

we need a gospel that does too. We need a Saviour who really suffered for our sins. We need a Lord who is really alive at God's right hand. The Lord Jesus is just such a Saviour. We must rest our souls upon him. Our death shall be very real. Our appearing before God for judgment shall be real too. We need a salvation that is just as certain as these things.

Let us see secondly from Paul's words that *the gospel is freely offered to everyone*. He makes this very clear. He is speaking to people who are not in the chosen land. Some of his hearers are Jews, but some of them are not. Some were "sons of the family of Abraham". Others were not; others in the synagogue feared God, but were reluctant to become Jews. But Paul was announcing that these things did not matter. God made no such distinctions any more. They had all been done away with. Whoever heard the gospel, was urged to come to Christ. "To you", says Paul, "the word of this salvation has been sent". This was revolutionary! They had never heard anything like this before. We can hardly imagine what a shock it was to them. But have we realised what it means for us too? God has sent his only, dearly loved Son into this world. He has given him up to the death of the cross. Christ has bled and died for sins. And now he is freely offered - to us! Whoever hears, is invited to come. The Saviour of sinners is offered - not just to others, but to us too. Have we responded to this? Have we heard the good news, and received the free gift? Do we understand what the gospel says? Do we believe that these things are true? Are we relying upon the Saviour who is at the heart of those things? Have we moved from hearing, to believing and trusting upon the Lord Jesus Christ for ourselves? These are vital questions. Our eternities hang upon them.

Finally let us notice that *even if we fight against God, his word will stand*. The rulers in Jerusalem had fought against God. They had rejected the promised Christ. They had hated him, and delivered him to death. They had crucified him. But in doing so, they had only done what the prophets had always said (verse 27). The prophets had spoken of a suffering Saviour. The Old Testament throughout speaks of a crucified Christ. It was necessary for the Messiah to suffer, and then to enter into his glory. These things were being read from the Scriptures every day and week. But they had not recognised them. And in their spiritual blindness, they had only succeeded in bringing them about!

God's wisdom and power are very great. We may think that we can fool or thwart him. But it is not so. Even in our rebellion, his word will be fulfilled. We cannot fight against his word and prosper. We can only fulfil it, by ruining ourselves. Let us not think that if we ignore the gospel, it will go away. Its truth cannot be changed. God will be glorified in saving us, or in damning us to hell. Either way, his word will be proved true. Let us yield to it, knowing that it is freely offered to us now. Let us know that Christ has already been damned on the cross, and we need not be. Let us know that he stands full of love, and ready to save. Let us flee to him, and fulfil his word by being saved.

Expository thoughts on **The Acts Of The Apostles**

Daily Bible Reading Notes

Week 9 (Chapter 12:6-13:30)

Grace Church Belper

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Acts 12:6-10, 18-19

6 And when Herod was about to bring him out, that night Peter was sleeping, bound with two chains between two soldiers; and the guards before the door were keeping the prison. 7 Now behold, an angel of the Lord stood by him, and a light shone in the prison; and he struck Peter on the side and raised him up, saying, "Arise quickly!" And his chains fell off his hands. 8 Then the angel said to him, "Gird yourself and tie on your sandals"; and so he did. And he said to him, "Put on your garment and follow me." 9 So he went out and followed him, and did not know that what was done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. 10 When they were past the first and the second guard posts, they came to the iron gate that leads to the city, which opened to them of its own accord; and they went out and went down one street, and immediately the angel departed from him.

18 Then, as soon as it was day, there was no small stir among the soldiers about what had become of Peter. 19 But when Herod had searched for him and not found him, he commanded that they should be put to death. And he went down from Judea to Caesarea, and stayed there.

These verses tell us about Peter's escape. It is a very striking report. It contains things which are unique in the Bible. God has lessons which he means to teach us through this incident. Let us open our ears and our hearts!

Let us notice firstly *the wonderful sovereignty of God* in these events. The whole chapter has much to say on this theme. There are many examples of it. Let us compare Peter and James. James was killed with the sword (verse 2). But Peter got away. One of the apostles had his earthly life ended. The other was allowed to continue for many years. One was left to Herod's will. The other had an angel sent to intervene. How can we explain these differences? Both men were apostles. Both had been chosen by the Son of God. Both had spent years being taught by Christ. Both had seen him die. Both had seen him after he rose again. Both had preached the gospel, and watched over the church. But now one died, and the other lived.

There is only one way to explain these events. It was the sovereign will of God. God's will is never without its reasons; but those reasons are not always revealed to us. God's ways are higher than ours. His mind is far beyond our mind (Isaiah 55:8-9). In just the same circumstances, he may choose opposite ways. We cannot complain or grumble. He knows well just what he does. If we seem to be left and the wicked prevail, he has a purpose. He has no less a purpose than when he sends angels and miracles.

