Sent Out By The Holy Spirit

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Preacher: Joe Hall

[0:00] Please take up a Bible and we'll turn this morning to Acts chapter 13.! It's on page 921 of the Blue Church Bible, Acts 13.

And we're reading the first 12 verses this morning. Page 921, Acts 13, verse 1. Let's hear God's word together.
Now, there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon, who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Mania, and a lifelong friend of Herod the Tetrarch, and Saul.
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've called them.
Then, after fasting and praying, they laid their hands on them and sent them off. So being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus.
[1:16] When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. And they had John to assist them. When they'd gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they came upon a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet named Bar-Jesus.

He was with the proconsul Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God.
But Elimus the magician, for that is the meaning of his name, opposed them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith.
But Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him and said, You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy.
Will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord? And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you'll be blind and unable to see the sun for a time.
[2:24] Immediately mist and darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking people to lead him by the hand. Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord.

Amen. God's holy word. Let's pray for his help as we spend time in it. Our Father, we thank you that as we heard earlier, the grass withers and the flower fades, but your word stands forever.
Father, Lord, we pray that in all our frailty, our fading strength, that you would help us, Lord, to hear your word, your everlasting word this morning.
Take it to heart and be deeply encouraged and helped, convicted and challenged, and built up in Jesus through it. Speak, Lord, we pray for your servants all listening.
In Jesus' name. Amen. Well, some of you may know it was Reformation Day last week, 31st of October, marked 509 years to the day since Martin Luther, the German reformer, nailed his 95 arguments or theses, as they're called to the door of the Wittenberg Cathedral.
[3:51] In our house, we may or may not have celebrated that day by eating German sausages and dressing up as Martin Luther. There was a treasure hunt, a Reformation Day treasure hunt, where the treasure was pieces of Romans chapter 1, verse 16.

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is God's power to save everyone who believes. Chocolate coins and gummy worms were also available.
Luther could never have pictured that. Another thing that Martin Luther could never have imagined as he stood at the door of the cathedral that day, was that his words were going to create a whole new church.
At the beginning, the reformers didn't set out to do that. They wanted to reform the church that they had, the Catholic church. But what they found was that by recovering the gospel message, that we are saved not by giving money or by trying to outbalance our sins by doing good works, but instead by simply putting our trust in Jesus and his finished work, his death, his resurrection for us, that we

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are saved, was that that gospel can't help but bring gospel churches into existence.
And so, as the gospel message spread throughout the whole of Europe and eventually the world, their two Protestant churches sprang up of various colors and stripes.
[5:32] Now, they didn't all agree on everything, but on this, they absolutely agreed, that we are saved by God's grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, for God's glory alone, which we believe from Scripture alone.

They were not ashamed of the gospel. One of the things that Martin Luther is therefore famous for saying is that the church is a creature of God's word.
Just like God spoke in the beginning and brought the universe into being, so now God's word as he speaks creates and gives life to a people, his church.
Now, that was over 500 years ago. Today, as a church family, we're getting ready to start a new church. The Geary Launch Team have been doing loads over the last year and a bit to get ready. They've been praying, studying the Bible. They've been doing some training. They've hosted a mission team. Most recently, they've started gathering for worship on a Sunday in Inveruri.
[6:44] It's the seedling of Geary Free Church. And as I say, in a few Sundays' time, we're going to take that seedling, as it were, from the Bon Accord greenhouse and plant it out in the Geary.

It's a huge milestone in the life of this church, in the life of the plant. We pray in the life of this whole region of Scotland.
And to prepare ourselves for that milestone, we're going to be spending four Sunday mornings in these two chapters of the book of Acts, 13 and 14, which describe one of the first times that people in the church were sent out.
Barnabas and Saul, also known as Paul, are sent by the Holy Spirit. And wherever they go, they preach the gospel. And wherever the gospel is sown, what starts to grow but churches? Churches. Brothers and sisters, planting a church is costly. It's painful. In a sense, we sow with tears.
[7:55] We'll look around in a few months' time, whether we're here or whether we're out with the plant, and we won't see faces that we've looked around in church and seen for many a year.

