

Chapter 30: The Unhindered Word of God

Acts 12:20–13:12

Over the last few chapters, Luke has quickly broadened the vision of the church away from an exclusive focus on Jerusalem and Judea, toward not only Samaria but even the wider Gentile world. From this point onward, the gospel of Jesus Christ will go out as far as the first missionaries can reach. Although churches in the Jewish and Gentile worlds may be different in some respects, Luke uses this section to show that the same means of expanding the church in Jerusalem and Judea will be the same for expanding the reach of the church through the world: the Word of God. In three short scenes, Luke reminds us that *the Word of God advances without hindrance*.

Rivaling God's Word (Acts 12:20–23)

In the previous section, we had seen Herod Agrippa I lead a wave of persecution against the church, killing the Apostle James and arresting the Apostle Peter (Acts 12:1–4). The Lord rescued Peter out of Herod's prison before his execution, and this last section offers a closing word on the Lord's judgment against this ruler who lifted his hand against the church of God. Although the dramatic, angelic, last-minute rescue of Peter the night before his execution was remarkable, that rescue only prevented Herod from carrying out further harm. It did not bring any sense of final justice against Herod for his bloody crimes against the church. As Calvin writes, "This was no small trial for the godly, who might have thought thus with themselves that God cared not for them, and they were afraid lest with Herod's power his tyranny and cruelty should increase. But the Lord had another purpose, for he set the oppressor of his Church on high that he might have the greater fall."¹ Although executing justice upon Herod was beyond the reach of the church, Herod was not beyond God's reach.

In Acts 12:20, Luke introduces us with a political dispute between Herod and the citizens of Tyre and Sidon, who were forced to seek peace because of Herod's control over their food source. We do not have too many details of the dispute; however, the Jewish historian Josephus writes a parallel account that completely corroborates the details of everything else that happens in this passage, while also adding a few more details:

[A.D. 44.] Now when Agrippa had reigned three years over all Judea, he came to the city Cesarea; which was formerly called Strato's tower. And there he exhibited shews, in honour of Cesar, upon his being informed that there was a certain festival celebrated to make vows for his safety. At which festival a great multitude was gotten together, of the principal persons, and such as were of dignity through his province. On the second day of which shews, he put on a garment made wholly of silver, and of a contexture truly wonderful; and

¹ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:490.

came into the theater early in the morning. At which time the silver of his garment being illuminated by the fresh reflexion of the sun's rays upon it, shone out after a surprizing manner: and was so resplendent as to spread an horror over those that looked intently upon him. And presently his flatterers cried out, one from one place, and another from another; (though not for his good;) that "He was a God." And they added, "Be thou merciful to us. For although we have hitherto revered thee only as a man, yet shall we henceforth own thee as superior to mortal nature." Upon this the King did neither rebuke them, nor reject their impious flattery. But as he presently afterward looked up, he saw an owl, sitting on a certain rope, over his head: (32) and immediately understood that this bird was the messenger of ill tidings, as it had once been the messenger of good tidings to him: and fell into the deepest sorrow. A severe pain also arose in his belly; and began in a most violent manner. He therefore looked upon his friends, and said, "I, whom you call a god, am commanded presently to depart this life: while providence thus reproves the lying words you just now said to me. And I who was by you called immortal, am immediately to be hurried away by death. But I am bound to accept of what providence allots, as it pleases God. For we have by no means lived ill: but in a splendid and happy manner." When he said this, his pain was become violent. Accordingly he was carried into the palace: and the rumour went abroad every where that he would certainly die in a little time. But the multitude presently sat in sackcloth, with their wives and children; after the law of their country; and besought God for the King's recovery. All places were also full of mourning and lamentation. Now the King rested in an high chamber: and as he saw them below lying prostrate on the ground, he could not himself forbear weeping. And when he had been quite worn out by the pain in his belly, for five days, he departed this life.²

Josephus's account confirms the major details of what we have from Luke: (1) an emphasis on the royal hubris of Herod Agrippa (including greater details of the stunning "royal robes" that Luke mentions); (2) the flattery of the people in calling Herod a god, and the prideful unwillingness of Herod to reject their flattery; and (3) the painful, violent death of Herod after this event.

