

## 21. A Sign of Things to Come

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Turn with me, if you would, to the passage that we read in Acts chapter 13, page 921, if you have one of our visitor's Bibles. And it seems to me this passage Luke is telling us is a sign of things to come.

A few weeks ago, as I said, we came to the end of one section of Luke's story of the spread of the early church. And as we said, it's marked there in verse 24 of chapter 12, one of those little brackets that signals an end to one stage of the church's progress.

Luke told us that Herod put all his political force against the Christian church, but his arrogant defiance of the work of God was met, remember, with summary judgment from the worms of God.

He was struck down, says verse 23, eaten by worms, and he breathed his last. But, verse 24, the Word of God increased and multiplied.

Wonderfully encouraging, isn't it, to know that as a church, we not only have the weapons of the Word of God in our hands, but we can trust utterly in the God who has power even over the worms, the worms of the earth.

[ 1 : 1 3 ] Despite what politicians and opinion formers and powerful people might think, God is not dead. He's not powerless.

And those who trample upon the workmen of God, and who seek to destroy the work of God, will, in the end, meet their nemesis in God's good time.

The gospel can't be trampled out, and that's as true today as it was then. The gospel is the unchained melody that is going to become the chorus, the song of this whole earth, and nothing and no one can ever stop that.

And that's just what Luke's next section here, beginning in chapter 13, affirms to us and assures us of as he begins to unfold for us the beginnings of that great outward movement of the gospel beyond Israel and into the whole Gentile world.

Now, we've seen a foretaste of that already, of course, with the beginnings of the conversion of Cornelius' household back in chapter 10, and the planting of the church in Antioch in chapter 11 by those people who just came from Cyprus and Cyrene spreading the word.

[ 2 : 2 5 ] But in chapter 13, what we see is the beginning of the apostolic Gentile mission proper. Apostles sent out specifically to evangelize the world.

So, verse 25, if you look of chapter 12, tells us that the key figures in this, Saul and Barnabas, have returned from their missionary journey of mercy to Jerusalem back to the church in Antioch and brought with them, as we're told, this co-worker, John, whose other name was Mark, who became an important figure in the New Testament.

Of course, later on, wrote Mark's gospel. And this next section of Luke's runs right on to chapter 16 and verse 5, where if you look over the page there, you'll see that we have Luke's next little summary word.

So the churches, verse 5 of chapter 16, were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily. And that's after the end of what we call the first missionary journey, but not just the missionary journey itself, because chapter 15 is a vital part of this next stage.

The vital council at the church in Jerusalem that was absolutely essential if any further mission to the Gentile world was going to be able to take place unhindered. And we'll come to it in due course, that council that settled decisively the issue of true Christian identity.

[ 3 : 49 ] That is, that Gentiles, that Greeks and pagans, non-Jews, could be truly Christian and fully Christian without also having to become Jewish.

And that was a great matter of controversy, but it was an absolutely vital matter that had to be established in the early church. Just read, for example, Paul's letter to the Galatians, how he is vehement in his defense of that, that salvation for Jew and Gentile alike is by grace alone and through faith alone, not with anything added.

No plus, no advanced super gospel of a Jewish identity that would just make you that bit more truly the people of God. No, absolutely not.

One gospel for one world. And so I suppose we could say that this little section of Luke, beginning at chapter 12, verse 25, and ending there at chapter 16, verse 5, is concerned both about the proclamation of the true apostolic gospel to the world and also the preservation of that true apostolic gospel for the world.

And both of these things, both of them are always absolutely essential for genuine Christian mission. Be very clear about that. We need to be just as clear about that today.

[ 5 : 11 ] There are some people who say they're very zealous for the work of the church, for evangelism and so on, but they don't care too much about doctrine. Don't talk about that, they say. Don't waste time getting hung up with things like that.

Let's just proclaim Jesus. No, no, no, says Paul. His whole point is that people can proclaim a different Jesus altogether. It must be the true Jesus, the true gospel, the one salvation, Jew and Gentile, all the world.

On the other hand, of course, there are other people today as well who are just very taken up with the purity of doctrine, who are very keen on the purity of preserving the doctrines of grace, but have very little interest, it seems, in proclaiming those doctrines of salvation to anybody outside their own little church or their own little huddle.