That will really hurt. We'll feel that. But we very much need that encouragement, then, of seeing in God's word, that that is part of the natural life cycle of a church.
It's what God's word does. If we're about the gospel, then we will find ourselves growing, multiplying, planting, sending out in one way or another, because the gospel gives birth to churches.
This morning, we're just going to see the first stage of that. Two truths to both encourage and equip us. The first truth we see in this passage is this, that the Holy Spirit, through the church, sends people out.
The Holy Spirit sends people out through the church. We're introduced in verse 1, aren't we, to the church in Antioch. If you're not familiar with your early church geography, Antioch is a very special place right now in Acts.
[9:09] We're told in chapter 11 that when the church was scattered away from Jerusalem, when Stephen was killed, the believers went as far as Antioch, which is about 300 miles to the north in Syria.

And despite being deep in Gentile territory, we find that initially they only spoke to other Jews. But soon they're joined by believers from Cyprus and North Africa, who also speak to the non-Jews or the Gentiles in Antioch.
And we read in chapter 11, a great number who believed turned to the Lord. For the first time in history, the nations are turning to the Lord en masse.
So, the Jerusalem church sends Barnabas up there to help. When he sees what's going on, he says, Paul has got to see this, Saul's got to come. So, he goes to Tarsus and he gets Saul to come. And the two of them are there preaching and teaching for a whole year in the first ever mixed ethnicity church. Fast forward to 13 verse 1, we're told by this time there are no less than five prophets and teachers in the Antioch church.
[10:23] Barnabas and Saul possibly have been there the longest, though true to the diversity of the church, the team comes from all over, from Turkey, from Libya, at once even a member of King Herod's court.

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Indeed, this is the place where the word Christian was coined to describe this strange group of people that were neither fully Jews nor fully Gentiles, but Christ people, Christians.
So, the church in Antioch is buzzing. You know, imagine being part of the first ever church to be called Christian. Imagine having a team of five regular preachers and teachers, two of whom are Paul and Barnabas.
Right? If I'm allowed to say this, if there's an early church that I would have been part of, it would be Antioch, hands down. Right? It's by far the best church in the book of Acts. So, have a look at verse 2.
What does God do? While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I've called them.
[11:37] Then after fasting and praying, they laid their hands on them and sent them off. They've got a great church. So, God breaks it up and scatters it abroad.

Notice how personally the Holy Spirit speaks here. Set apart for me the work to which I've called them. Verse 4 says, they were sent out by the Holy Spirit.
There's no room, is there, for thinking of the Holy Spirit as an impersonal force or an inanimate tool in God's hand. He has agency, purpose, initiative. He's the third person of the Trinity.
Working here as ever in perfect unity with the Father and the Son. One God, three persons.
Perhaps he spoke audibly to the room. Perhaps through one of the prophets, we're not told.
The point is that the Holy Spirit said it. He is the one who speaks, who calls, and who sends.
[12:41] The initiative to go and spread the gospel, make disciples, plant churches, comes here from God himself. Brothers and sisters, who in all the world do you think most loves the lost?

Who cares most that the nations are reached by the gospel? It is the triune God, their creator. How encouraging and essential it is for us to know that the one at the head of world mission, leading the re-evangelization of Scotland, sending his people out into a lost world, is God the Holy Spirit.
When we hear about the immense need around us, the sad statistics, situations we know in our own circles that break our hearts, we need to remember, don't we, that the task unfinished is his work before it's ever ours.
God carries out his own mission. What great news is that he's not delegated the saving of sinners to people like us. Sinners everywhere rejoice in that.
Praise the Lord. He plans. He instigates. He takes the lead. He speaks. He calls. He sends. He says, the work seems impossible to us.
[14:06] And indeed, it is impossible. But success is a foregone conclusion to him who spoke the universe into being, sustains it with a word, and calls people of all nations to himself through the gospel.

Sometimes, don't we, we find encouragement in the thought that God is on our side, which isn't wrong. But how much more encouraging to know that we are on his side.
We are sent out by the Holy Spirit. And the church in Antioch clearly grasped that. They received the message. And then what?
Verse 3. They pray and obey. Again, we're not told everything that happened, but clearly their first instinct wasn't to schedule meetings for the next six months and talk about how they were going to do it.
Their priority was to speak to the Lord about what they had heard from him. They fasted and prayed, which makes total sense, doesn't it? If God's called them to set aside guys for specific work, the most important line of communication is surely to him.
[15:22] We're not told what they prayed. But it's not a great stretch, I think, of the imagination to think of the kinds of prayers that they might have prayed.

