

Spiritual Warfare Acts 13:4-12

In the book, *Vietnam Landing*, Tedd Burton relates a personal testimonial about the Vietnam War. And he describes this one battle where people were being killed all around him. And what was so eerie was that he could not see the enemy. The enemy could obviously see them because they were being decimated, but he could not see a one of them. And it is kind of disconcerting to know that we have an unseen spiritual enemy who can see exactly what we are doing. We get shot at and we wonder, “Where did that come from.” And yet, in the book of Acts, we don’t see God’s people fearing Satan. We are not presented with hair raising stories of demons to generate fear. Sometimes the books written on demonology almost take away your faith and make you nervous. In contrast, every occurrence of the demonic in this book gives us a total confidence in the power of God over Satan. What that soldier said was that he was in radio contact with the helicopters and jets and they were able to eventually subdue the enemy in that region. And it’s the same spiritually. If we only look to our own resources, the unseen enemy can be intimidating, but we have far greater resources at our disposal than Satan does. Greater is He who is in us than he who is in the world. Yes, Satan may be a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour, but he may only go as far as God allows him.

But that does not mean we can ignore Satan. God’s sovereignty over Satan does not mean that the battle is an illusion. Nor does it mean that Satan cannot be very effective in his opposition. He can be very effective. In I Thessalonians 2:17-18 Paul says, **But we... endeavored more eagerly to see your face with great desire. Therefore we wanted to come to you—even I, Paul, time and again—but Satan hindered us.** Satan stymied every effort that Paul made to come back to Thessalonica. This means that there was a real battle, and there can be casualties and losses on both sides. We can’t always assume that things will turn out as we had hoped. Throughout this book you are going to see enormous opposition from Satan to try to make Paul’s work ineffective. Often Satan will do it simply by using *people* to disrupt, oppose, undermine and frustrate. In fact, that is probably his most common strategy: to work through people. So it’s not just flesh and blood, but the principalities and powers behind them that we need to take account of. So we need to have the confidence of Acts on the one

hand, and we need to have Acts' realistic appraisal of what we are up against on the other hand. Too many times we ignore the demonic.

I. The conflict between Paul and this occult sorcerer (vv. 6-12)

But almost every conservative commentary admits that the demonic is clearly here. In verse 6 Luke says that this missionary team found a sorcerer. And it says it with no embarrassment. The Bible believes there is such a thing as sorcery and says that it is wrong and dangerous. It's not just a superstition. It is a work of Satan. Verse 7 says that the proconsul was an intelligent man, yet he believed in sorcery. He had no doubt seen the reality of Satan's power through Bar-Jesus' sorceries and prophecies. Satan is a real person, and he continues to act upon the earth with such things as séances, witchcraft, sorcery and other occult practices. In fact, when you count up the numbers of demons listed in the Bible, it becomes apparent that if they aren't sleeping 24 hours a day, there is lots of mischief that they are stirring up. Based on Revelation 9's description of just one contingent of demons as having 200 million demon soldiers in it, I do not think it is far fetched to imagine his army as comprising upwards of a billion demons. Job 1, 1 Kings 22 and Matthew 12 all indicate that there are demons who go on reconnaissance missions, gathering information. And there would have been plenty to bring concern to Satan in this chapter. It's no wonder that conflict is stirred up. Verse 10 implies that Elymas had a pretty high ranking demon attached to him.

Now I am not going to get into all of the theology of spiritual warfare that people get out of this passage, but it wouldn't hurt for you to be aware of some terminology that is sometimes used. Several modern theologians have distinguished between three levels of spiritual warfare. The first level is called ground level spiritual warfare. That's where you are individually battling the temptations of demons, personal attacks or sometimes, the casting out of demons. The second level is called the occult-level spiritual warfare. This deals with any organized forms of the occult or of false religions. The third level is strategic-level spiritual warfare that looks at the bondage that a geographic area or racial group or political group has under Satan's sway. This would include territorial spirits. Daniel for example speaks of the demon prince of Persia and another demon prince of Greece.

Well, what's interesting about this passage is that we see all three levels at once. At the strategic level, the binding of Satan's control through Elymas opened up the governor and the whole region to the Gospel. Anyone

involved in politics needs to take this passage seriously because Satan is always trying to gain a foothold in the capitols and city councils of a nation. Without spiritual warfare, Christian politics will not succeed.

At the occult level, Elymas' defeat would do irreparable damage to the reputation of his religion. And at the ground level Elymas' work was disabled. So all three levels are present. And I don't think we can ignore any of those three levels.