We can see the sovereignty of God in how Peter was rescued too. God could have spared Peter prison. But he did not. He could have intervened on the very first night. But he did not do this either. He allowed Peter to remain in the prison until the eve of his death. And then he intervened. What were his reasons for this? We cannot know for

Saviour - Jesus - 24 after John had first preached, before his coming, the baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. 25 And as John was finishing his course, he said, "Who do you think I am? I am not he. But behold, there comes one after me, the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to loose. 26 Men and brethren, sons of the family of Abraham, and those among you who fear God, to you the word of this salvation has been sent. 27 For those who dwell in Jerusalem, and their rulers, because they did not know him, nor even the voices of the prophets which are read every Sabbath, have fulfilled them in condemning him. 28 And though they found no cause for death in him, they asked Pilate that he should be put to death. 29 Now when they had fulfilled all that was written concerning him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb. 30 But God raised him from the dead."

Luke is continuing to tell us about what happened in the synagogue in Antioch (Pisidia). Paul is preaching. People in Asia minor are hearing the gospel for the very first time. They have never heard anything like this before! Let us listen with them to the apostle's words.

These words tell us some things very clearly. *The gospel is all about facts concerning Jesus Christ.* Paul did not preach his own ideas. He did not preach philosophy that only a few could understand. He did not make claims that had no connection to history or reality. No - he preached about real events surrounding Jesus Christ. He pointed them to things which many of them would have known about. John the Baptist (v24) was one of the most famous people of his day. A synagogue of Jews would have heard of him. And if they had heard about John the Baptist, they must have heard about Jesus Christ. John had pointed to him (v25).

Paul preached that Jesus had been declared by John. He said that he was an innocent and blameless man. He declared that he had been condemned by the rulers, and put to death. He explained that Pilate had been involved in it too. He said that he was crucified, and had died. He preached that he had been laid in a tomb. And from that tomb, Paul taught, he had returned, raised from the dead.

The gospel is all about real historical facts. It is about things that have happened in time and space. It is either right and true for everyone in all time, or right and true for nobody at all. We live in a time when people say "it might be true for you, but not for me". The gospel cannot be treated like this. Nobody says that the existence of London, or the second world war, is could be true for you but not for them. Either the gospel is good news for everyone, or for no-one at all. Either Jesus Christ really died and rose again, or he did not. He is either Lord of the whole universe, or not Lord at all. Paul knew nothing about the idea that the Christian faith is just helpful ideas for our lives. He could never have thought that it would be useful for us, even if Jesus was really still dead. His preaching was quite the opposite. He preached that Jesus died and rose again, and that this was at the heart of all things.

We must take this very seriously. We live in the real world of time and space. And so

like hard words. But they are all true. The gospel ministry is not to be entered lightly. It is a high and holy calling.

Whether we are ministers or not, there is teaching for us here. It is one thing to begin the Christian life. It is another thing to persevere. It is not those who start who receive the reward. It is those who make it to the end. Let us examine ourselves. Are we losing heart? Are we giving up? We need to take care. We might be in danger of never making it at all. Let us remember the Lord. Let us see that we do not let him down.

Let us see secondly from these verses that *Christ is the climax of all God's promises under the Old Testament*. The way that Paul preached may seem strange to us. But it was very familiar to those who were Jews. We tend to talk about ideas. The Jews talked about the story of God's dealing with the world. Paul preached about how God had dealt with Israel from the start. But it is not a story for no reason. It is a story with a very clear point. That point is that Jesus was the fulfilment of all that had happened before. If they wanted to be true Israelites, they must trust in Christ. If they wanted to recognise all that God had done, they must bow to him. There was no true religion, except that which led to the Son of God. If they had the Lord Jesus, then they had all that God had ever promised. If they rejected him, then they would have nothing at all. God has always been working to a plan. That plan climaxed in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Have we understood these things? Religion is not something good just for its own sake. Not all roads lead to God. God has had his own purpose in the history of the world. All of his promises are fulfilled through Jesus Christ. If we trust in him, then we have all that God ever spoke about. If we are born again and relying on his shed blood, then everything is ours. If we are still unconverted, then we cannot hope for anything at all. There are no promises of any kind except ones that are realised in him. This is a matter on which we cannot afford to make a mistake. Are we relying on Jesus Christ? Nothing we do is of any value before God, without him.

Let us remark finally that *there is only one gospel in all the world*. The Holy Spirit has given us this sermon in some detail. And it is a very familiar one! We have already read how Peter preached to Jews. We have read how Stephen spoke at the council. And the words and thoughts are very similar to those. There is a good reason why this is so. That is because there is only one gospel for the whole world. Those living in Jerusalem and in Asia all needed the same message. They needed to hear that Jesus was the Messiah sent from God. They needed to know that he died for his peoples' sins, and rose again. They needed to understand that all who trusted in him would be saved.