Think about it. It's go time in Antioch. The church has a great thing going on. Barnabas and Saul have been core to that church. They're from the beginning.
The Spirit hasn't exactly spelled out what the work is that they're going to go and do. What sort of prayers might you pray in that situation? Lord, we love our church, and we don't really want to lose these guys.
Please help us trust your goodness and your sovereignty as we send them. Lord, you're doing a great work here. Please sustain us here in Antioch and do even greater things through our brothers wherever it is that you might send them.

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Lord, we don't know what the future holds, but you do. Go before us in all our ways and help us to follow where you lead. Lord, please look after Barnabas and Saul.
[16:31] Keep them faithful. Keep them from danger. Bring them home safely. Prayers, those prayers and others, I guess that we'll want to be praying for each other and others in the coming weeks.

Then after fasting and praying, they laid their hands on them and sent them off. They prayed. Then they obeyed. Now here's a question.
How did they know to send them off? How did they know to do that? It's interesting, isn't it? We're not told here that the Holy Spirit said that. He talks about the work to which I've called them, but how does the church know that that involved sending them away?
There may have been more said than Luke has recorded for us, but even if that's true, he's done it on purpose, he's left us to connect the dots, hasn't he?
The Holy Spirit has called these guys to a new work. We must have to send them out. Sending people out from a church then is not a special project that some churches do on the side.
[17:40] Sending people out, it's part and parcel of the Holy Spirit's ordinary work in the church. Think about my plants. If the plants were not sending out suckers and runners and reproducing, there'd be something a bit wrong with them, wouldn't there?

It's one of the seven life processes scientists use to identify living things. Movement, respiration, growth, reproduction. So it's entirely natural and intuitive that when the Spirit says, set them apart for the work I've called them to, the church understands that to involve sending them elsewhere.
I point that out because as much as it's a big deal to send people out to a new work, and it is, it's also part of the natural life cycle of a healthy living church.
I'm told that giving birth is painful and hard. And yet, it's not a special interest for the real enthusiasts, is it?
It's a natural part of family life. And so church families beget churches. They send people away under the Holy Spirit's direction. It's hard work.
[18:59] It's painful. But it's part of being a living, growing church under the Spirit. And so planting Geary Free Church is great. We're all behind that, aren't we? We see that and we love that.

But the question in my mind, and I know in others' minds is, what next? Where next? What more? We hear God's call in Scripture.
Set them apart. Send them out. What do we do? We pray. And we obey. One of the most encouraging things about where we are right now with Geary is that this is where it all began.
We talked about the plans for Geary at the beginning of last year. But for how many years before that had it been being prayed for? On a Sunday, in prayer meetings, many of you I know have been watching and waiting for this for many, many a year.
We heard God's call in Scripture to gather in, build up, reach out, send out. We saw the need out there and we saw the power in here. And we asked the Lord, please, to show us what He would have us to do.
[20:14] And it was as we prayed over those months and years that the jigsaw pieces started to kind of click together. prayer. So that there came a time that all we needed to do was kind of look at what God had presented us and say, well, there's the plan.

You know, I've never heard the Holy Spirit speak audibly. But at this point, I don't think I would need to to be utterly convinced that the Holy Spirit has called us to go and do this work.
because it began with prayer. It's continued to be bathed with prayer. And He has been pleased to continue to answer so clearly, so clearly as He's led us and called people, set them apart and sent them.
And so, friends, encouragement to you. Let's not stop praying for the Spirit to show us what next. What next to Geary? What next to Bonacord? We wait expectantly on the Lord to show us the work to which He's called us.
Where would He send us? Who would He send? And so, as He calls, we pray and obey. For the Holy Spirit, through the church, sends people out.
[21:30] that's the first truth we need in our survival kit as we get ready to send the plant out in a couple of weeks. The second truth to encourage and equip us this morning, then, is this.

That the Word of God, faithfully preached, is opposed, but prevails. What are we to expect as we go out and send out into the world?