No, says Paul. No, no, no. The gospel mustn't just be preserved, truly. It must be proclaimed to all the world, to Jew and Gentile, to great and small, to a religious person, and to pagan.

And that proclamation is what we see here, beginning in verses, in chapters 13 and 14, of Luke's account. It must be preserved also from error, from additions, from subtractions, from anything that will destroy the gospel, but it must be proclaimed.

[ 6 : 34 ] And those two things together are, I think, what makes Luke end his little section at chapter 16, verse 5, by the way. You may wonder why it doesn't end at chapter 15, verse 35, when it seems that the missionary journey comes to an end.

Well, we have a little section after that where Paul revisits the churches that they had already evangelized on that journey and implement the decision of the Council of Jerusalem.

So that all of that is clearly established and everybody knows the true gospel and the work can go on. So these chapters tell us then about proclaiming and protecting the true faith in the world.

And as Luke tells us that, he's got a very clear message. Both of these things, he says to us, are going to be very hard graft. Proclaiming and preserving the gospel in a hostile world are going to involve battles and oppositions of all different kinds.

But despite all of that, he's saying to us, nothing but nothing can ever stop the preservation or the proclamation of this gospel. Yes, there were and there always will be many adversaries lined up against those who hold to the gospel and who proclaim the true Christian faith in its entirety.

[ 7 : 52 ] There always will. But notwithstanding that, where there are great and many adversaries, Paul also tells us, there will always be a great and effective door open for the power of God to be at work through his church on earth.

In our passage today, verses 1 to 12, is simply the first taste of that. It's a sign of things to come, Luke tells us, when his church is at work in that way. I want to concentrate on these verses this morning because I think Luke wants us to notice some things particularly about the kind of church that God chooses to use as an incubus for real worldwide mission, for mission that truly impacts the society around it and the world beyond.

And he wants us to learn about the kind of calling that that really is so that we don't have the kind of sentimental ideas that sometimes we have about what Christian mission ought to be all about.

Sometimes we have very sentimental, naive ideas about that. No. Luke wants us to realize the truth. And the most important thing he seems to be flagging up for us in this seminal account here that we're looking at this morning of this beginning of real mission is that, above all, it's all about God.

It's the Lord who is in the midst of his people. It's the Lord who's doing everything. I'm sure you noticed that when we read the passage. Just look again. It's the Holy Spirit, isn't it?

[ 9 : 26 ] Who's behind everything that happens here. As mentioned, there are three times in the passage we read in three critical movements in verse 2 and verse 4 and again in verse 9.

And what Luke is telling us in this passage, I think, is that the church that can be a true springboard for world mission is a church that knows the Spirit's presence. And it's a church that follows the Spirit's plan.

And therefore, it's a church that experiences the Spirit's power. Let's give some thought then to these three things as we look at the text. First of all, the presence of the Holy Spirit in the church.

Verse 2, if you look at it, makes it plain that this whole great missionary expansion was born in a church that was deeply conscious of the presence of the Lord in the midst by his Spirit.

The Lord is speaking in the midst of a truly worshipping community here. While they were worshipping, the Holy Spirit spoke.

[ 10 : 33 ] But notice the details that Luke gives us as he paints a picture of what this truly worshipping church was actually like. What does it mean to be a worshipping church? What does it mean to be a church where the presence of the Spirit of God is evidently at work in the midst?

Well, the first thing he points us to is that a worshipping church, as the church in Antioch, was a church devoted to speaking God's words. Verse 1, It was a church, he tells us, above all marked by prophets and teachers.

That is, it was marked by those who spoke the word of God. So it wasn't just an enthusiastic church, it was a taught church. You'll remember back to the end of chapter 11 when we're told of Barnabas first visiting this new church plant in Antioch.

He made it a priority to get them taught. He went off deliberately and found Saul of Tarsus, a man who he knew could add to that ministry. And together we're told they taught a great many people for more than a year.

Well, now you see at the beginning of chapter 13 we're seeing that approach bearing fruit, aren't we? Now in verse 1 we've got at least five names, no doubt there were more, who are recognized as prophets and teachers.

[ 11 : 48 ] Men who are competent and gifted and trained to speak God's words. There was a growing team of preachers and teachers of the word of God in this church. And if you look at the names you'll see what a variety of backgrounds they came from.