No doubt there are many ways to preach the gospel. Different hearers will need different approaches. But there is only one gospel that can be preached. However we get to Jesus, we must get there in the end. Nobody else can save. Let us look to him.

Acts 13:23-30

23 "From this man's seed, according to the promise, God raised up for Israel a

certain. But surely it had something to do with the church's prayers (v5). God knew what he had in mind. But first, he would teach the church to pray. It was always his purpose to release the apostle; but only through the believers' prayers. Peter too surely learnt many lessons. His faith was purified and refined. He learnt that God can save even in the hour of death. He learnt that angels are always watching over God's elect.

We must learn our lessons from this. God is not only working in the world around us. It is not only his purpose to use the church. He is also at work within us. It is also his purpose to change and purify his people. He knows what he plans to do. But he will do it in the way which most glorifies him! God's sovereignty is not something to be feared. It is not something which is cold and hard. It is all for our good (Romans 8:28). It is all driven by infinite love. It is the same purpose which delivered Jesus to the cross. It is the same will which has chosen believers and purchased glory for them. Let us admire it, adore it, and make it our safety in times of distress.

Let us secondly see Herod as an example of *a hard-hearted man*. Peter was very heavily guarded. "Four squads" of soldiers were keeping him (v4). In each squad, two soldiers were chained to his wrists (verse 6) and two guarded the door. The squads would take it in turn, so that none would fall asleep and let Peter go. He was behind a locked door. There were guard posts (verse 10). He was very well secured. It was clear that no man could release him. The penalties for letting a prisoner go were very severe. If a soldier let a captive escape, then he must die in his place (v19). That was the normal law. No soldier would take a chance, given such a fate. It was very clear, then, that Peter's escape had not been through man. It was clear that God himself had intervened. It was obvious that a miracle had occurred. There was no human explanation for it; the soldiers were left in "no small stir" (v18). But despite all this, what did Herod do? He put the soldiers to death. He did not care for God or man. He had no fear towards his creator. He had no care for the lives of his servants. His will had been foiled, and he was an angry man. He had wanted to trouble the church; but when he could not, he took it out on his soldiers instead.

Sadly Herod has not been alone. It is not only tyrants who have hard hearts. You do not have to be a king to be a rebel against God. Herod has had many followers since. His followers today are all those who care nothing for Jesus Christ. They put their own goals and plans first. They are willing to tolerate the faith and the church. But if they and it clash, the faith always has to give way. They come into contact with holy things. But holy things never enter into their hearts. They might sit in church buildings, and hear many things from God's word. They might always be at services, and seem to be worshipping God. But inside, their hearts are unchanged. When some conflict comes up, self always wins. They do not put anyone to death; but they do the same thing in their hearts.

Let us ask ourselves what kind of hearts we have. Do we grieve over sin? Are we saddened when we know we have offended God? Is doing right in his eyes our great concern? Do we put self to death, each and every day? Are we taking up our cross and following Christ? Are we thrilled by the thought of pleasing him? Are we moved by the

thought of his death, and grateful for his precious blood? Do we show this love to every other believer? Do we put ourselves into difficulties for their sake? Does our love to them cost us anything? Is it in deed, or in words only? These questions will all show us something about our hearts. They will show us who is our real god. They will show us if we are like Herod, or if we have the mind of Christ.

Acts 12:11-17

11 And when Peter had come to himself, he said, "Now I know for certain that the Lord has sent his angel, and has delivered me from the hand of Herod and from all the expectation of the Jewish people." 12 So, when he had considered this, he came to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose surname was Mark, where many were gathered together praying. 13 And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a girl named Rhoda came to answer. 14 When she recognised Peter's voice, because of her gladness she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter stood before the gate. 15 But they said to her, "You are beside yourself!" Yet she kept insisting that it was so. So they said, "It is his angel." 16 Now Peter continued knocking; and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. 17 But motioning to them with his hand to keep silent, he declared to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, "Go, tell these things to James and to the brethren." And he departed and went to another place.

At last Peter comes to his senses! He had thought it was all a dream (v9). But now the apostle sees that it is real. Herod's victim has escaped from his grasp. It is still the dead of night. Nobody knows yet that Peter is not still in jail. There are a few hours for him to make good his getaway. Let us see what he did.

Let us notice that *Peter knew exactly where to find the church*. The believers did not have any buildings in those days. They met in private homes. There was no headquarters for Peter to go to. But he knew just where he would find the believers. There was a prayer meeting, and he knew that the brethren would be there.

