

The Unstoppable Gospel goes Overseas

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[0 : 0 0] tonight is from Acts chapter 12, starting at verse 25. You'll find that on page 1107 in the church Bibles. So Acts chapter 12, starting at verse 25. When Barnabas and Saul had finished their mission, they returned from Jerusalem, taking with them John, also called Mark. Now in the church at Antioch, there were prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manan, who had been brought up with Herod the Tetrarch, and Saul. 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 have called them. So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off. The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Cilicia and sailed from there to Cyprus. When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues. John was with them as their helper. They travelled through the whole island until they came to Paphos. There they met a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus, who was an attendant of the proconsul, Sergius Paulus. The proconsul, an intelligent man, sent for Barnabas and Saul because he wanted to hear the word of God. But Elemas, the sorcerer, for that is what his name means, opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith. Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elemas and said, you are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right. You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery.

Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord? Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind for a time, not even able to see the light of the sun. Immediately the mist and darkness came over him and he groped about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand. When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord. This is the word of the Lord.

Well, good evening everyone and let me add my welcome to Alan's at this Tri-Church service. Let's pray as we dig into God's word this evening. Father, we pray that your word would speak to us, that by your spirit you'd help us to hear and understand you, and to hear and understand the message about the Lord Jesus and all that he has done through his church and continues to do. Amen.

How did we get here? And I don't just mean for the people on the weekend away, how did you get here? That road is very dangerous. I mean, how did we get here? Which is, in what sense are we 2,000 years after the events we just read about, sitting in a building built in 1864, listening to a story together, thousands of miles away from where the events happened? Isn't that somewhat strange when you actually think about it? Now, the long answer to that question is complicated and takes all of the intervening history, and we won't get into that this evening. You'll be glad to know. But the short answer is because 2,000 years ago, Jesus, by his Holy Spirit, sent people out who believed in him all the way out over the world with the message about him. Those people taught about his death and resurrection, and people believed it. Those people then planted churches that raised up and sent out other people who did the same thing, and that kept going and going and going until one day eventually, someone reached Glasgow with the gospel, and eventually reached us with the gospel. For the last 2,000 years, the Lord Jesus has been building his kingdom by the miraculous power of the Spirit, using ordinary people in ordinary churches like this. And tonight we're going to hear about that. But very excitingly, in this passage in Acts, we get to see where it began, as we see the origin of the overseas Christian mission movement, the first time the gospel goes from one country to another. We get to see how that happens under three simple headings on your service sheets, if you'd like to follow along. The Spirit sends through the church, the Spirit speaks through his messengers, and the Spirit saves by his power. Now, we pick up our story in Acts with just two of the major players, Saul and Barnabas, arriving back from Jerusalem with their friend Mark. A couple of weeks ago, Jamie preached through our sermon on Acts 11, and we saw how the city of Antioch had become a second hub for the early church, even sending aid to the mother church in Jerusalem. And we're beginning to see just how central these churches, these gatherings of

Christians together, are going to be to the expansion of Jesus' kingdom all over the world. If the good news is going to reach the end of the earth, it's going to be through these groups coming together and sending people on. And so our first point this evening, then, is from verses 25 through to verse 6, the Spirit sends through the church. Now, at the start of Acts, Jesus sends the Spirit to continue his work through his people. But even at this early stage, there is already a remarkably diverse group of people in this church. If you look at verse 1, you see that the leadership team is from all over the place. First, we have Barnabas, who was a Jewish resident of Cyprus, who became a Christian in Judea, and had been given the name Barnabas because he was such a great encouragement to the church that he joined. Second, Simeon Colnager. Originally, the language implies that he's black African. Third, Lucius of Cyrene. And Cyrene is a Jewish colony in North Africa located in modern-day Libya. Next, Manian, who we're told was being brought up with Herod the Tetrarch.

[6 : 26] He's probably a slightly older man if he was brought up with that Herod. That's the Herod that had John the Baptist killed in the gospel accounts. So, potentially, this man's also from the ruling class. And finally, Saul, a Jewish teacher who'd been persecuting Christians before Jesus intervened to make him an evangelist. I just think, well, what a random bunch. People taken from all over the place that are not similar to each other. You wouldn't have thought, well, if we got these five people together, we'd have a great church. You'd sit there thinking, how on earth did these five people ever start working together? Some of you might think that about the staff team at St. Silas, but that's up to you. Luke is showing us through this list, however, the leadership of that early church is really diverse. The gospel doesn't just go out to one type of people in one place.