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Well, sent out by the Spirit, Saul and Barnabas make their way down to Cyprus. They travel from one end of the island to the other and proclaim the Word of God in the synagogues.
Again, super interesting, isn't it? They didn't need to ask the Spirit twice what it was He specifically wanted them to do when they got where they were going. If God sent us out, you can bet He wants us to tell people about Jesus and the good news.
We're not told, are we, they went about healing people, doing miracles, speaking in tongues, though Paul does invoke a kind of curse on someone later. They simply went and told people plainly what God says in His Word, the Gospel, which is exactly, of course, what they'd been doing in Antioch, in Damascus, in Jerusalem before that.
[22:47] And by the time they get to the far side of Cyprus, this has caught the attention of the Roman proconsul, Sergius Paulus, verse 7, a man of intelligence who summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the Word of God.

Now, this is remarkable for a few reasons. So far, Saul and Barnabas have preached to Jews in the synagogues on Cyprus, but apparently not to Gentiles.
Sergius Paulus is as Gentile as it gets, and he has called them to him to tell him what they're saying. He's also a proconsul, which I found out this week in Roman politics would have meant that previously he'd been a Roman senator and now had been set over the island of Cyprus as a province to govern it.
So, he's a really important Gentile. We're also told here he was intelligent. His interest in the Gospel is clearly more than due diligence. I guess as proconsul, you would want to know what's being preached on my island, but he's clearly curious, personally, to know what it is Barnabas and Saul are saying.
But where there is openness to the Gospel, opposition is never far behind. And indeed, Sergius Paulus has a kind of royal advisor with him called Bar Jesus or Elemas, verse 6, a Jewish false prophet spirit.
[24:21] If you kind of picture worm tongue with King Theoden, that is Elemas with Sergius Paulus. Clearly, he has the proconsul's trust, yet he is there to keep him captive to spiritual darkness.

So, when Sergius Paulus sought to hear the word of God, verse 8, Elemas, the magician, opposed them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith.
If we'd followed Acts up to this point, we'd recognize this is not a new story. The same word that cut to the heart 3,000 people in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, that grew and multiplied, that went out to the Ethiopian eunuch, that converted Saul, that reached Cornelius the centurion, that birthed the church in Antioch, has now come with great power to Cyprus, and it's working.
But just as it has been at every other turn, so even far away on Cyprus, it meets with opposition. And friends, it's no different today.
Wherever we go with the gospel, we can be sure that the enemies of Christ, spiritual and human, will try to shut it down and stop it going out.
[25:42] Whether that's the one person in the friendship group who rubbishes and badmouths Christianity at every opportunity, whether to your face or behind your back.

Whether it's the building owners or the council who don't want their facilities used for Christian worship or outreach. Whether it's the false prophet in the church down the road that twists Christian language to spread a merely human message and turn people away from the true faith.
Opposition to the gospel takes countless forms from low-level banter to high-level attack.
Sometimes, as on Cyprus, it comes from surprising places. You might have thought that the Jewish advisor of a Gentile ruler would be sympathetic at least to two guys who have graced the synagogues and speak about the Messiah, but there it is, obstruction, opposition.
If we're preaching the gospel faithfully, it will happen. It will happen in Geary, wherever else we go.
But whereas Paul and others faced opposition in Jerusalem and around Jerusalem relatively calmly, this opposition on Cyprus brings out a much stronger reaction, doesn't it?
He calls Elipus, you son of the devil, you enemy of righteousness full of deceit and villainy. Now, I wouldn't go around saying that to people this week.
[27:14] And there's a reason. We'll explore why the much stronger reaction next week when Paul unpacks it himself. But for now, notice that we're told in verse 9 that Paul was filled with the Holy Spirit as he said it.

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This was not Paul flying off the handle in a rage. It was a spiritual response to spiritual hostility. For remember, it was the Holy Spirit who sent Paul like Isaiah out to prepare the way of the Lord and make straight his paths.
And here is Elimus, this guy, making crooked the straight paths of the Lord. But it doesn't stop there, does it? For behold, said Paul, the hand of the Lord is upon you and you'll be blind and unable to see the sun for a time.
And immediately it happened. Darkness fell upon him. He went about seeking people to lead him.
Now, as dramatic as that is, I wonder, does that remind you of anyone else in the book of Acts?
Surely, even as he said it, Paul would have been reminded of his own blindness, blinded by the Lord on the road to Damascus as he went to, what? Oppose the gospel, bind up Christians.
[28:32] So now, Elimus, holding Sergius Paulus in spiritual bondage, is blinded by the Lord, like Paul, needing to be led by the hand, humbled. And again, like Paul, for a time.