There's Barnabas, the gracious and generous old timer who'd been there right from the beginning. There's Saul, Paul, the educated Pharisee, highly educated scholar.

There's Simeon, Niger, the black one, somebody who came from far away in black Africa. There's Lucius who obviously came from Cyrene, from the land of modern day Libya, from North Africa.

And there's Manaean, this chap who we're told must be an aristocrat. He was brought up in the very household of Herod Antipas, no less. And that is quite a diverse group, isn't it?

United as a preaching and teaching team in this church in Antioch. But that is one mark, Luke is telling us, of a church where the Spirit of God is really present in the midst. And that's because God's Spirit is the author of God's Word and His desire, therefore, is for the Word of God to be taught and to be heard.

[ 12 : 59 ] And so as Paul and Barnabas went about their teaching and their training ministry, they were training faithful men and entrusting the Gospel work to them also so that they too might teach others. That was always Paul's pattern.

It's what he says to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2, verse 2. And as they did that, so the Holy Spirit was calling gifted men, different people from different backgrounds, and calling them into that work of speaking God's words.

It's rather wonderful, isn't it? But that is a cardinal mark of the Spirit's presence at work in the church to make it a truly worshipping church. Well, I think I take it as quite an encouragement.

I think we all ought to that in some measure, at least, we're seeing that in our midst here, don't you? There's certainly many more preachers and teachers of the Word of God speaking God's Word among us than there were even just two or three years ago and from many different backgrounds as well.

And that's something we should be rejoicing in. That's a sign that this church is a worshipping church where God's Spirit is pleasing Himself to be present and to work among us.

[ 14 : 11 ] We should rejoice at that and give thanks to Him. But the church in Antioch wasn't only marked by people speaking God's words, but also by people who were devoted to seeking God's face.

They were a praying church, verse 2 says. It says that when they were worshipping and fasting, God spoke to them. The parallel is there in verse 3.

When they were praying and fasting, worshipping and fasting, praying and fasting, it's two ways of just saying the same thing. That word worshipping there is the word used in the Greek Old Testament of the priestly service of the priests and the Levites in the temple and that is what the prayer of God's people is, especially the corporate prayer, praying together as the church.

It's the priestly service that we share of seeking God's face, seeking His presence. And we're all priests to God in the glory of the new covenant. We don't need priests and intermediaries.

We pray through the name of our great high priest. We pray in the spirit of our risen Lord Jesus. We have direct access to the face of God. And a worshipping church, a church deeply conscious of the presence of the living Lord in the midst will always be a praying church.

[ 15 : 28 ] It goes without saying, but it needs saying, doesn't it? Because so often we forget it. This is a church earnest in prayer. They were fasting, we're told. They weren't fasting because, well, that's a magic way to get answers from God, to get Him to take your prayers seriously.

No. It's just that they were conscious that they were living in vital times, in important times. So they sensed the need to think very sacrificially about their whole life, to lay aside other things, even food, to concentrate on their concern, on focusing on God, on taking Him seriously, on seeking His face, on seeking His guidance.

And that meant they made sacrifices so that they could pray. They skipped a lunch, they skipped a dinner, so they could get together and use that precious time when they weren't at work to pray together, to wait on God.

So it was a church where prayer was a real priority in their corporate life. I take it, by the way, that the they of verse 2 means the whole church, not just the leaders, but obviously it includes the leaders.

And certainly a church where leaders aren't part of the corporate prayer life of the church, then that won't be a church that's worshipping as it should be, will it? Very likely it won't be a church that's sensitive to the prompting and the leading of the Holy Spirit when He does speak as He spoke here to the church in Antioch in verse 2.

[ 16 : 54 ] So that's a great challenge to me personally. As a leader in Christ's church and ought to be to all of us as leaders in the church as well as to all of us as partners in this gospel mission.

Are we a church not only speaking God's words but also seeking His face, speaking to Him in prayer? Well, if not, I don't think we'll be sensitive hearers of God's word either.

But certainly in Antioch, here was a church devoted to speaking God's word and seeking His face. And that's why it became a church thirdly that was marked by sending God's servants, verse 3.

They sent off Barnabas and Saul in response to what the Holy Spirit revealed to them about His calling on their lives. Very striking, isn't it?

This picture of a truly worshipping church where God speaks in His church and they listen and where the church speaks to God and He listens and where God responds by sending out His appointed servants to do His work in the world.

