

“MOVING FORWARD.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Text for the Sermon: Acts 12:24 – 13:1-12

Introduction.

In a small way we are signaling a return to normal, as we return to our sermon series on the Acts of the Apostles, or as I like to say some of the acts of some of the apostles or the acts of the Holy Spirit. Three times in our text the Holy Spirit is mentioned, calling, sending, filling.

This is the very word of God, only truth for faith and life.
Expect God to speak as we read His Word.

Prayer: Holy Father, your Word is our only firm foundation in this otherwise shifting, changing, unstable, uncertain world. Speak to us by your Spirit, equip and train us in righteousness for your glory and the sake of your Son. Amen.

“But the Word of God increased and multiplied.”

Why does Dr. Luke, the author of Acts, say that, or say it that way? What is implied behind that word, but? In spite of something, despite something, even though something else happened, still or nevertheless, the Word of God increased. What was the obstacle?

That question gives us the invitation to quickly review the ground we have already covered in Acts. Since it has been almost a year since we were last in Acts, let me do a very brief summary.

Jesus ascended to heaven and sent His Holy Spirit whom He poured out on His church at Pentecost. That day the church grew by three thousand people. Then like a rock dropped in a pond, the ripples moved out, from Jerusalem to the Samaritans, the Ethiopian eunuch, Saul of Tarsus, the Gentile centurion Cornelius, and thousands more all the way up to Antioch.

But interspersed there were obstacles, opposition, persecution. Apostles were arrested, Stephen, a deacon, became the first Christian martyr, Saul was persecuting the church, the apostle James was arrested and killed, and Peter was in prison awaiting execution.

Luke shows us this river of God’s grace in the early church growing wider and wider despite reports of serious setbacks and even because of affliction.

But the Word of God increased.

The church can be locked down by a virus, economic disruption can spread across the land, voices of opposition and hate can rise from education institutions, news media and politicians.

But the Church of Jesus Christ has always been moving forward and it is still moving forward and to the ends of the earth, even in the face of serious obstacles and opposition. Covid-19 and national lockdowns and church closures have not hindered the advance of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the growth of His church and the salvation of souls all over the world.

When the wicked have done their worst the church always rises out of the ashes. Luke is writing a true and faithful and honest account to encourage Christians in every age and in every land. The weaker the church is, the stronger God shows Himself to be. His grace is sufficient for every trial. The fire of the Holy Spirit cannot be quenched.

Like the children of Israel in Egypt, the more they were afflicted the more they multiplied. The sufferings of martyrs has brought more into Christianity than it has deterred from Christianity. When the world sees Christian suffer for Christ they are more convinced about Christ.

Barnabas and Saul, set apart and sent off.

Now we come to chapter thirteen. Remember that table of contents verse in chapter one:

Acts 1:8 You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.

We are now up to the point of the third part, the third chapter, the church spreading to the end of the earth. This is our chapter, this chapter is still being written. We are part of the fulfilment of that promise of Jesus. The Word of God is still increasing and being multiplied.

You see businesses advertise how long they have been in business or how long they have been serving their customers. In Lynden Dairy Gold, Peoples Bank, Lynden Tribune, John Deere and Twin Brooks Dairy are all over 100 years old. First CRC has been here 120 years.

The Church of Jesus Christ has been growing uninterrupted for 2000 years. The reason anyone today is a Christian has its roots in this chapter. This is the key God used to open the kingdom of heaven to Gentiles who believe. This is an extraordinary thing. The time has come now for the Gospel to be spread to all Gentiles in all nations, to gather the church from among the Gentiles. God is making known His grace to all people.

Anyone who has been blessed by God is blessed for one reason, to be a blessing to others. We are not created and called and blessed to be stagnant ponds, but life giving streams of blessing.

Antioch was a blessed church with many good and gifted prophets and teachers of God's Word. And now God is calling that church so *blessed to be a blessing* to others.