II. The reason for spiritual warfare

A. *Satan sees the leaders being sent (vv 3-4)*

But let's look at the reasons why this conflict came up in the first place. I think we can safely say that Satan's demonic spies are bringing back information all the time. By this time Satan is angry at the success that Barnabas and Saul were having, and not finding a chink in their personal armour, Satan resorted to stirring up people against them. Here are the things that Satan no doubt saw:

First, Satan's mission could not have missed the fact that God and church had commissioned two new missionaries to go into brand new regions. Verse 3 describes a public commissioning service. **Then having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them way.** Satan notices those things. Verse 4 shows that they were immediately taking action on this commission, **So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus.** So the first thing Satan notices is leaders being sent by God. And leaders is one of the first places that Satan strikes at in the church. Jesus said, "strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered."

Why did Satan tempt David to number Israel (1 Chron. 21:1)? Why did he attack Job (Job 1-2)? Why did he stand at Joshua the High Priest's right hand to oppose him (Zech. 3:1)? Why was a messenger of Satan sent to be a thorn in the flesh for Paul (2 Cor. 12:7)? Why did Satan tempt Christ through Peter (Matt. 16:22-23)? These and many more examples show that Satan does everything he can do to destroy leaders. If he can make a Tedd Hagar fall into homosexuality, it won't just affect him and his church. There will be huge collateral damage. If the shepherds are destroyed, the sheep will more easily be scattered. We are getting close to having new officers in the church, and any time that happens, Satan sits up and takes notice. They need to be prayed for so that they will not be preyed upon. We will see that prayer sustained these leaders.

B. Satan sees who is seeking (v. 7)

But a second thing that the demons will not miss is who is seeking. Verse 7 says about this government official, **This man called for Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God.** Here was a man who was seeking. God was already at work in his heart, and Satan had opposition at hand to try to stop him from hearing. Satan doesn't let go of his captives easily. Any time you are bringing the Gospel into an unsaved person's life, you are taking away one of Satan's children, and he is going to fight you. He will do everything he can to keep them from hearing the Gospel. In a worship service he will introduce distractions, make the person worried about his upcoming schedule, put a veil over his mind or cloud his thinking. Satan is not ignorant of the evidences of God stirring up the hearts of his people, and it infuriates him. We see some of his fury coming out through Elymas.

C. Satan sees who will stand in the way (v. 8)

In the parable of the sower, Jesus describes how the world, the flesh and the devil can all hinder God's Word from producing fruit in our lives. The part relating to the devil was the seed that fell by the way side and was eaten by the birds. He says, **Those by the wayside are the ones who hear; then the devil comes and takes away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved** (Luke 8:12). That's exactly what Elymas the sorcerer does in verse 8. **But Elymas the sorcerer (for so his name is translated) withstood them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith.** Satan knows which people will be effective in dissuading people from the Gospel. If it is a spouse, he will try to use the spouse. If it is our children, Satan will try to use our children to make us compromise. But he knows who would be most effective to stand in the way of the effectiveness of God's Word.

So the first three reasons for spiritual warfare is that there are effective leaders who have been raised up, Satan notices a man who is seeking, and he thinks Elymas will be a perfect tool to hinder the Gospel.

D. Wherever we go, we (and the angels with us) are penetrating Satan's territory (v. 6)

A fourth contextual reason for the warfare is that they have been penetrating Satan's territory already. Verse 6 says, **Now when they had gone through the island to Paphos, they found a certain sorcerer...** They were penetrating Satan's territory and Satan has to raise up this powerful opposition. Whenever we go into pagan territory, our angels go with us. This

automatically sets up tension between the two kingdoms. So it is no wonder that there is confrontation.

E. But notice the silence of Acts on the details of the spiritual battles that so many are curious about.

But I think that point E is the most important caution about this whole subject. I find it remarkable that Acts doesn't spend lots of time describing the unseen enemy. He's not enemy focused. Now we might think, "That would make a great story. Modern movies would much rather major on special effects in showing demons and angels engaging in hand to hand combat then they would in saints praying. That's boring. It's much more engaging and interesting to look at the unseen action. And the Bible could have done that. God knows all the details of these battles. Yet it's very rare to see detailed accounts of such battles in the Bible. It occurs frequently enough that we know it exists. There's enough Biblical theology on Satan that it helps us to see hints as to why there would be confrontation here. But the Bible's focus is on our responsibilities in the face of the unseen. It doesn't satisfy all our curiosity about what exactly is happening in these heavenly battles.

