

Wrestling Rasputins

Acts 13:1-12

Introduction

Let me read some information from the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (which I have edited). I always knew I would one day use this incredibly expensive set of books that we paid thirty dollars a month on for ten years!

By the way, if I were to ask you what was responsible for the downfall of a thousand year old Russian monarchy, the murders of Csar Nicholas II, his wife and children, the rise of Lenin, and the Bolshevik Revolution; if I were to ask you what was the one fundamental cause that sparked it all, you would probably never imagine that the answer would be – the work of one man. It was indeed, the work of one demonically empowered holy man named Grigory Efimovich.

Let me read and tell the story.

While Grigory was still in his teens he gained a reputation for being able to predict the future, as well as for his immoral lifestyle. The local villagers gave him the nickname Rasputin, which means, debauchery. When he was twenty two, he made a spiritual pilgrimage to Mount Athos in Greece. There he came under the influence of a heretical religious sect known as the Flagelents. They believed sinning was necessary to salvation – the more you sinned the more secure your salvation. Two years later, Rasputin reappeared in his Russian village as a mysterious holy man – with a penchant for immorality and an unusual ability to cure the sick.

He eventually wandered into the capital city of St. Petersburg where society was in the midst of delving into mysticism and the occult. They warmly received this unkempt peasant holy man with strange eyes and unusual healing talents. Eventually,

Rasputin gained an audience with the imperial family – Csar Nicholas and his wife Alexandra – who were struggling with the incurable condition of their son. The boy suffered from hemophilia. When Rasputin demonstrated an ability to ease the boys suffering, he was welcomed into the family circle as a close and trusted friend. Alexandra came to revere him as a holy man sent by God to save her son, and her husband's throne.

Under the spell of his influence as chief advisor however, capable men were exiled and corrupt men were put in their place. Even after Alexandra was confronted with Rasputin's scandals in and out of court, she refused to believe any of it – he was a holy man with power to help her son.

Finally, as a result of Rasputin's control over the palace, the war effort abroad failed. At home, the people had already begun to plan their revolution against the Csar.

A group of cabinet members and royalty also conspired to assassinate Rasputin. On the night of December 30th, just over eighty years ago, Rasputin was invited to what he thought was a royal party – instead, he was served and drank poisoned wine. When he did not die, one frantic guest then shot him. Rasputin was able to run out into the courtyard where he was shot again and then thrown into the river – where he finally died by drowning.

The damage to Russian society at large had already been done. Just three months later, Csar Nicholas abdicated his throne. Not satisfied with that, members of the revolution brutally murdered Csar Nicholas, Alexandra, and their children.

What was behind it all? A holy man with evil ambitions.

One historian wrote,

If there had been no Rasputin, there would never have been a Lenin – no Lenin and there would never have been the propagation of atheistic communism through the empire of the Soviet Union.

That is not the last time a holy man has exerted power over political empires. More recently, robed men claiming to be advising the will of God exhorted Boris Yeltsin to sign legislation which would disallow any religious organization to stay on Russian soil that had been established within fifteen years. The Russian Orthodox church was simply trying to stamp out the truth and these holy men whispered to Yeltsin that which would only increase his future guilt and doom.

Rasputin was not the first one to use pseudo-spirituality to influence either. In fact, on the very first missionary journey of the apostle Paul, a holy man with great influence attempted to stand in the way. In a rare display of immediate judgement, God turns the tables and the holy man is exiled in disgrace and the political leader comes to faith in Christ. In fact, history records that for two generations, this famous political family will spawn a godly heritage.

The Ministry of the Spirit

Turn in your Bible to the book of Acts, and study with me the drama of this incredible encounter. We will begin in chapter 13 with verse 1.

Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.

A church with global ambitions

Now stop at this point. Before we get to the missionary's challenge, I want to look briefly at this missionary church.

Two important offices

Two offices are functioning in this effective model "ekklesia," or church.