[ 18 : 00 ] I wonder if that's what you think about when you think about a church's worship. People often say that, don't they? They say, I'm looking for a church where I like the worship. Sometimes when they're saying that, what they mean is, I'm looking for a church where the Holy Spirit is evident in the midst, where His presence is felt tangibly, where we know He's at work.

Well, that's just what we should be thinking, of course. And Luke tells us if we're looking for a church like that, we should be looking for a church that looked like the church in Antioch.

The mother church of all world missions. What better model could you possibly get than that? A church marked by a growing ministry of speaking God's word, by devoted worship, of seeking God's face in prayer, by responsive willingness to send out God's servants to give of their resources for the spread of the gospel in the world.

I hope that's what we're increasingly devoted to here and always are. A strategic ministry, yes indeed, we need that, don't we? Acts is full of strategy.

Paul was brilliant at that. Planning, he was a genius. He knew where he wanted to go and he got there. And we must be people of strategy, we must be people of active thought, of plans, of effort.

[ 19 : 25 ] Yes, a strategic church, but a spirit-filled church. A church with a deep concern that above everything and above all strategy comes the strategy of the Spirit of God that we're following.

That's what we surely need above everything else, isn't it? They sent them off, says verse 3, with their prayer and with their blessing, but look at verse 4.

Who's really in charge? It's the Holy Spirit who sent them out. And real mission begins with the presence of the Holy Spirit in his church.

Real mission is born out of a church that is truly worshipping in the word and in prayer and in generous and immediate response. That leads us to the second thing which is the plan of the Holy Spirit for the church.

See, verse 2 and verse 4 make it absolutely a plan that this huge outreach into all the world is the specific command of the Spirit of God. Indeed, it's the chief purpose of the Spirit's presence in his people and in the church.

[ 20 : 37 ] Now, that ought to be no surprise to us. Jesus told us that right back in Acts chapter 1. You'll receive power, he said to his people, when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you will be my witnesses.

In Jerusalem, that's phase 1, and in all Judea and Samaria, that's phase 2, and to the very ends of the earth. That's the third stage just beginning that we're seeing. That's why the Holy Spirit was sent from the presence of the risen Lord.

It was for the witness of worldwide mission. Jesus didn't send his Holy Spirit just to make us feel good. He didn't send his Holy Spirit to give us warm feelings or fuzzy experiences or electric experiences even.

He sent his Holy Spirit to energize and to equip his people for his heart's desire, which is his mission to the world. And that's the plan of the Holy Spirit for his church.

It was then in Antioch and it is today in Glasgow and all around the world. And that means, doesn't it, that a church that's uninterested in world mission, and of course world mission starts right on our own doorstep, not across the seas.

[ 21 : 50 ] It extends there. But a church that's uninterested in world mission here and everywhere must be a church that's out of step totally with the plan of the Spirit of God. Might have everything at church, everything that we can see that looks marvelous, but if it doesn't share that plan of the Spirit, it can't share the presence of the Spirit.

That's the reason. And here's just one instance of that that Luke's showing us to make it very plain. The Spirit says, unequivocally, set apart from me Saul and Barnabas to the work to which I've called them.

And that work is pushing out the frontiers of the kingdom of God on earth. David Cook in his book on Acts notes that Luke records for us the direct voice of God to his church some 22 times throughout the book.

I haven't counted, but he has. I trust him. And almost every time he says, that word is a specific command to the church to press out beyond the fringe, to break new ground, going out, spreading the gospel of the kingdom.

So Acts chapter 5, verse 20, for example, God said, go and stand in the temple to the apostles and tell this people the words of life. Or Acts 8, remember, when the Spirit spoke directly to Philip and said, go out into the desert.

[ 23 : 09 ] And that's where he found the Ethiopian eunuch. Or Acts chapter 9, when the Spirit speaks directly to Ananias after Paul's conversion, Saul's conversion, and says, go to this man because he's my instrument to bring my name to the ends of the earth.

So it is, again and again through Acts, the direct commands of God to his church reveal his plan which is onward and outward with the gospel of Christ. That's the Holy Spirit's plan for his church.

But notice, it's not a random plan. It's not a haphazard plan. It's a very carefully laid strategy. It's very carefully prepared. It's very carefully executed.