It goes out to diverse people everywhere. This is not just a gospel, not just the good news for Jewish people, but for the whole world as people come to believe. So, we find out in verse 2 that the church and its leaders are meeting together to worship the Lord and to fast. And it's from here that Jesus continues his work by his Spirit. Through one of the prophets, assumedly, the Holy Spirit says, set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them. The church is worshiping and praying, and the Spirit responds to the worshiping church by sending these two leaders off for an assigned task. The Spirit has plans for these two men to use them as messengers to build his kingdom. And it is a specific call to a specific task for specific people. But look how the church responds in verse 3. They fasted and prayed, placed their hands on them, and sent them off.

The church responds obediently to the call of the Spirit by sending these men away. And as a sign of being sent by this church collectively, their hands are laid on them to send them off, as in we are sending you on. And so verse 4, the two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus. Now notice what Luke has just done.

The church has sent them off, and the Spirit has sent them off. So the question, well, who's doing the sending? Well, the answer is both. Is it the Spirit or the church? Well, it's just both together.

The Spirit calls and the church obediently sends. And for the church in Antioch, there's a real cost to this. The Spirit calls them to send these leaders away, which means that they lose two-fifths of their leadership team. Sending on those leaders means losing two capable and competent people.

[9 : 24] But it also means participating in the gospel growth of the kingdom of God by sending people to the ends of the earth, as Jesus called his people to go. This is, in the Bible, the first overseas mission.

I have to think that's a remarkable thing. Sailing to another country to tell people who've never heard of Jesus, never heard the news, and couldn't ever possibly have heard it before, that God has come to save sinners. The world mission movement started here, as the gospel is sent out from a Jewish land to a Gentile one. And we see for verses 4, 5, and 6 that Barnabas, Paul, and John Mark travel all the way across the island of Cyprus. And initially, they're preaching in synagogues, as they maintain the pattern of going to the Jewish people first, to tell them that the promised Messiah had come, and then going from them to the Gentiles.

It's a small picture of the first overseas mission, but it's a great encouragement. In some ways, when we think about this in detail, it's just very exciting. This is the start of something that finally today ends up in us hearing the gospel here. If this hadn't have happened, well, how would the gospel have started to go around the world? If the church hadn't obediently followed the call to send, the gospel would not have gotten anywhere. Now, we are not Saul and Barnabas. We did not have the same specific call. But that pattern of church history, with Jesus by his Spirit sending out people from local churches to faraway places, has continued all the way through history. The church worships the Lord, and raises up leaders, and sends out messengers. That is what the pattern of the church has always been. It's what the pattern of the church will always be. And here in 21st century Glasgow, we have a church that the Spirit has planted, where we worship the Lord, where we seek to raise up leaders, and send people out on mission. And that's right. We get to join in with the work of the Spirit as we pray, and as we raise up, and as we send. We can be encouraged as we know people like our mission partners, people like Josh Williams in the Ukraine are sent out, that it is good to bear the cost of sending capable people away for the sake of people hearing the gospel far away.

But the question is, as this passage goes on, well, what happens when these people go? Let's go to our second point. The Spirit speaks through his messengers, verses 6 to 10.

It's probably, I think, a little bit hard when we read a passage like this to really understand what it would have been like. In a world of international flights and immediate international video calling, we don't really get a sense of how costly it is both to do the sending and to be sent.

[12:25] Paul and Barnabas aren't going to see these friends in the church in Antioch for a long time. Some of them they may never see ever again. And that's maybe a surprise to us as we think about the real cost of these things. They're the first overseas missionaries. They get the excitement of going to tell Jews and Gentiles the good news of the Savior, but it does cost them, and it does cost the church. But it also marks the start of something big, and it's a small detail that helps us to understand this. Let's look with me at verse 9. Saul, who was also called Paul. Now, that might just be a small thing to us. There's a lot of names in this passage. It's good to recognize that.

Saul is a Jewish name, and Paul is the Greek version. And it's a little detail that signals in Luke's account of Acts. The focus going from the Jewish heritage of the gospel and the Jewish evangelists to Paul being sent out to the Gentiles in the Greek-speaking world, as his Greek name is used for the rest of the entire account of Acts. And even Barnabas, who's been a big player in the story so far, begins to take a back seat to Paul's evangelism. But very excitingly, they get to go to Cyprus, which for Barnabas is his homeland. I imagine there's some excitement attached to that for him. He gets to take the gospel back to his people. But as soon as they do, there's serious opposition.