1. Prophet

There is the office of prophet, which will remain until the church finishes its formation stage, and will serve as a funnel of God's revelation to the church.

2. Teacher

There is also the office of teacher, which will expound and explain the revealed will of God through the revelation of Jesus' own words and works.

Five different men in leadership

There are five different men listed among the leadership of this new church.

1. Barnabas

We have, in a previous discussion, looked closely at this incredible man of grace and humility.

2. Saul

Saul, who we have also previously studied, finishes the list. He will, for the first time in this passage, be called Paul. Paul was his Roman surname; Saul was his Jewish name. As Saul enters the ministry, more and more to the Gentile peoples, he will become known only as Paulos or Paul.

3. Simeon

There was also Simeon who was called Niger. The construction of this list indicates that Simeon was also from Cyrene – a city along the North African coast. He was called by this name "Niger," which is the Latin word meaning simply, "black skinned". It is the word from which we get our word "Negro". Simeon was a black North African believer.

Furthermore, many believe this Simeon was the same man who carried the cross beam of Christ to Golgotha. Mark's gospel, in chapter 15, verse 21, tells us that the Simeon, who carried Christ's cross beam, was the father of Alexander and Rufus. Later, in Romans, chapter 16, verse 13, Paul mentions that the mother of Rufus was also his mother – an idiom meaning that she took care of Paul while he was in Antioch. In other words, Paul probably stayed in the home of this Simeon – a man converted by virtue of his own eyewitness account of the crucifixion. It was a conversion that led him to the point of leadership in the church of Antioch.

4. Lucius of Cyrene

The next name mentioned is Lucius of Cyrene. He may have been a longtime friend of Simeon's who perhaps, came to faith by means of Simeon's own testimony.

5. Manaen

Finally, the name Manaen appears in the list. Of him we read the interesting phrase, “who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch”.

This is not referring to Herod Agrippa I, whom we studied in Acts, chapter 12. This Herod was Herod Antipas – the one guilty of beheading John the Baptist and the same Herod before whom Jesus Christ stood while on trial.

Manaen was brought up with this Herod. His relationship to Herod was described as “suntrophos”. That word referred to someone being nursed by the same woman as a baby. It could be translated “foster brother”. It was a term given to boys who were the same age as royal princes and who were raised with them at court. They were schoolmates. As boys, Herod Antipas and Manaen went to class together, played together, studied together, laughed together, heard the same lectures, and recited the same poetry.

When they grew up, Manaen would become a believer in Christ; Herod would scoff at Christ before sending Him back to Pilate. By the grace of God, Herod’s foster brother became a minister of the gospel; Herod became a murderer of a gospel messenger.

Look at the leadership of this church! A Jew from Cyprus; a black man from Africa; a Gentile; an aristocrat, and a converted Rabbi – wow!

The church at Antioch became an example of unity in the face of diversity. The church in Antioch proves that prejudice is not fundamentally a problem of color, it is fundamentally a problem of character. If you convert the character, you eliminate the hatred.

This church would become a microcosm of what God was going to do with the gospel – it would go to every tongue, tribe, and nation.

One key word

Look at verse 2 of Acts, chapter 13.

While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”

Ministering

The word “ministering” is often translated in the New Testament as “worship”. It is a Greek word “leitourgeo” (λειτουργεω), which gives us our word “liturgy”. It was often used in the Old Testament Septuagint for the work of priests ministering in the

temple, going about their duties. In the New Testament, the word is used in reference to believers praying.

We tend to think of praying before we go out to serve the Lord. Have you ever thought about the fact that praying is Christian service; praying is ministry?

Further, in Philippians, chapter 3, verse 3, we read the word translated “worship”. Paul reminds the believers that they,

. . . worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus . . .

In other words, every activity of the believer is to be seen in the context of bringing glory to Christ.

Whatever you do, do all to the glory of God! You do not just worship one hour, you worship all week. You do not experience one hour of liturgy, but a lifetime of liturgy.