It's taken years to get to this stage, stage 3, the worldwide mission, hasn't it? And for years, God has been preparing the way in readying his servant, Saul of Tarsus, to become Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles.

It's been 14 years at least, if not more, since that episode on the Damascus road. Paul tells us that in Galatians chapter 2. So the Holy Spirit's plan, although it was urgent, seemed to allow for years and years of preparation and training for Paul and years and years of training and preparation for the church at Antioch so that it was ready and equipped for that great task of mission to the whole of the ancient world.

[ 24 : 41 ] It didn't all happen at once. I think that's important for us to realize, isn't it? God rarely does things all at once just like that. especially when we're young, especially young folk are often very impatient, aren't they?

We want it all to happen just at once. We want God to fulfill his plan for my life right now, straight away, next year. But no, God prepares his workers and he prepares his whole church because you see, sensitivity to the leading of the Spirit as we see here in the church in Antioch, it doesn't come overnight.

It takes spiritual maturity, it takes discernment. And that takes time. It comes through teaching and training of God, speaking his words to his people. It comes through time living as God's people and seeking his face, living out in the presence of God, our lives with him, learning to hear his voice, learning to heed his voice, to trust him, to respond in prayer.

But when God's people allow themselves to be putty in his hands and to be prepared in that way, molded and shaped by his Spirit through his Word, then they will find themselves in harmony with his great plan and purpose of the Spirit.

They'll find that their desires match the desires of the Spirit of God. They'll find that they're sending them off with their prayer and blessing, but it's the Holy Spirit who's behind it all, pushing and making it happen.

[ 26 : 13 ] My Father often used to say that sometimes the church today is like the knight who leapt on a charger and rode off furiously in all directions at once.

And often Christian believers can be like that as well. We're enthusiastic, we're keen, and we just charge at this mission as though anything would do and we go in every direction at once, but don't really get very far.

It's interesting when we read the book of Acts how different that is, how concentrated, how careful, how strategic the mission of the Spirit is. It's the plan of the Spirit of God to be focused and to be clear and it's his plan that we should be in step with that.

And a church that is in step with the plan of God because it lives in the presence of God will also, and this is our third thing, be very clear in its understanding of the power of the Holy Spirit through the church.

Verses 4 to 12, you see, show us how that mission born of the Spirit's presence and guided by his plan will never lack his power. Though it's clear from the very start that that mission will have a very clear pattern of warfare and hardship, nevertheless, it's just as clear that none of these hindrances will ever overcome it.

[ 27 : 35 ] the power of the Holy Spirit will be at work in the proclamation of the gospel of his church. The word of warning of the gospel will judge those who resist it, but the command of grace in the gospel will always be drawing into Christ's presence those who are being saved.

And that's the message of these verses. It makes it very, very plain. If you look at verse 4, it tells us they sent themselves off to Cyprus. I guess that's very natural, isn't it, for the world mission to begin in Cyprus?

That's where Barnabas' homeland was. He knew it probably like the back of his hand. So they arrived on the east coast in Salamis. And they preached everywhere, we're told, in the synagogue of the Jews.

That was not just because that was a natural place and a familiar place to go, a place where they would find Jews and God-fearers and a ready audience. It was that. But it was more than that too.

We'll see that when we get to verse 46 later on. Paul says that that too is part of the Holy Spirit's plan. The Gospel is good news first to the Jew and also to the Greek, the Gentile.

[ 28 : 44 ] And that's Paul's pattern everywhere he goes. First to the Jew and then to the Gentile. Luke's telling us it's a sign of things to come. It's God's plan, he says, that salvation should be first revealed to the Jews and then that either through their acceptance or through their rejection, the blessings of salvation through the Jewish Messiah would overflow also to the Gentiles, to the world.

That's what we see in Acts chapter 13 and 14. We'll see more of it as we come through. Rejection and acceptance by Jews leading to an overspill of grace to the Gentile world. But Luke here doesn't tell us very much about the response in Cyprus.

He tells us in verse 6 that they went all through the whole place and then he focuses on Paphos, the main capital of the island over in the west. Some of you go on holiday to Cyprus, to Paphos, so you'll know probably the geography of that place.