If the world was totally fine, if the world was not sinful and totally okay, it would not need a Savior. But in fact, we live in a fallen world full of darkness and sin. And that's a world that needs God's intervention and good news. Jesus preached the good news of the kingdom and was eventually killed for it. He rose again, and that is the good news of the gospel that is taken out. But no surprise, when his people then take out the gospel, they bear the same opposition that he did.

So in verses 6 to 10, we see the Spirit speaks through his messengers, but we also see opposition. So when we get to Paphos, Paul and Barnabas meet that opposition. We're introduced to two men.

A Roman governor called Sergius Paulus, who according to verse 7, was an intelligent man who sent for Barnabas and Saul because he wanted to hear the word of God. Now we've got to understand at that point, the gospel has been making waves in Cyprus.

[15:00] If the local Roman governor of the island has heard about it, then something has been said, passed from person to person. Have you heard this? Have you heard this? Have you heard this? And he thinks, I want to hear this.

I want to hear what these men have to say who claim to speak the words of God. But right next to him, we find a Jewish sorcerer called Bar-Jesus, also named Elemis, who is an attendant of Sergius.

And notice the details Luke uses to describe this man. One, he's a Jewish sorcerer, given the name Elemis, which just literally means sorcerer. The Jewish law specifically prohibited any kind of sorcery.

So even by Old Testament, Old Covenant standards, this is a bad guy. Second, he's a false prophet. He looks like he has the truth, but he speaks deceptive lies.

He's named Bar-Jesus, which literally means son of Jesus, or son of God's salvation. Yet, he's opposing the saving work of God by trying to turn the proconsul from the faith that Paul and Barnabas are bringing.

[16:10] Now, we might struggle with this talk about sorcery and spiritual evil, but the Old Testament law prohibits these things precisely because they are real. If it was not real and did not matter, there would be no reason for God to prohibit these practices yet.

What do these practices do? They stop people hearing the saving good news about Jesus. They stop people hearing the truth about God.

The spiritual darkness of this man is currently keeping Sergius Paulus from the saving light of the gospel. He's a bigger danger than he seems. So, the battle is set.

Paul and Barnabas arrive to speak the gospel. Elemis seeks to oppose them, and that is where the Spirit intervenes. Paul steps up to the plate, and like Peter's speech at Pentecost, the Spirit begins to use him in powerful ways.

Follow along with me with verse 9. Paul, filled with the Spirit, looks straight at Elemis, and he said, You are a child of the devil, an enemy of everything that is right. You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery.

[17 : 19] Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord? It's the verbal equivalent of a one-punch spiritual knockout, really. The Spirit completely exposes, through Paul's words, the reality of the dangers this man poses.

And the language used reminds us of the devil's deception of Adam and Eve all the way back in the garden in Genesis 3. This man is a deceitful trickster, the devil at work to blind people through his agents in the world, never stopping his effort to pervert the right ways of God by deceiving and tricking and blinding.

Elemis is peddling darkness that leads to death. But when the Spirit turns up, he's powerless to fight back. Verse 10. Now the hand of the Lord is against you.

You are going to be blind for a time, not even able to see the light of the sun. Scary words pronounced on this man. I wonder how Paul felt.

If we'd been reading through this entire story of Acts, we would have heard only five chapters ago, that Paul, after he'd been persecuting the church, was blinded by the Lord Jesus in a huge spiritual encounter himself, as he was turned away from his persecution of the church.

[18 : 47] And after days, he received his sight back again, but wonderfully receives his spiritual sight as he sees the Lord Jesus and follows him. And I wonder what Paul thought as he pronounced these words on this sorcerer.

I wonder if even in this, there's maybe a little bit of hope for this man, blinded, though temporarily. The persecutor has turned messenger of God by the Spirit.

And here, another man seeking to oppose the kingdom is completely overpowered by the Spirit. And all through Acts, we see the Word of God sent out by the Spirit of God has the power of God.

The truth about Jesus sent by Jesus through Jesus' messengers, like Paul. And again, we're not Paul.

We have not received the exact same calls, the exact same missions, the exact same place. But we are called to speak about Jesus boldly where we can. And we trust the Lord in doing so.

[19 : 57] And as a church, we continue to send others to speak the words of God out in the world, trusting that that is how the Spirit works. The Spirit empowers the mission that he has given to God's people to glorify Jesus, to bring the light of God into a dark world, the truth about Jesus to a deceived and tricked world.

Spiritual opposition is absolutely real and we must not forget that. But the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of King Jesus himself, is infinitely more powerful.

If we have him, we need not fear the spiritual darkness. It will not triumph. God sends out his messengers, speaking his message with the Spirit's power into the world.