This is the first time we hear the name of John Mark. He will be important in the chapters to come. The church was meeting in his mother's house. It was the middle of the night. Were the believers in bed? No, they were pouring out their hearts to God. What a happy pastor Peter must have been! He did not have to find his own home. He did not have to go to a home where he could meet one or two brethren. He knew that if he went to Mary's house, he would find many of the church there. They were a church who could be relied upon to pray.

This passage asks us questions. These questions are searching, and require an answer from us. Can we be relied upon to pray? Do our leaders know that if the church is praying, we will be there? Is prayer something continually being carried on in our homes? Do we pray as those who really believe that God hears? Is it the work of a few minutes, or is it a work of real time? If one of our members was taken away, would he

brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say on." 16 Then Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand said, "Men of Israel, and you who fear God, listen: 17 The God of this people Israel chose our fathers, and exalted the people when they dwelt as strangers in the land of Egypt, and with an uplifted arm he brought them out of it. 18 Now for a time of about forty years he put up with their ways in the wilderness. 19 And when he had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, he distributed their land to them by allotment. 20 After that he gave them judges for about four hundred and fifty years, until Samuel the prophet. 21 And afterward they asked for a king; so God gave them Saul the son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, for forty years. 22 And when he had removed him, he raised up for them David as king, to whom also he gave testimony and said, 'I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after my own heart, who will do all my will. 23 From this man's seed, according to the promise, God raised up for Israel a Saviour - Jesus'. Luke has given us a very full record of what happened in Antioch of Pisidia. (This is a different Antioch to the one in Syria which they had left). These are the first official missionaries to Europe. This is the first sermon preached there. How did they go about their work? What message did they declare? We have been given an answer to these questions in these words.

Let us notice firstly that *some Christian workers will turn out not to be up to the task*. John Mark had come from Jerusalem with them. He had travelled to Cyprus (his uncle Barnabas' (Colossians 4:10) homeland). But now when they come Asia minor, he turns back. He "departed from them" (15:38), and was not willing to go "with them to the work". There is a lot here that is unclear to us. The Holy Spirit has not recorded all the details for us. But one thing is certain. John Mark turned away from the labours that were before them. His departure was so serious, that Paul thought it unwise to risk taking him again even two years later (Acts 15:36-41). He had been proven unfaithful, and unfit for the work.

Happily John Mark came good again in time. Paul found him useful once again (2 Timothy 4:11). But at this time, he was not up to the task. We do not know exactly how he failed. Was the going too hard? Was the opposition too severe? Was he not yet convinced that the gospel really was for non-Jews? Was the Gentile mission too uncomfortable for him? We cannot say. But whatever it was, he had put his hand to the work but was now turning back.

We must understand that Christian service is not meant to be easy. It places great demands on our minds, bodies and souls. The Christian race is not a sprint. It is not over in a day. The opposition is very severe. The world, the devil and the flesh are all opposed. There are many tests and temptations. There might be the test of open persecution. There might be the test of no apparent fruit even over many years. Whatever way, there is a price to pay. We ought to count the cost before we start out. Jesus taught a great deal about this. To one, he had to tell him that as a gospel worker he could expect no fixed place to stay. To another, he had to reveal that the kingdom must take priority over all things. To a third, he had to say that "No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God." These all seem

how love for God sometimes has to speak. The danger of being deceived is very great. The words spoken against it need to be very clear. Paul spoke these words being "filled with the Holy Spirit" (verse 9). These words were inspired by God. He called Elymas "full of deceit and all fraud", a "son of the devil", "enemy of all righteousness", and charged him with "perverting the straight ways of the Lord" (verse 10). He pronounced him to be in spiritual darkness, and miraculously sentenced him to endure the same outward darkness too. Paul did not do these things out of malice. He did them, led by the Spirit of God.

We must never forget that evil is meant to be confronted by the gospel. Evil is not something which we are meant to ignore. It is meant to be exposed, and overcome. Sin was what sent Jesus Christ to the cross. It ought to be our sworn enemy too.

Finally we must take to heart that *Christ is stronger than every other power*. This is the point of these verses. As the gospel went out into the pagan world, it went out to confront and defeat. Jesus had won a great victory through his death at the cross. And now his servants go out in order to make that victory known. Jesus is putting down all earthly and hellish powers, bringing all things under his own rule (1 Corinthians 15:24-28). The spread of the gospel is a great contest. Christ enters into contention with the other powers. But the battle is not an even one. Christ has already won. He has already defeated sin, and death and hell, at Calvary. He has already overcome all that they could offer, and risen from the dead. Victory is already his. He is already reigning from the right hand of God. He now goes out as the mighty conquering Lord, so that the fruits of this victory should be seen. This is what we see here in Acts chapter 13. Christ confronts the rival powers, and overcomes them.