Regarding the royal hubris of Herod, Luke writes about Herod's "royal robes," his "throne," and how he made an "oration," a public speech fitting for a king. As Lenski summarizes, "The king was mounting to the pinnacle of his glory....In his blazing silver apparel and with his demagogic [*sic*] oration the king was grandly rising to the occasion."³ Luke's background into the dire concerns for a food shortage for the people of Tyre and Sidon cast a cynical shadow on their words: "The voice of a god, and not of a man!" (12:22). From Herod's perspective, these comments were well-deserved, as he arose to address his citizens in his royal glory; however, Luke's narration raises questions of whether they actually believed their praise, or whether they just wanted to strike a favorable deal. That question is important whenever we deal with flatterers who come to any of us, regardless of what position we may hold. The fact that Herod believed the flattery, then, was not only unwise;

² Josephus, *Antiquities*, Book 19.8.2. Available online: <<https://penelope.uchicago.edu/josephus/ant-19.html>>

³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 486.

it was sinful blasphemy, in that “he did not give God the glory” (12:23a). Because of this, “he was eaten by worms and breathed his last” (12:23b). If Josephus’s account is correct, there was a gap of five days between being “eaten by worms” and having “breathed his last,” during which time Herod endured extraordinary pain. This detail does not conflict with Luke’s account, but is not confirmed by Luke’s account either. Regardless, we see here the justice of God upon an evil ruler who persecuted God’s people out of his uncontrolled pride.

Obeying God’s Word (Acts 12:24–13:3)

The scene now turns away from the influence of Herod to the influence of the Word of God. Luke means for us to see the contrast between these two forces in the world: “With Agrippa’s sudden removal, the persecution of the church ended, and once more the word of God flourished.”⁴ Here, we read that God’s Word “increased and multiplied,” using language that appears in Jesus’ parable of the sower and the parable of the talents, as Lenski notes: “It is a wonderful view of the vital life of the Word. It actually thrives under persecution. Yet we so often hang our heads when God sends persecution here and there. Ten most bloody persecutions ravaged the church under the pagan Roman emperors, and, when they had spent themselves, Christianity had permeated the empire, and in due time a Christian emperor ascended the throne.”⁵ The language thus is both organic/agricultural as well as financial/mathematical. Regardless of how you assess it, the Word of God flourished in a way that Herod was pleased to claim, but unable to accomplish.

Toward the increase of the Word, Luke reintroduces Barnabas and Saul, who had “returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark” (12:25). Specifically, they had returned to Antioch after delivering the relief aid to Jerusalem for the famine throughout Judea (Acts 11:29–30). Upon their return, something major happens during a public worship service, under the direction of the “prophets and teachers,” including Barnabas and Saul, but also three others (13:1). The phrase “prophets and teachers” seems to be two terms that are used to describe two aspects of the same people, who seem not so much to have prophesied by telling the future (as Agabus; Acts 11:28), but by serving as “excellent interpreters of Scripture” who “had the office to teach and exhort.”⁶ Similarly, Paul speaks about those who are “shepherds and teachers” in Ephesians 4:11 in a form that does not signify two different offices, but two aspects of pastoral ministry: to shepherd God’s people and to teach God’s people. Here too, these “prophets and teachers” seem to be those who exercised the equivalent of the pastoral office in the early church, where the Word of God interpreting the significance of the coming of Jesus Christ had not yet been committed to the Scriptures of the New Testament.

During such a worship service (led by these ministers of the Word), “the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them’” (13:2).⁷ Luke describes what sounds like an

⁴ Polhill, *Acts*, 285.

⁵ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 488–89.