But here he tells us that something immediately very significant happened. The Roman governor, the proconsul, who's also called Paul, Sergius Pilus, if you want to be posh about it, verse 7 says, the proconsul, a highly intelligent man, he is keen to hear the truth of the gospel.

You see, the ancient world was just as full of spiritual hunger as our modern world is. Not just the uneducated masses as Marx would want us to believe who are seeking some kind of opium from the people, not at all.

[ 30 : 14 ] The world is full as it was then of able, intelligent, inquiring people who are seeking the truth. But alas, of course, where that's so, then there's plenty of bogus and corrupt religion all around always, isn't there, to prey on that hunger.

I was just speaking to somebody the other day. One of the students applied to Cornhill who was telling us about their conversion and how they had a long period of searching for truth to understand life, to understand meaning, to understand what the world was all about.

And they talked about all of the different philosophies and religions and ideas that were flung at them. Well, no, that was what Sergius Pilus was doing, there in the ancient world.

And it seems to explain why this intelligent man seemed to have this, well, I don't know what you would call him, a religious quack or something, bar Jesus, Ilamus, why he seemed to have him around.

He was a corrupted Jew, an apostate Jew, whose real intent, it seemed, just was to curry favor with the authorities and with those in power and influence. So he would happily mold and shape his form of religion and his form of morality so as to favor whatever the world wanted to hear, whatever the world's institutions and powerful people wanted to hear.



[ 31 : 27 ] And we still see plenty of that today, don't we? I guess you could call Ilamas, if you like, a former evangelical. He had been a Jew, he'd been one of the people of the Old Testament faith who had the truth of God in Scripture.

But he had departed from it long ago. He'd kept some sort of veneer, some sense of it, some language of that religion. But he'd departed from the substance long before.

Of course, that's all around us today, the kind of spokesman that the media love, that the politicians like Sergius Paulus tend to have around them today, are people just like that, who have all the language of Christianity, but long ago left the real substance of it behind.

Sometimes, actually, their vehement opposition to the real truth of the Christian gospel is far greater than anybody else's. Have you noticed that? Sometimes those who once believed the true gospel of Jesus Christ but have departed from it, they are the most vehement opponents of the apostolic gospel today.

Well, as the hope was with Elymas, verse 8 tells us, he opposed them. He tried all he could to stop this high-ranking Roman intelligent man from finding the truth that's in Jesus Christ.

[ 32 : 41 ] He sought to turn them away from the faith, away from the eternal life that is found in Jesus Christ alone. But Saul, verse 9, who was also called Paul, just like the proconsul was, but Saul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him and said, come on now, Elymas, we're a broad church, aren't we?

Let's work together for the peace and unity of the church, Elymas. Let's bury our differences and emphasize the common ground that we've got. There's room for all of us here in Cyprus. We don't want to be divisive. Surely we've all got a place with Sergius Paulus.

For the sake of our potential influence on the nation of Cyprus, let's work together on him, Paul. Well, I dare say that's what many would have urged Paul to say.

To Elymas, bar Jesus. But that's not what he said, is it? What he did say wasn't very ecumenical, was it? Verse 10. 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?

That's dreadful, Paul. That's shocking. What are you thinking? How can you say such a thing to a fellow believer, fellow Jew?

[ 34 : 12 ] What he's thinking, no doubt, is of Jesus' words in John 8, verse 44 to other corrupted so-called churchmen who likewise oppose the true gospel. What did Jesus say?

You are of your father the devil. No doubt, he's also thinking of Jesus' warning in Matthew 13, verse 38, when he tells the parable of the good seed and the tares and he says that wherever the gospel is sown in the good seed, the weeds will spring up and the weeds, says Jesus, are who?

Sons of the evil one. Sons of the devil. That's where Paul got it from, you son of the devil. So if we admonish Paul here and don't like that, we've got to admonish the Lord Jesus too and we've got to admonish the Holy Spirit.

Look at verse 9, who specifically filled him and inspired him to utter those words. Now we can't fault Paul because this is the exposure of sham religion and he's exposing it as being in fact the very power of darkness, the power of anti-Christ, the word of anti-salvation.

It's heavy with irony, isn't it, that this corrupted Jewish teacher is called Bar Jesus, son of Jesus, but Paul says, no, you're Bar Satan, that's your name, son of Satan.