And I bring that up because there are evangelical Christian books out there that claim to be able to tell us far more about the world of demons than the Bible tells us. They add their own personal experience of dealing with demons to the testimony of the Bible and then they add in the details that demons give to them as they are being cast out. For example, before they cast out a demon they will ask the demons name, what he does, how many associates he has, what his position is, etc. And they analyze the data from thousands of such cases and then add it to their theology. And I'll tell you why that's dangerous. Well, first of all, it is dangerous because the Bible tells us to stick to the book. Isaiah 8:19-20 explicitly tells us not to seek information from demons. Instead, Isaiah says, **To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.** 2 Timothy 3:16-17 tells us that the Bible is sufficient and more than sufficient to equip us for every good work.

But a second reason it is a dangerous policy is given by Jesus in John 8:44. Jesus said, **"the devil... does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it."** That means that you can't trust a thing that demons tell you. In fact, when Christians include information that comes from demons into their theology books on demons, they are engaging in the same sorcery that the Bible condemns. They are gaining information

from Satan. It is wickedness that these evangelicals are engaging in. They are taking demons seriously and governing their theology by such demonic information. Let's stick to the Scriptures.

A third danger with this common approach to studying demons is that the sensational books that come out of the evangelical presses cast fear into the hearts of believers. Ironically it makes people become enemy focused rather than God-focused. Acts doesn't focus on Satan. It doesn't focus on Satan's strategies, plans and ideas. The book of Acts makes us focus on the power of God, not on the power of Satan. So really, the most important information you will have in this sermon is not in points I and II (even though these are Biblical cautions). The most important information is in point III.

III. The power for spiritual warfare

John Obermiller is an avid reader of war strategies, so you will have to check with him if this is correct or not. But in his book, "How Great Generals Win," Bevin Alexander tells of the ingenious way that the Roman general Scipio Africanus finally beat Hannibal. One of Hannibal's effective strategies was to use elephants for battle. These huge beasts terrified the soldiers as they went stampeding into their ranks. For years the Roman soldiers and horses were ineffective. But then Scipio Africanus came up with the idea of blowing a bunch of trumpets at these elephants. And it worked. It so startled the elephants that it caused them to retreat in fear. Of course, it was only one of their tools used against Hannibal.

Well, in this chapter we have six powerful tools on our side that we can use against Satan's intimidating tactics.

A. *The power of prayer and fasting (vv. 2-3 – last week)*

The first tool is the power that comes through prayer and fasting. Verses 2-3: **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. Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away.** We already dealt with this powerful tool last week, so I won't say much now. But I was encouraged that two of you have already reported to me that God has given you incredible victory this week because of your fasting. And that so encourages my heart. I am delighted. But I am not surprised.

But a lot of people are. To many people, the prayer and fasting that formed the foundation for Paul and Barnabas' selection, commissioning and

ministry may seem as weak as blowing trumpets against elephants who are tearing up the joint. Surely we need to just dive in there with sword and arrow. But sword and arrow did not make the war elephants flinch. It was the trumpets that made them flee. And the seeming weakness of prayer and fasting is also a tool that causes Satan to flee and which gives us power. All through my ministry I have had amazing provisions from the Lord both during and after times of fasting. If you didn't hear last week's sermon, you can download it off the church website. But one of the reasons for the success of Barnabas and Paul is that they began their ministry with prayer and fasting. And later Paul says that he was in fastings often.

B. The Power of going as a team (v. 3)

The second thing that gave these guys strength is that verse 3 shows them being sent out as a team, and being supported at home by a team. God did not intend for us to fight our battles alone. There are some people who would just as soon go out there as lone soldiers. But Ecclesiastes 4:9 says, **Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labor.** [That is speaking of the power of synergy when two work together. This division of labor allows more specialization, keeps people from needlessly duplicating efforts and makes them more efficient. So Solomon says, "they have a good reward for their labor." But he goes on. He says in the next verse] **For if they fall, one will lift up his companion, but woe to him who is alone when he falls, for he has no one to help him up.** When you are going into battle you need someone to cover you. You need someone to tend you when you are wounded. You need someone who will shake you out of shock and back into action. And I highly recommend that every person in the church have an accountability partner. You can spur each other onto good works. So there is the power of working as a team.

C. The power of guidance and God's presence (v. 4)

A third tool that these men had in their favor was the power of guidance. Verse 4 says, **So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus.** What an encouraging thing it is to be sent by God Himself into the world. That sense of His favor and His approval enables us to face giants. I have had men tell me that when they knew their wives were for them, they were ready to scale mountains and to conquer giants, but when they didn't feel their favor, it affected their confidence at work. Well, to an even greater extent, this is the way it is with our sense of God's calling upon our lives and His favor with

what we are doing. When you have God's guidance, you can face danger with confidence.