There is a great deal spoke about spiritual battles today. Much of it is unbiblical, harmful and untrue. But there is indeed a great battle going on. It is a battle with the gospel at its heart. As Sergius Paulus saw what was done, he believed (verse 12). He was astonished not so much at the miracle, but at the teaching of the Lord (verse 12). The spiritual battle is lost or won when people come to faith and abandon their former ideas. The Lord Jesus' kingdom is advanced when frauds are exposed, and the gospel message is heard and believed. This is the work which the Lord Jesus Christ is doing. It is a work in which he is succeeding and will succeed. He has all authority in heaven and on earth (Matthew 28:18). No power is greater than him. Let us bow before our great and powerful Saviour. Let us trust him for every needed thing. Let us look to him in every struggle, and look for him to bring us victory in every battle. Those who look to him shall never be ashamed.

Acts 13:13-23

13 Now when Paul and his party set sail from Paphos, they came to Perga in Pamphylia; and John, departing from them, returned to Jerusalem. 14 But when they departed from Perga, they came to Antioch in Pisidia, and went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day and sat down. 15 And after the reading of the law and the prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent to them, saying, "Men and

know that when he came out, he could well find us at prayer? It is to be feared that very little praying happens in these days. When much sin abounds, the love of many grows cold (Matthew 24:12). Living in days of small things, our expectations grow small too. But it ought not to be so. The Lord still reigns. Jesus Christ is still at the right hand of God. The Saviour is really alive! Prayer is still one of the very best uses of time. We must ask ourselves the question. Do we pray? Whether we pray little or much, we can all pray a bit more. We shall never regret doing so. Let us devote ourselves to the task.

Let us see secondly from these verses *what a strange mixture of belief and unbelief is to be found even in true believers*. These believers were not people of little faith. They were still praying, into the last hours of Peter's life. They had forsaken their beds, because they believed that God could still intervene. They had not lost heart, and stayed at home in case they were Herod's targets next. They prayed, because they believed that God could do great things. Yet what a strange picture we now see! Let nobody say that there is no humour in the word of God. Peter is standing at the gate and knocking - but they do not let him in! The servant girl is convinced that it is him - but does not open the door! She tries to tell the believers that the apostle is really there. Yet they say that she is mad! She insists that it is so; they say something about an angel! (v15). They were praying for God to bring Peter back to them. And God had done just that. Yet they could not bring themselves to believe it was so! Maybe they were somewhat afraid. They feared for their own lives. The door was locked in case someone came for them. Their faith was mixed up with unbelief.

We must not be surprised that these things are so. It was true in the very first church. It has been true for the churches ever since. Faith and unbelief often exist side by side. There is a true love to Jesus Christ - but also too much clinging to the present world. There is real fear of the all holy God; co-existing with the fear of man. There is relying on the promises of the Lord - with doubts that they can really be believed. All our experience tells us that these things are so.

Let us not require perfection of our fellow believers. They are weak vessels, just like we are. Let us not hold them to a standard which nobody can keep. We must ask ourselves if there is real faith towards Jesus Christ. The smallest faith which really looks to him, saves. The weakest believer who has abandoned their own good works and is trusting in him shall go to heaven, however small that faith may be. It is the precious blood of Jesus which saves, not our faith. Our faith connects us to him. That connection may be large and strong; or it may be small and weak. But the question is, does it exist at all? If it does, we may have hope of everlasting life.

Let us not be completely crushed when we see our own weakness. We are far weaker than we even imagine yet. But the Lord is very strong. He will uphold his church. Peter was not taken away from them when they refused to believe. He brought them the blessing still.

The third thing these verses tell us is that *believers are expected to use their wisdom*. God had just performed a great miracle. An angel had delivered Peter out of jail. But

Peter did not now live as he pleased. He did not say "I am invincible", and flaunt himself around the town. When he saw what God had done, he moved quickly, and departed to another place (v17). Peter's faith was very great. He had even been sleeping on the night before his death (v6). He was so fast asleep, that the angel could hardly wake him. He had been part of a great miracle. But faith is not presumption. He did put the Lord to the test. He did not presume that the Lord would always so directly intervene. Rather, he took steps to make himself as safe as he could. He trusted that God would ordinarily bless him in the ordinary way. Peter would use what things he could - and he would trust God to bring him success.

This is a lesson for us too. The Lord can do miraculous things. But we must not presume upon them. Faith must rest upon the promises of God. It cannot rest upon promises which he has not given. God has not promised to perform miracles for us. He has promised to bless us as we use the wisdom which he has given us. Let us not sit around waiting for blessing to float down from the sky. Let us look at what the Lord has already given us, and use it as best we can. God wants us to be mature, not like little infants. We should not need to be led by the hand. He has given us his word, and expects us to read it. He expects us to study, so that we become wise. He expects us to live by faith, not by sight. This is not an easy thing to do. We would like to be cared for like little children all the time. Growing up is hard! But it is the Lord's will. Let us bring glory to him.