⁶ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:497–98. So also Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 492; Polhill, *Acts*, 289. Some, like Bock, makes a slight distinction between the two: “A teacher’s ministry would involve a less-spontaneous declaration and preaching than that of the prophets, including instruction and the passing on to others of the received apostolic teaching (Williams 1990: 223; 1 Cor. 12:28–29; Eph. 4:11). This was how the church taught its doctrine before the use of the books that later became a part of the NT.” (Bock, *Acts*, 439, citing D. J. Williams, *Acts*, New International Biblical Commentary 5 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990), 223.)

⁷ “Here the participle must mean that these five men were not merely generally busy in their official capacities as prophets and teachers but were in the midst of a divine service with the assembled congregation; it

immediate response from the church: “Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off. Barnabas and Saul on Cyprus” (13:3). It is worth noting the role of fasting in the church’s efforts to discern direction, especially in the Lord’s leading for the next stage of ministry. When I considered taking a new pastoral call, fasting and prayer was an important part of that decision-making process to seek the Lord’s leading. Then, as Calvin notes, the “laying on of hands which Luke reckoneth up, in the third place, was a kind of consecration...that the Church might offer them to God, and that they might with their consent declare that this office was enjoined them by God; for the calling was properly God’s alone, but the external ordaining did belong to the Church, and that according to the heavenly oracle.”⁸ By sending Barnabas and Saul, the church began in earnest to undertake the Lord’s “mission to the ‘ends of the earth.’”⁹

Opposing God’s Word (Acts 13:4–12)

The mission begins in largely the way that gospel spread in the past, by going to the synagogues: “they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews” (13:5a; see Stephen in Acts 6:9; Saul in Acts 9:20). Once again, we should not miss that John (Mark) is on this journey “to assist” Barnabas and Saul (13:5b). That detail is subtle here, but it will become important later. Luke tells us that this team of missionaries “had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos” when “they came upon a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet named Bar-Jesus” (13:6). This false prophet was, in some way, “with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus” (13:7a); however, Bar-Jesus does not have absolute sway over Sergius Paulus, since he was “a man of intelligence, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God” (13:7b). Luke then gives us another name of the man, “Elymas the magician,” and tells us that Elymas “opposed them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith” (13:8).

Against this opposition, Luke tells us that Saul, being “filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him and said, “You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord?” (13:9–10). The fact that Saul was “filled with the Holy Spirit” is important, since this detail clarifies that Saul was not simply irritated or annoyed by Elymas. Instead, this statement begins with “the full evidence of outrageous guilt; then, the verdict announcing the punishment. The Spirit, speaking through Paul, is absolutely just.”¹⁰ It is the Holy Spirit who identifies Elymas as the “son of the devil” (cf. John 8:44; 1 John 3:10). Further, it is the Holy Spirit who convicts Elymas of being “full of all deceit and villainy”—a contrast to Saul’s being filled with the Spirit. By contrast, the manner of dealing with the enemies of the gospel will be different in the church today, as we continue to labor in the power of the Holy Spirit, but without such direct statements as Saul received. Calvin writes this:

We must always begin with doctrine, and those are also to be admonished, exhorted, and pricked forward, who do not as yet appear to be altogether obstinate. Neither doth Paul so vehemently inveigh against the sorcerer at the first dash; but when he seeth him maliciously and manifestly fight against the doctrine of godliness, he handleth him like a bond-slave of

may well have been one of the regular Sunday services which included the entire congregation as such.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 494.)

⁸ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:503.

⁹ Polhill, *Acts*, 287.

¹⁰ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 504.

Satan. Thus must we deal with the desperate enemies of the gospel, in whom appeareth open contumacy and wicked contempt of God, especially when they stop the way before others.¹¹

As Calvin notes, the work of opposing the enemies of the gospel begins with patient teaching, to correct opponents with gentleness (2 Tim. 2:24–26). Yet, although the Holy Spirit assessed the spiritual condition of Elymas in an immediate and perfect way that is different from our own, fallible assessments of those who oppose the gospel, we nevertheless ultimately must make the same judgments about those who prove to be stubbornly wicked against the work of the Lord, albeit through the courts of the church in the declarative and ministerial application of God's Word.