This is the beginning of the next and final wave. The calling of Paul is as monumental and momentous as the calling of Abraham. This is the fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham, that through him all the families of the earth shall be blessed (Genesis 12:3).

How has God blessed you? What has He done for you or given you an abundance of? Have you kept that to yourself or have you shared it, passed it along, given it away? How are you using your blessing for His glory and to advance His kingdom and build His church?

God takes a leading role in calling out and setting apart, equipping and leading those for ministry in His church. The church is sending out their best.

When you give, give your best, give the first fruits, give the first part of your week, give the best of your efforts, your time, your gifts.

When Abel made an offering to God it was of the first fruits and this was pleasing to God.

When Israel sacrificed a lamb, it was an unblemished lamb.

When God came to save us He sent His best, His only Son.

It is a noble and good and pleasing thing to do and you will never be lacking, God will abundantly supply and repay. Teach your children this truth.

Worshiping, fasting, praying, laying on of hands.

Here is a glimpse of the Church of Jesus Christ from the earliest days, doing what the church does, worshiping God, hearing the Word, fasting and praying, giving, sending out.

The mission before them is huge, really beyond comprehension. Nothing like this had ever been done, it was so far outside the box of cultural Jews. And it would take wisdom, courage, boldness, power, endurance beyond human comprehension in the face of great suffering.

It is right that those who know those going out should be the ones most called upon to pray for them and remember them in prayer. The work cannot be undertaken without much prayer, a pleading dependence on God's grace and mercy and provision.

If you read about the history of missions around the world, one thing consistently stands out, prayer. The history of missions is the history of mighty prayer.

In 1727 the Moravians started a prayer meeting that lasted 100 years that sent out 300 missionaries. The 1806 the Haystack prayer meeting in Massachusetts launched foreign mission in America.

The purpose of prayer is to make really clear to everyone that the victory in this war belongs to God and to God alone. Jesus answers our prayers so that the Father may be glorified and we are

benefited. Apart from Him we can do nothing and receive nothing. Prayer reveals and releases the power of God.

Sent by the Holy Spirit they went to Cyprus.

From Seleucia in Syria they sailed to Salamis on Cyprus, Barnabas' homeland, his people. And from Salamis they walked across the island to the city of Paphos.

Here they encounter their first opposition in Elymas, a Jewish false prophet who was a sorcerer or shaman who dabbled in dark arts and superstition. Even the smart people were able to be misled. He had attached himself to the Roman ruler of Cyprus, Sergius Paulus.

We are reminded here an always that there are two realms, two power sources. We serve God or we serve Satan. We are either for God or against Him. There is no neutral ground in this world. There is no in-between. It is like Joshua calling the people of Israel to choose this day whom you will serve, the gods and idols on the world, or the Lord, who is God.

Here we see once again the collision of worldviews, of ideologies. And God will let His own elect children fall for the lies and be deceived for a time, before calling them out of the world and into the fellowship of His Son through the Gospel of Truth.

But Satan never surrenders easily. He tempts and distracts. The moment there is a spark of interest in spiritual things Satan is there to distract, to get us to put it off for later, to lure us away into something on TV or the computer. How many of us have left a Sunday morning worship service contemplating something the Holy Spirit has impressed on us only to walk in door of our home and be distracted by lunch or sports on TV or something else and the thoughts disappear.

We should wake up to the devil's schemes, to his hindrances, tricks, deceptions, distractions, detours, allurements. There are a thousand sorcerers around us all the time. I experience them every day in my ministry, my study and sermon preparation. An email pops up, a text message come in, a news headline, a random thought enters my head. Whatever it is we are soon a hundred miles from what we were first focused on.

What is it in your life that draws you away from Christ, away from Scripture, away from prayer, away from worship? What is the tool Satan most easily uses to keep your faith from growing, or undermine your faith or draw you away into an allegiance with sin?