In Exodus 33:15 Moses said, “**If Your Presence does not go with us, do not bring us up from here.**” He knew that without God there is no way they could win. He was willing to risk life and face pain if God would go with him, but having no sense of God's guidance and no sense that God was approving of their going took the wind out of his sails. Calling is one of the key C's in a healthy leader's life. Malcolm Webber speaks of Christ, Community, Character, Calling and Competencies. But this sense of calling and guidance gave them every bit as much power in their battles as the American air intelligence gave Ted Burton help in Vietnam. Without the intelligence they would have been shooting blindly in that battle. There is a power in guidance.

D. The power of God's Word (vv. 5,7,8)

A fourth tool that aided them in taking over Satan's territory was the power of God's Word. Notice that they weren't preaching fun stories. Fun stories can have a place if they lift up and highlight the Word of God. But it is the Word, first and foremost that came out of their mouths. Verse 5. **And when they arrived in Salamis, they preached the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews.** I have heard radio preachers who did not reference the Bible one time in their radio sermons. They are not preaching the Word. It is humanistic oratory. Look at verse 7, last sentence. **This man called for Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God.** He wasn't interested in yet another opinion. He wanted to know what God Himself had to say. Too many times we inject ourselves into the message thinking that our experiences are more interesting than God's Word. Or preachers will use the Bible as a jumping off point to talk about their own opinions.

The Bible doesn't say anything about Satan trying to snatch your opinions out of people's hearts. Satan could care less about our opinions. The Bible says, **Satan comes immediately and takes away the word that was sown in their hearts** (Mark 4:14). Why? Because he doesn't want it's powerful working in their hearts. And that's what Satan tried to do in verse 8.

Verse 12 shows the proconsul's astonishment at the **teaching of the Lord**. Interesting phrase. This wasn't Barnabas and Paul's teaching. When they taught, the Lord taught. Why? Because they were giving the Word of Christ. And there is a power in that Word that can break through all resistance. When Christ used choice Scriptures against Satan in the wilderness, Satan had to flee. James promises us the same results: **resist the**

devil and he will flee from you. Hebrews 4:12 says, **For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.** Don't underestimate the power of the bible. If you memorize it and meditate upon it, you will be transformed by it. It can take away your fears, restrain your passions and give you faith. Jesus said that it sanctifies us. He prayed to the Father, **Sanctify them by Your truth. Your Word is truth** (John 17:17). The word of God is likened to healing oil, to a sledge hammer that breaks the stones to pieces, to a flame of fire and to a tiny seed that grows up. A powerful tool, yet it is a neglected tool in the evangelical church because we like to only use our favorite sections. Read the whole Word.

E. The power of imprecation (vv. 9-11)

The fifth tool that we see Paul using is imprecation. An imprecation is pronouncing of God's curse upon someone. Now that's not something a nice evangelical should do. We are supposed to be doormats who smile even when we are being resisted. But the Bible portrays a totally different picture. We are in a warfare for keeps, and if we don't take seriously the battle we will lose it. Those who obstinately resist God's work must be brought down.

Let me make two prefatory statements before we look at the imprecation in verses 9-11. The first is that this is consistent with the Gospel. The Gospel is that there is a way of escaping God's bad news (His curse) – by repentance and faith in Jesus. And so, when the imprecatory Psalms are brought against people, God can answer in two ways: he can answer by converting them, in which case Christ bears the curse and they are no longer an enemy. They have been defeated. The prayer has been successful. The second way He could answer is by destroying them, in which they bear the curse themselves. But they are already under the curse of God and deserve nothing less. So my first prefatory statement is that imprecations are perfectly consistent with the Good News.

The second prefatory statement is that these imprecations are consistent with our call to love our enemies. Most of the imprecations in the Psalms were written by David against two people that he loved: Saul and his son Absalom. David was no doubt hoping that the curse would fall on Jesus and that they would repent. But he knew that the advance of God's kingdom had to come before anything else.

So let's look at the imprecation that Paul uses. Beginning at verse 9: **Then Saul, who also is called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit...** This phrase "filled with the Holy Spirit," clues us in to two things. First, it shows

us that the Spirit of God produced this imprecation. I believe it was inspired by the Holy Spirit. But in any case, I believe it was clearly *motivated* by God the Spirit. Those who think that the imprecations of David show his sinful flesh showing through rather than the Spirit are missing the point that the Spirit calls Himself “**the Spirit of judgment**” and “**the Spirit of burning**” (Is. 4:4). It was the Spirit who smoked Sodom and Gomorrah. It was the Spirit of God who struck down Ananias and Sapphira. Whenever the Spirit came upon Samson, he slew his thousands. The sentimental view of the Holy Spirit that is current in many circles is making God into our own image rather than worshipping and serving the living and true God. So this verse indicates that imprecations are perfectly consistent with the Holy Spirit’s desires.