Acts 12:20-24

20 Now Herod had been very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon; but they came to him with one accord, and having made Blastus the king's personal aide their friend, they asked for peace, because their country was supplied with food by the king's country. 21 So on a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat on his throne and gave an oration to them. 22 And the people kept shouting, "The voice of a god and not of a man!" 23 Then immediately an angel of the Lord struck him, because he did not give glory to God. And he was eaten by worms and died. 24 But the word of God great and multiplied.

This is a very striking incident. It is remarkable for many reasons. Records of it are found in human histories as well as the word of God. The message which it speaks is loud and clear. Let us read it and worship the true God!

The first thing we see in these verses is *the great pride of man*. Herod shows us how large, and how foolish, this pride can be. No doubt he was a great man in the world. He had reunited the kingdom of his grandfather, Herod the Great. He had power over regions and multitudes of people. His decisions affected countless lives. Much authority was in his hands. But for all this, he was still a man, and not a god. But in this chapter, we see that he had completely forgotten that. He stretches out his hand to trouble the church (v1). He dispenses life and death (v2). He takes prisoners at his own will (v3). He cuts off food, or lets it come through. He behaves as if he could do as he pleased. When he is flattered, he gives out favours. When he is offended, he dispenses death. In

golden calf (Exodus 32). Balaam was a prophet of the Lord, but for money rather than for a heavenly reward. King Jeroboam rejected the true worship of God, and set up calves instead. The Sadducees were not atheists, but they did not trust the living God. The Pharisees devoted nearly every waking thought to religion, but nothing they did pleased Israel's God. And let us not forget that it was religious people who murdered the Son of God. Here we have another striking example of this truth. Elymas was a Jew. He claimed to be near to the true God. He claimed to be a prophet. He claimed to have divine powers, practising sorcery. But all his claims were false. He was a fraud. His real delight was the influence it gained him. What he really wanted was for the ruler in Cyprus to respect him. He was not concerned for God himself. He wanted to turn Sergius Paulus away from God's truth (verse 8). His question was not "is the gospel right, or is it wrong?". His question was "what will the gospel mean for my status and my power?". He was in spiritual darkness. He did not love what was pure. There was a dark mist over his soul, long before one came over his eyes. He was in chains to the devil, and an enemy of all that was true (verse 10).

These things are true in our day too. Not everybody is religious because they love God. Man cannot help being religious. God has made us to be this way. Religion is an unavoidable part of human life. There are few who can truly live without some thought of God. As soon as catastrophe or calamity comes, they prove that it is so. They can only rest at peace on their own for a while. When death or disaster comes, they are soon talking about God, even if only to say it is his fault. The reality of spiritual things is stamped upon man's soul, and he cannot escape it. But this does not mean that all religion is good. Far from it. As man is corrupt in every part of his being, so his ideas about religion are very corrupt as well. As man seeks to use all of God's good gifts for selfish ends, so he does with religion too. Not all who name the name of God are good. The test comes when they are shown the gospel of Christ. The gospel of Christ brings all glory to God. It humbles sinful man down in the dust. It tells him he is wicked, and calls on him to repent. It takes all self-righteousness away from him, and brings all praise to God. It declares that Jesus is Lord, and that we must bow before him. It tells him that he is hopelessly lost, and must be born again. A religious person can put up with many things. But the gospel is too much for a proud soul. He may be able to tolerate it, but he can never truly embrace it. The church has many frauds too. They do not preach Jesus Christ, but seek power and influence for themselves. Let us not be shocked that these things are so. Let us ask ourselves, why we are involved with the Christian faith. What do we look for in it? Is it the glory of God? Or is it only to comfort and gain something for ourselves?

Let us see secondly from these verses that *frauds need to be confronted and exposed*. Paul was like his master. He knew nothing of the teaching that love will never criticise or confront. He had no knowledge of the idea that hard words are ungodly or unkind. Paul loved the truth too much to think this way. Paul had too much compassion and concern for Sergius Paulus' soul to allow such deception to continue. When Christ confronted the Pharisees, he spoke very plainly to them. He used words like "hypocrite" (Matthew 23:13), "your father the devil" (John 8:44), "serpents" and "vipers", and told them that they were heading straight for the damnation of hell (Matthew 23:33). This is

was willing to pay. The Lord Jesus was ready to accept the fierce outpouring of God's anger, in order to save. And he carries on working, to bring all his chosen ones home. For a Christian to support missions is not an option. It is compulsory. To not do so is to be ungodly. It is to be utterly unlike God himself. Christ has not left us in any doubt. The work of reaching the lost is the greatest work of all.