At this point, Saul (speaking by the Holy Spirit) extends a temporary judgment of blindness against Elymas: "And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and unable to see the sun for a time" (13:11). It is indeed notable that Saul pronounces blindness upon Elymas, when Saul himself had been struck blind (Acts 9:8–9). On this judgment, Polhill writes, "One would like to agree with Chrysostom, who argued that Paul inflicted his own blindness on Elymas in the hope that it would lead to his conversion, just as it had been a sign of his own. More likely, however, the blindness was symbolic of Elymas's own spiritual state of being (cf. John 3:19–20; 9:39)."¹²

Perhaps the most remarkable part of this story is the way that Luke concludes: "Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord" (13:12). The miracle itself was extraordinary, and there is no question that the miracle removed an "obstacle" from the proconsul's faith.¹³ Yet, it was the *teaching of the Lord* that astonished the proconsul. These two elements, however, should not be pitted against each other, as Lenski writes well: "He saw the same power in the miracle and in the doctrine which it sealed."¹⁴ The miracle confirmed the teaching, but his faith rested in the content of what was taught.

We need to make one final note on this passage. Luke mentions, almost in passing, that Saul is also known as "Paul" (13:9). From this point onward, Luke will refer to Saul exclusively as Paul (although, see Paul recounting the use of "Saul" in Acts 22:7, 13). Two reasons are suggested for this. First, some have suggested that this change signifies a change in leadership, where Barnabas had led *Saul*, but now *Paul* leads Barnabas. Second, since "Paul" is a Roman name, while "Saul" is Jewish, this was "a fitting place to indicate that Saul now used his Roman name Paul because he worked among Greeks to whom *Sh'aül* would sound too foreign."¹⁵ Regardless of the reason, the name "Paul" continues to exercise a profound effect on the church and on western civilization as a whole.

¹¹ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:508.

¹² Polhill, *Acts*, 294.

¹³ For the language of "removing an obstacle," see Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 382. See also Polhill: "The miracles wrought by the Spirit often provide an opening for faith. It is much as with the lame beggar of chap. 3. The crowds were attracted to the apostles by the healing (3:11). They believed in the Lord as the result of Peter's preaching the gospel (4:4). So here Paulus was impressed by what had happened to Elymas." (Polhill, *Acts*, 295.)

¹⁴ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 508.

¹⁵ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 502.

Discussion Questions

1. What had Herod done against the church in the previous section (esp. Acts 12:1–4)? How does the need of the people of Tyre and Sidon affect the way that we hear their flattery of Herod (12:20)? In how many ways does Luke stress the royal pride of Herod in this scene (12:21)? What was wrong with what the people said about Herod, or about his response (12:22–23)? Where might pride arise in your own heart about the words that you say?
2. How does the progress of the Word of God compare to the progress of Herod’s “god”-like voice (12:24)? How do the different words for the progress of the Word of God speak to depth and breadth (12:24)? Who was John Mark (12:25)? Who were the “prophets and teachers” (13:1)? What was the role of fasting in the church (13:2–3)? How does the response of the church to God’s Word contrast with Herod’s rejection of God’s Word?
3. Where do Barnabas and Saul go on the first part of their mission (13:4)? Why do they go to the synagogues of the Jews to begin that mission (13:5)? Who was Bar-Jesus/Elymas (13:6, 8)? Why had the proconsul sought to hear from Barnabas and Saul (13:7)? Why did he seek to turn the proconsul away from faith (13:8)? On what authority did Saul rebuke Bar-Jesus (13:9–11)? What was the result for Bar-Jesus (13:11)?
4. Are you listening regularly to God’s Word? Are you taking opportunities to hear God’s Word taught in the church, in smaller Bible studies, and alone in private? As you listen to God’s Word, are you sensitive to respond in faith and obedience? What is so astonishing about the teaching of the Lord (13:12)? Is your heart still captivated by God’s Word? Why or why not? How do you need to relate to God’s Word differently in the coming week?