It's not permanent. Now, we're not told what becomes of Elimus, but he wouldn't be the first Jewish magician to repent and believe in Acts. Back in chapter 8, Peter has a very similar interaction with a guy called Simon the magician who was similarly humbled and repents.
If even Paul the persecutor could see who he was up against when blinded by the glory of the risen Lord Jesus, surely then there was hope for Elimus the enchanter to truly see the Lord.
Now he's been blinded by Paul's word. But more importantly still to the book of Acts and therefore to us, we're left in no doubt of who did believe that day.
Verse 12, then, the proconsul believed when he saw what occurred, that he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord.
[29:41] Sergius Paulus, super important Gentile, ruler of his own Mediterranean island, hears Paul's word and is converted by the power of the Lord's teaching.

As unlikely as a man like that was ever to believe the gospel, he was even less likely with Elimus dripping poison into his ears. But friends, there is no opposition, no condition, no position, too hard for the gospel of the Lord Jesus to cut through with power.
The word of God, faithfully preached, is opposed, but prevails. Who knows if that one friend will ever soften to the gospel, but keep speaking because others will be watching and listening.
Who knows if that one venue might not ever be an option. The doors might literally be closed to the gospel, but the Lord will open other doors and the word will get out. There will always be counterfeit Christianity around.
We promise that. False teachers, unfaithful churches, keep preaching the word of God because some will see through the fog and the lies and come to know the Savior.
[31:02] Who knows, just possibly, even the particular opposition might be overcome and humbled by the word like Elimus. We don't know all the purposes of the Lord in sending us out.

We don't know who will listen. Who will save, how he'll build his church, how he'll lead us, what he will do. But whatever the specifics, these things we can count on, difficulty and success, opposition and victory.
We should not be surprised, therefore, when opposition rears its head because we are planting a gospel church where there is gospel need. it might be targeted at the launch team.
Inbaruri doesn't need any more churches. We're struggling for numbers as it is and you're pulling people away. In fact, why don't you guys just come and join us and you'll double your numbers and we'll keep our building.
Or perhaps that's the ultra-conservative church, the non-inclusive church, the we freeze. who knows? But it will come.
[32:18] It might be targeted at us at Bon Accord. We get a lot of love from our gospel partners. But this is not what the world wants churches to do.

The world wants the church to do poverty relief and mental health support and community integration. I get emails about community events which explicitly say, in bold, underline, this event for people, for faith leaders.
This event is not about discussing the big questions or telling anyone about what you believe. It's only about understanding how my experience of faith helps me, what my religion means to me.
In other words, they want a secular event where people talk about their feelings in religious language. The world does not cheer and celebrate when the church says, as Jesus said, repent and believe the gospel.

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people. Who knows what challenges might come, but know, brothers and sisters, that they will. Where do we turn then for courage and help when they come?
[33:35] Back to the beginning of the gospel and see that just as it was for Paul and just as it was for Jesus, so it is for us and has ever been so, and so we must never lose our nerve.

Peter, who knew a thing or two about facing opposition, writes in his first letter, beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you as though something strange were happening to you, but rejoice, for insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.
be assured, brothers and sisters, that when opposition comes, whatever it looks like, however it comes, the gospel will prevail, Christ's glory will be seen, and we will rejoice in it when, like Paul and Barnabas, we keep faithfully preaching it.
May we be deeply encouraged and equipped then to do so as we go out from here. Let's pray for God's help together. Let's pray. Father, we thank you so much for the record of your gospel growing and multiplying in the book of Acts.
Lord, we pray that what we've heard in it today might give us great courage and confidence in what you have told us in the gospel, that Jesus' life, death, and resurrection have secured the forgiveness of sins, which will be preached from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth.
[35:24] Please, Lord, help us as we take our part in that here in our day in Aberdeen and the Northeast. Please help us, Lord, to follow in the footsteps of men like Saul and Barnabas, who boldly and fearlessly proclaimed your word.

And we pray, Father, that as you did for them, so for us, you would embolden us and clear away the opposition. Help us to see, Lord, the good news prevailing, and help us to set our hearts on the glory of Christ, Lord, and rejoice in it, even when we suffer for it.
These things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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