These verses show us that mission is a work for the whole church. Only Paul and Barnabas went, but the church had fasted and prayed for them. Only two leaders actually went out, but hands had been laid upon them. Those hands symbolised that they went on behalf of all. The church was not forgetting them. It was committing itself to pray and to plead continually. Not everyone is meant to go to reach Christ-less lands. But every believer must take that work to heart, and support it in whatever way they can. If we are truly saved, then we owe everything to the missionaries who first came to our lands. How can we not love others in the same way?

Acts 13:4-12

4 So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus. 5 And when they arrived in Salamis, they preached the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. They also had John as their assistant. 6 Now when they had gone through the island to Paphos, they found a certain sorcerer, a false prophet, a Jew whose name was Bar-Jesus, 7 who was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, an intelligent man. This man called for Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. 8 But Elymas the sorcerer (for so his name is translated) withstood them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith. 9 Then Saul, who also is called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him 10 and said, "O full of all deceit and all fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease perverting the straight ways of the Lord? 11 And now, indeed, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you shall be blind, not seeing the sun for a time." And immediately a dark mist fell on him, and we went around seeking someone to lead him by the hand. 12 Then the proconsul believed, being astonished at the teaching of the Lord.

Here are the first activities of the first official missionaries of the Christian church. Here are the steps in which every missionary since has followed in. Here is what the first preachers of Christ in the pagan world did. How different our country would be now if not for these things! If Paul and Barnabas had headed east instead of west, how different our history would have been. Every English reader ought to have deep gratitude to God for these events. Let us see what happened, as the gospel of Christ was spread.

Let us see for a first thing that *many religious people are frauds, and are only serving themselves*. This is something which the Bible makes very clear. There are many examples of it. The rebels at Babel were religious. They made a tower to the heavens - but not to God (Genesis 11:4). Pharaoh feared Jehovah, but only when it suited him. The Israelites turned away from God, but did not stop worshipping, choosing instead a

his mind, he was indeed a god, and was glad when people said so (v22).

How foolish human pride is! It makes no sense at all. Herod, for all his power, was a man like any other. He could not keep himself alive. He was of the same nature as everyone else. He had been given great authority - but it could be taken away again. It was not part of him. It was a privilege the true God had given him for a time. But Herod forgot his maker, and behaved as if he was accountable to no-one. And in a moment, he was made to give a full account for it all. He behaved like a god - and then came face to face with God. He stretched out his hand to trouble the church - and then the church's Lord stretched out his hand to trouble him. Now the people saw who was really God! Herod died in a terrible way. One historian tells us that it was not instant. The worms which ate him took a number of days. He died in great pain. Everybody could see that he was but a mere man.

Pride is the most foolish thing of all. And it is not only found in powerful kings. It is found in every human heart. Pride is when we think of ourselves more highly than we ought. Pride is when we take too many things into our own hands. Pride is when we love ourselves when we ought to love God. Pride is the very deepest sin within us. It is the very last one to be mortified. It lies at the root of every other sin. In every sin, we take into our hands the rights of God. We determined what will be our good and our evil. We act as if we were answerable to nobody other than ourselves. This was the sin through which Adam and Eve fell. They decided that they would be like God (Genesis 3:5). Those "lifted up with pride ... fall into the condemnation of the devil" (1 Timothy 3:6). God resists the proud (1 Peter 5:5). Pride is a sign of apostasy from God (2 Timothy 3:1-2). It is a sign of being under his wrath (Romans 1:30). The end of the proud is be burnt up like stubble (Malachi 4:1). "Every one that is proud in heart is an abomination to the LORD: though hand join in hand, he shall not be unpunished." (Proverbs 16:5).

Let us take note of how dreadful a sin pride is. There is scarcely a sin like it. It clings to us so deeply. It affects every person born into the world. But it is the road to ruin. It was so for Herod. It shall be for us too. Let us ask the Lord to humble us deeply. Let us ask him to show us what we are really like. We must put pride to death, or suffer eternal death in hell. The Lord remembers the humble. Let us seek to bow down low, before him.

We must see too from these verses that *Jesus is a judge, as well as a Saviour*. The same Jesus that sent an angel to deliver Peter, sent an angel to strike down Herod. The same Lord who saves the church, will damn the wicked world. The same arm that is powerful to save is also powerful to destroy. That is one of the lessons of Acts chapter 12. The Jesus who does not judge is not found in Scripture. He is an invention of the unbelieving mind. He may be taught in many churches, and have many followers. But he does not actually exist. The true Lord is fearsome, and vengeance belongs to him (Hebrews 10:30, 2 Thessalonians 1:8).