[ 35 : 41 ] And Paul's words are vindicated in verse 11 as the darkness and blindness engulfs him in judgment. Just as it had, remember, to Saul himself on the Damascus Road. Perhaps that also suggests to us here that God's judgment here also was a judgment mixed with mercy.

Paul says, you'll be blind and unable to see the sun for a time. Was he giving him time to think, to consider, to repent, to turn, as Saul himself had done?

We don't know if he did or not, but what we do know, what Luke tells us is that the other Paul, Sergius Paul, is this intelligent, high-ranking, educated Roman ruler that he left behind all his darkness and all his fog and all his continual searching for the truth.

And verse 12 says, he believed. For, notice, he was astonished, not so much by the exposure of Elemas as a fraud. I'm sure he probably thought he was a fraud for a long time.

But astonished, verse 12, at the teaching of the Lord, at the truth of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. This intelligent man with an educated mind, an inquiring mind, he said, yes, this, at last, is what I've been looking for all my life.

[ 37 : 06 ] This is the truth I can see explains everything. This is what makes sense of the world. This is what makes sense of my life and my future. This is what speaks about my longings, my hopes, my desires.

And this is the answer also to all that I've always known has been wrong in my own life and in my own heart deep inside. The answer to all the things that I've been ashamed of and wanted to change but haven't had the power to do so until now.

I've found it. And that's not unique. That's a story of many, many folks sitting here this morning in this church.

I could ask numbers of you to come up here and to testify to a story that wouldn't be so different at all to the words and to the testimony of Sergius Paulus here.

Finding the light and the astonishing truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And that's just what we should expect, Luke tells us. This is a sign of things to come.

[ 38 : 12 ] This is what the mission of the Christian church is going to look like all through the earth, all through time until Jesus comes. Don't be mistaken, he says. It is supremely and always will be a spiritual task.

Wherever the seed is sown, the weeds will spring up. The sons of the evil one will be there in opposition. Yes, they will. Those are Jesus' words. We've got it. Plain. And the devil has all different varieties of progeny.

We'll see that in the rest of chapters 13 and 14. Corrupted ex-believers like Elemus. Idolatrous pagans like those in Lystra. Idolatrous Israelites. Religious people stuck to their traditions and against the gospel.

Paul saw all of that and we will see all of that today as well. And it will be hard and it will be difficult and it will be painful. There's no room for naivety in our understanding of what the mission of the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ will be like today and every day.

In the world you will have tribulation, Jesus said. But also, he said, be of good cheer for I have overcome the world.

[ 39 : 21 ] And we see that right here as Luke shows it to us in the first organized steps of world mission. A Roman consul, an intelligent governor of Caesar's empire, bows the knee to one far greater than Caesar.

to the Lord of heaven and earth. And it's a pointer, says Luke, of more to come. So don't be surprised, he's saying, when you get to the end of my book and you find that in fact this gospel is being preached right at the very heart of the empire in Rome.

Nothing hindering it. Don't be surprised. This is the beginning of the pattern. Maybe we should think more like that too when we're struggling against opposition and hardship from the elements and their like.

We're just as plentiful today as they were then. When we are struggling against all the things that the world throws at us but in the midst we hear about an intelligent young man here or a keen young student there or a searching older person somewhere else who has become astounded and astonished at the truth that is in Jesus Christ as somebody did just this very week in this building.

It's a sign of things to come. So let's rejoice because the power of the Spirit of God is at work. It's at work according to the marvellous unstoppable plan of God's Spirit.

[ 40 : 54 ] Let's not forget the outworking of that saving power of God all begins with a church in worship. A church conscious of the presence of God.

A church growing in its ministries of the Word of God. A church deepening in its life of prayer. A church spreading and generously giving in its sphere of service.

Don't you think it would be a great aim for us as a congregation here in Glasgow in the 21st century to be a church like Antioch for 21st century Scotland.

It's not impossible. That's why Luke wrote these things and the Spirit preserved them for us. He's showing us a pattern. He's showing us the shape of things to come when God's people like his church in Antioch when they're a truly worshipping church in step with the Holy Spirit of God.

Well, let's pray. Gracious God, how conscious we are that we need your Spirit in our midst stirring up our hearts and stirring up our prayers and opening our ears that we might hear your voice of direction and your word of command.

[ 42 : 23 ] Help us to be such a church we pray for we ask it for the glory of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.