Do you realize how that elevates and sanctifies life? When you hammer a nail, you are glorifying God by doing it to the best of your God-given abilities. Whether you are changing a diaper, fixing an automobile, typing a paper, studying for an exam, or examining a patient, it can all be liturgy – worship unto God.

The life controlled by the Spirit of God is a life of worship.

One incredible response

Now notice the incredible response of their collective worship. Look at verse 3.

Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.

Wait a second! They sent them away?!

Imagine, releasing their best leadership – Barnabas and Saul! In one move they sent away nearly half of their pastoral staff! Now don’t get any ideas!

We see, for the first time in this verse, a local church led to see the need for a witness beyond themselves to the larger world. And then, they have a willingness to send some from within their body to carry out the task. Any church that wants to stand alongside Antioch had better get ready to invest some of their finest members.

I pulled from our church web page, the reports of our own teenagers who are serving on the island of St. Lucia. The first team is back and the second team

is well under way. Let me read some of their reports from the first week.

Tonight the girls had a meeting at the church and the guys went to the capital city to pass out tracts on the streets. Three men prayed to receive Christ this evening. There is a party in heaven tonight!

Today our Vacation Bible School team had two hundred twenty seven kids in a small church building. What an unbelievable experience for our kids! There were so many children that we had to wash paper cups to re-use them for juice.

Tonight we had an open air meeting. The kids again, did a super job in a very unique setting. There were many professions of faith.

At the end of the first week's trip, one of the leaders wrote,

The trip to St. Lucia has been so eventful that it is hard to imagine what the Lord has in store for the new team that is coming [we had so many kids who wanted to go that we had to send two teams]. The kids have been very bold about sharing their faith with people at the airports, on the plane, in the park, and at every opportunity. As I sit typing this note in the airport, kids are sharing the gospel with at least four different groups of people. I guess it is no surprise that our plane has been delayed for over fifty minutes.

A man accepted Christ on our last flight. All the kids sitting within hearing distance were praying as the gospel was shared. The Spirit is working in incredible ways.

We have had numerous individuals approach us asking about our shirts, and several approach us because of the excitement and happiness that our group exudes.

We received a note from a flight attendant on our first flight which read, "I would like to say to your group what a blessing it is to see young people so excited about serving our Lord and Savior. May you receive a great blessing from the Lord this week while serving Him and may you see many souls saved. My prayers will be with you. Your fellow sister in Christ. Philippians 4:13."

Are you ready to invest our teens? Are you ready to invest yourself? They were in this church in Antioch. They sent their best.

The Ministry of Satan

Now, look at verses 4 through 7a.

So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus. When they reached Salamis, they began to proclaim the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews; and they also had John as their helper. When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they found a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet whose name was Bar-Jesus, who was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence. . . .

This Roman politician was no intellectual child, he was simply caught up in the spirit of his day. Wealthy families often employed their own private wizards who claimed to be able to read the future and assist their benefactors.

A charlatan with evil intentions

Romans put great stock in powers of divination. Charlatans like Bar-Jesus, were smooth and knowledgeable. They practiced a combination of pseudo-spirituality and pseudo-science/mysticism.

History tells us that the family of Pauli was a well known family. From this family came many official statesman throughout the empire over a long period of time.

According to these verses, close at the side of Sergius is a first century Rasputin. The text indicates that he was a magician; a diviner. This apostate Jew had evidently rejected the Old Testament scriptures because they forbade any kind of sorcery. He was evidently powerful because he had become an advisor to Sergius.

Notice verses 7b through 8.

. . . This man summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. But Elymas the magician (for so his name is translated) was opposing them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith.

The tense of the verb indicates he was constantly trying to turn Sergius' attention and mind away from the gospel. He knew his livelihood depended on Saul and Barnabas failing to reach Sergius, so Elymas was pulling every trick he could out of his magician's bag to divert Sergius' attention.

Continue to verses 9 and 10.