We are surrounded by people and things designed to deceive us, to lead us astray. We must be vigilant and wise as serpents to not be taken in. Far smarter people than us have been.

Saul who was called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, rebuked Elymas.

Was Paul too hot tempered, was Paul lacking in some Christian gentleness, a bit too rough? Did he miss a class back in his evangelism training on how to win friends and influence people?

There are times for strong words, for clear, direct words. There is a time to put the fear of God in someone, especially a clear enemy of the truth of the Word of God.

Matthew 18:6 Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.

The salvation of a soul is so eternally important that obstacles must be dealt with seriously and strongly, sometimes with strong words.

If the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation and the only hope for eternal life, then decisive words, urgent words, must be spoken.

In the words of John Calvin, “if soft, effeminate men think [Paul’s words are too] stormy, they do not consider how dear and precious God’s truth is to Him” (Acts, Vol. I, p. 360).

Since the sorcerer was trying to blind others to the light of the Son of God, he was blinded to the light of the sun. God often uses fitting punishment, where one falls into their own trap.

People ask why this sort of thing doesn’t happen now.

First, how do you know it doesn’t?

Second, why does it need to be repeated? This is written for our warning and correction.

Third, the judgment and wrath of God is real and it is coming. Sometimes it is poured out, sometimes it is stored up for a later pouring out. The sins of the Canaanites filled up for 400 years. Fear God, repent of all that opposes Him and His Gospel.

Romans 2:4-5 Do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? 5 But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.

The proconsul believed.

The first recorded convert on the first missionary trip was a politician, the Roman ruler of Cyprus.

Do you see the trouble and lengths to which God will go to save a soul? He sends two Jews some 200 miles over land and sea, blinds a deceiver, removing that hindrance, opens the eyes of a blind Roman ruler and opens his ears to the truth of the Gospel concerning another Jesus, the true Jesus. This is God’s straight path in a crooked world, seeking and saving the lost.

He didn't surrender to Jesus because of the brilliance of Barnabas and Paul, or their charismatic personalities or their great fame. A pagan Roman ruler wants to hear the Word of God from a couple of nobodies. This is the work of God by the Holy Spirit, as it is in every human heart. This is the astonishing power of the ever increasing Word of God.

Implications and application.

Let me close with three questions.

First, is the Word of God increasing and multiplying in you, in your home, in our church? Are you taking advantage of opportunities to be in the Word, to know the Word, to be faithful in worship, in Bible Study, in family devotions? Are you sowing good seed, seed for eternity? Are you still seeing astonishing things in God's Word? Pray and ask God to show you wonderful things out of His Word (Psalm 119:18).

Second, do you ever pray for God's will to be done in your life? Are you willing to accept that will, whatever that will might be? Are you willing to go wherever He send you, willing to do whatever His says to do?

Are you willing to pay whatever the price to follow Jesus?
Are you willing to share your faith and sound like a fool?
Are you willing to stand for righteousness and be rejected?
Are you willing to walk out of a theater or a conversation that is foul and be called a prude?
Are you willing to practice consistent integrity in your business and miss out on some profit?
Are you willing to reach out and help a needy person and be taken advantage of?
Are you willing to care and love and be broken?
If you never go to Cyprus and you will never have to face ugly confrontations.

Third, God is moving forward, His Word is increasing and multiplying. Are we moving with Him? Are committed to His mission, committed to seeing the Gospel shared with the unreached people of the earth?

Are we committed in giving and supporting those who have gone out?
Are we committed in praying for them?
Are we remembering individually and as families to at least pray for the least reached people of Nigeria, particularly the Hausa people of northern Nigeria?

If we don't have a heart for missions we don't have a heart for Jesus Christ.
Jesus came from heaven to earth on a mission.
Jesus commissions His church to be on a mission to the ends of the earth.
Missions is not the goal, worship is the goal, missions is the means to the goal.

Will you pray that we will be a beacon of light for the salvation of souls in our community and around the world? Without prayer it will not happen.