Have you believed on the Lord Jesus Christ? Or are you still behaving as if you

yourself were a god? We will not be able to do this for ever. The time of his patience will have an end. Turn to him, as he offers you life. Bow to him as your Saviour and Lord. There is still opportunity today to honour him. Do not make the mistake of Herod.

The great question of our lives is, "shall we give glory to God?" (verse 23). This is the reason why God made the world. This is the reason why we exist. Our great purpose is "to glorify God, and enjoy him forever". Everything that is done, should be done to the honour of the Lord. Whether we are ruling a kingdom, or just drinking and eating (1 Corinthians 10:31), it can be done so as to honour him. Make no mistake - God will be glorified. He was not honoured by Herod's life. But he got his honour in Herod's death. Whenever this Herod's name is mentioned, it is with the memory of this. The word of God is being spread throughout all the world, and in it we learn how the great Herod died. God got the fame due to his name. Let us ask ourselves the great question. Just why do we live? Is our purpose in line with God's? Are we bringing him praise? When we have to give an account, will we be able to say that we did it for him? Will he be glorified by our lives, or by judging us in hell? This is not a small question. Everything, everywhere, hangs upon the glory of our great God.

Acts 12:25-13:4

25 And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had fulfilled their ministry, and they also took with them John whose surname was Mark. 1 Now in the church that was at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. 2 As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, "Now separate to me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." 3 Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away. 4 So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus. These are some deeply significant verses. We ought to approach them with special reverence and awe. In them, we read about the first official missionaries of the Christian faith. If we believe in Christ today, it is because of the missionaries who have gone before us. We are now about to read about the very first missions to the Gentile world. The people of Israel already feared the true God. But now the gospel will be taken to people who have never even heard his name. These verses stand at the beginning of the story which we are part of today. The gospel will now make its journey "to the end of earth" (1:8).

Let us see from these verses that *the church is a very diverse body*. In these verses, we have the names of six different men. One was Barnabas, a Levite from the country of Cyprus. Another was Saul, the Pharisee from Cilicia in Asia minor. Another is Simeon, whose nick-name "Niger" means "black" - maybe a man from north Africa. Another we are told was Lucius, from Cyrene, which was part of the Roman Empire in Africa. Another, called Manaen, had been a companion of royalty - Herod, the tetrarch. What a mixture this gathering was! Yet these were all prophets and teachers in the same

church (verse 1). They all loved one Saviour. They all believed the same word. They were all gathered together, as one body in the Lord.

This is just how it is meant to be. What brings a church together should not be education or background. The church is not a club of those with the same interests in life. It is those from all nations who have been redeemed by the blood of Christ. The human race is very diverse. The church should be so too. The Lord wishes it to be so. Many people can get along because they are similar kinds of folk. But the church is meant to be together because it has one Lord. The love of Christ is meant to overcome every human barrier. Each brother should say to every other "if you love Jesus, then that is enough for me." What a shame that it is often not this way! We look at others, and say they are not our kind of people. But the Lord never speaks like that. He has died for sinners of every background and kind (Revelation 7:9).

We must look at the church as it really is. It is the body of Christ. In that body, everyone who truly believes should be welcome. We should love each one just the same. We should make a special effort to love those who are not like us - because this especially glorifies God.

Let us learn secondly from this passage that *the work of missions is God's work*. The church at Antioch did not form the idea itself. God himself caused the advance. The Holy Spirit spoke to the church (verse 3). He himself sent them out (verse 4).

The Lord has a missionary heart. Missions are very close to him. He himself is the greatest missionary of all. He left heaven and glory, to come to this sin-cursed world. He came to seek and to save that which was lost. He came to dwell among us, as one of us. He brought the word of God to a lost world. There was never a greater missionary than Jesus himself. He gave himself for the work, even to the death of the cross. Every true missionary is a pale reflection of him. But every true missionary is also sent out by him. The Lord has not left behind missionary work. It is the great task which he left to his church. He said to them, to go into all the world to make disciples (Matthew 28:18-21). There is no work like it given to the church. Christ shall return, when this work is at last all done.

Saul and Barnabas were surely the very best men in the church at Antioch. Saul was an apostle of the faith. Barnabas was one of Jerusalem's most trusted men. Saul had the best training, and a brilliant mind. Barnabas was full of courage and encouragement. They had been the two who had done most for the believers in that place. They had both been in the faith for many years, and born much fruit. But now God was saying that it was these very two men who should move on. The message from this is clear. It tells us how dear missions are to God's heart. He did not send novices out to it. He sent out the best men the church had. He did not send out those who were spare. He sent out the church's key men.

In all of this we see the great love of God to sinners. He does not spare anything for them. He did not spare even his own Son. The agony of Calvary was a price which he