Which just very simply leads us to our final point in 11 and 12. The church sends, the messengers speak, but ultimately, only the Spirit, by his power, can change hearts and minds.

Look with me at what happens to these two men in the end. Immediately, mist and darkness came over Elymas and he groped about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand.

[21 : 13] When the proconsul saw what happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord. Elymas, the sorcerer, is miraculously blinded and Sergius, the governor, is miraculously brought to sight.

He sees Jesus. He believes in him. Now, Paul doesn't go and physically blind the sorcerer. That would be ridiculous. It's not what he's called to do. But he does the work of God with the words of God.

And the same then goes for the proconsul. Paul can't force this man to believe. And he doesn't believe in the miracle itself so much as that last verse in the teaching that he has received, which the miracle confirms.

The miracle serves to show the truth of the gospel, bringing this man to faith. But notice, at every stage of this whole story, without the work of the Spirit, none of it would have happened.

The Spirit consistently uses the church and his messengers to do his work. But the work of saving souls, of salvation, is his alone. For the story of Acts, Sergius Paulus is the first recorded Gentile convert in a Gentile area.

[22 : 30] There have been over Gentile converts who've come into Jerusalem before, but this, out in the world, is something new. The first fruit of the overseas mission movement. And that story then takes up the rest of Acts and ultimately the rest of history.

It's the reason we're sitting here tonight hearing the Word of God taught to us. So the final question really is, well, what do we do with the story tonight? Hopefully it's clear that the church sends, the messengers speak, and the Spirit saves.

But really, every part of that is the work of the Spirit as Jesus sends out the Spirit to build His kingdom in the world. It is all absolutely Spirit-dependent.

And so practically, the good news for us is that if you want to participate in this mission, you are in fact in the right place. Our story started with a church assembled, worshipping the Lord and praying.

So rightly so. What do we do? Worship the Lord and pray. We keep meeting, praying dependently for Jesus to build His kingdom, seeking to raise up people and send people out.

[23 : 41] And that's why events like our monthly church prayer meeting are so important. If we do not seek God's help in His mission, we will not achieve His mission because it is the work of His Spirit through His church. But we can have confidence that as we worship and as we pray, as we listen to Jesus speak, that He will make us a sending church.

As we raise up leaders and send people out, even sending missionaries to far-flung places with real confidence, knowing that the power is not in us but in the Spirit, who achieves His work through His people.

We are confident to bear the cost of sending away good and trusted people even when it is hard for us. For those who have been around at St. Silas for longer, if you're new, you may not know that we are seeking to plant a church in the east end of Glasgow where there is less access to a gospel-teaching church.

And for us, that will mean that we have to bear the cost of losing people that we love to the other end of the city and we will see them less. But what a brilliant thing to be able to do, to bear that cost because that is right and good as the Spirit uses the church to send people out with the Word.

This is the same confidence we have in sending out mission partners and continuing to pray for them as they build up Jesus' kingdom far away. And our confidence is again not in ourselves as a church or in any individual messenger or leader, but in the power of Jesus through his kingdom building up gospel witness in the world.

[25 : 16] We can train up leaders, we can send out messengers, but only Jesus can save people by his Spirit. Yeah, that's exactly what we should expect as we faithfully follow the pattern laid out for us through the book of Acts.

So what can you do? Well, first, keep praying. Second, for some of us, that means thinking about being sent. Maybe going to the church plant in the East End in the coming years or being sent on the mission field overseas.

You should maintain being a church that is ready to send and praying that people would be sent. If you're here and you're not yet a Christian, I hope you see that Jesus' kingdom is something stable and historical, something unlike anything else that is lasting.

God uses ordinary churches and ordinary human means to send the gospel out so that everyone can hear the word about Jesus. And in the end, that's the most important thing that you will ever hear in your whole life.

We might think that if we were to meet Jesus, it would come with light shining from the sky and something hugely impressive but it really most often comes through an ordinary person speaking ordinary words at an ordinary church.

[26 : 35] And that is where the glory is and that is the wonderful thing. So let's be confident of that and be encouraged by this story.

Let me pray as we close our time. Father, thank you that you send your spirit, that your church may send people out into the world to proclaim the glory of Christ everywhere.

Thank you for this story of your word and your gospel being sent overseas. Thank you that in history it has moved around the world and so today we can hear it here clearly, without fear and with joy.

Would you make us people who are willing to send other people away to bear the cost of sharing the gospel and seeking to play our part in building your kingdom? As we ask in Jesus' name.

Amen. Well I'm going to invite the...