And the straight way of the Lord is simply to believe.

Most of us here would say, "Well I would never want to hinder anyone from doing that." But we do it without trying to because often as Christians we revert back to religion and we become a hindrance to others. Remember how Peter had learned his lesson about how God wanted to reach Gentiles? He had that vision where God told him to "kill and eat" all those unclean animals. He met Cornelius and saw the Holy Spirit fall on him and he said, "**If God therefore gave to them the same gift as He gave to us also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?**" (Acts 11:17). Peter had been standing in the way of God's straight path but now he was finally getting out of the way. Finally, he was letting go of religion. Peter was trying to make a straight way by combining religion and faith and all he got was a crooked way.

So this passage presents all of us with a choice: will we choose the straight paths of the Lord, or will we make them crooked? Will we get on board with God's search and rescue mission, or will we get in the way?

© 2007 Central Peninsula Church, Foster City, CA