The second thing implied by that phrase is the caution that I give to people that they ought to use the Spirit’s Words in the Bible rather than coming up with their own curses. These were not simply Paul’s words. I believe that the Spirit of God was moving him by inspiration to speak this curse to a man who deserved it.

Continuing on in verse 9. **Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him...** I believe that Paul (by God’s help of discernment) was seeing spiritually more than simply flesh and blood here.

Verse 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?** One commentary points out how (other than the phrase, “son of the devil”), this is using Old Testament phrases. The phrase son of the devil is a contradiction of his name, Bar-Jesus which means “son of the Savior.” But what hard words these are! And yet this is the kind of language that the Bible uses to describe those in opposition to God’s kingdom. They aren’t simply sincere religionists. They are enemies of the cross. Next time a president has a muslim imam pray at an event next to an evangelical or liberal Christian, re-read these words and think of what a blasphemy that is. Paul is rejecting the doctrine of pluralism here. He is in effect saying, “You don’t have the right to believe whatever you want to believe. God commands you to repent and believe the Gospel. And if you don’t, you will be judged.” (And by the way, Elymas had already heard the Gospel. He was rejecting it.

Verse 11. **And now, indeed, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you shall be blind, not seeing the sun for a time.”** God has authorized some pretty amazing imprecations in the Psalms, and just as we need to take fasting seriously, we need to take the imprecations seriously. There is a power in them that is utterly lacking in the modern church. And I think it is

high time that the church pick up the imprecatory psalms now that it is coming under increasing attack from all quarters.

I read the story of Lucas Sibanda, a South African who was attacked by a python. The python grabbed him and started wrapping itself around Lucas in order to suffocate him, crush his bones and then eat him. But Lucas fought for his life with what weapon he had – his teeth. He bit the snake just below the head repeatedly, and when it loosened a bit, kicked and punched until the snake released him. Amazingly he was able to kill the snake with a stick. I believe we are at a time when Satan has all but encircled the church and squeezed the breath out of her. We need to take seriously every spiritual weapon at our disposal and fight with the same tenacity that Lucas did.

F. The power of spiritual miracles (v. 11)

The sixth powerful tool that God enabled them to use was miracles. Verse 11 goes on to say, **And immediately a dark mist fell on him, and he went around seeking someone to lead him by the hand.** Paul only pronounced the blindness for a time. An early church father, Chrysostom, says that this was because it was Paul's hope that he would repent once he came out of his blindness. But certainly the miracle had a profound impact upon Sergius Paulus. Which brings me to the last tool that we have: the power of the Lord's methods of teaching.

G. The power of the Lord's methods of teaching (v. 12)

1. The Truth of God

2. The Power of God

Verse 12 says, **Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had been done, being astonished at the teaching of the Lord.** The Reformed commentator, Joseph Alexander, wrote: , "What struck the mind of the Proconsul and commanded his belief was the Lord's mode of teaching his own religion, both by word and miracle." (p. 477) Truth alone does not convert; it hardens. Apart from God's power being present in our ministry it will not succeed. But notice what the proconsul was astonished at. I'm sure he was astonished at the miracle too. But verse 12 says, **being astonished at the teaching of the Lord.** God was speaking to him through this whole event. God opened his blind eyes. God taught him through the mouth of Paul. God delights in taking the foolishness of preaching and turning it into the power of God unto salvation.

And we must have a similar faith in God's presence and power as we exercise each one of these weapons of warfare. When we pray and fast

without God, we will end without God's power. When we organize community in our own fleshly strength and ingenuity, all we will be left with is what human flesh and ingenuity can provide. When we seek guidance from men, that's what we will get if God does not speak through them. If we study God's Word without a dependence upon God, we will benefit no more than liberals who study God's Word with their own human intelligence. We can imprecate all we want to, but it won't amount to a hill of beans if God's power does not back it up.

We started this sermon with the story of Ted Burton. He and his men were hopelessly outnumbered and were fighting blindly not knowing where to shoot. But you know what? He had a *radio* that opened the door to communication with helicopters, jets and gunships. And once the skies started responding, there was nothing left of enemy. We too have a military radio. It's the first spiritual weapon: prayer and fasting. It doesn't seem like much. You can't kill the enemy by throwing a radio at him. But spiritual prayer and fasting make all the difference in making sure that it is God and His power that backs up His truth. It's calling down the reinforcements of the helicopters, jets and gun-ships. May we valiantly fight, not in our own strength, but in the strength of Christ our Lord. Amen.