But Saul, who was also known as Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, fixed his gaze upon him, and said, “You who are full of deceit and fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease to make crooked the straight ways of the Lord?”

How is that for tact and tolerance?

It is reminiscent of when the Lord dressed down the holy men of His day – the Pharisees. He told them, as recorded in Matthew, chapter 23, that they were vipers and whitewashed tombs; that is, they looked clean and good, but in reality, they were filled with dead men’s bones.

The church today needs a shot in the arm of doctrinal courage. Paul did not dialogue with Elymas, he called him a fraud. He did not try to seek some middle ground of compromise so that they could work together in cleaning up the immorality of Paphos, he called him a son of Satan.

We are living in a church age (I am not talking about the world, I am talking about evangelicalism), where doctrinal compromise has become a virtue and truth has become offensive. In our own evangelical community, dialogue and pseudo-fellowship with false systems of doctrine has replaced the bold exposure of doctrinal error and religious deceit. The thinking is, “Don’t talk about things that divide; don’t bring up controversial issues; don’t offend anyone.”

I am going to save further discussion of this point until we reach chapter 16 of Acts. And then, I plan to offend as many people as possible with the truth.

Paul, with this one statement in verse 10, reveals three things about Elymas: the motive, the man, and the ministry.

The motive revealed

Paul says of Elymas’ motive, in verse 10,

. . . You who are full of all deceit and fraud, . . .

“Deceit” can be translated “bait”. It comes from the context of a fisherman who baits his hook. The fisherman is seeking to deceive the fish into thinking dinner is ready, but instead, the fish will be hooked. Elymas was baiting Sergius with good things, but ultimately, was leading him to spiritual ruin.

“Fraud” can be translated “false pretenses”. In other words, Elymas had an outward religious appearance, but he had evil ambitions.

The man exposed

Paul then exposes the man, Elymas. He says, in verse 10,

. . . You who are full of deceit and fraud, you son of the devil . . .

Paul is probably saying this while surrounded by dignitaries and other sorcerers.

Now, if you go back to verse 6, you discover that Paul is actually making a pun of Elymas’ given name. Notice verse 6b says,

. . . a Jewish false prophet whose name was Bar-Jesus

“Bar” means “son of,” and “Jesus,” or “Yeshua,” means “Savior”. In other words, “Elymas, you claim to be the enlightened son of the Savior. Really, you are in fact, the son of Satan.”

Paul goes on to say of Elymas, in verse 10,

. . . you enemy of all righteousness . . .

In other words, Paul is saying that Elymas was the enemy, in fact, of God.

I would imagine that the entire audience gasped with Paul’s indictment. I can see Elymas’ eyes narrow with hatred.

The ministry uncovered

Paul is not finished. He also exposes the true ministry of Elymas, in verse 10.

. . . will you not cease to make crooked the straight ways of the Lord?

This is taking truth and twisting it; taking clear scripture and convoluting it – manipulating it to make it say something it does not say.

Continue to verse 11.

“Now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and not see the sun for a time.” And immediately a mist and a darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking those who would lead him by the hand.

The implication is that no one would lead him by the hand, so he stumbled about trying to find someone who would help him. No one wanted to – he was exposed as an evil, ambitious man who had deceived Sergius’ entire household.

We never read of Elymas again.

The Ministry of the Word

A conversation with royal implications

Look at verse 12.

Then the proconsul believed when he saw what had happened, being amazed at the teaching of the Lord.

Sergius Paulus was impressed by the miracle and was amazed by the teaching

Do not miss this – Sergius was impressed by the miracle, but he was amazed by the teaching.

Sergius Paulus believed; had faith

And, Sergius believed. That word means to have faith; to be persuaded; to rely upon; to trust.

The spell of Rasputin was broken – this time. As a result, an entire family of royal standing became followers of Christ.

Application – What is Required to Wrestle Rasputins?

What is required to wrestle Rasputins? Will we dare to be like the church at Antioch? We need three things.

We need open eyes that are looking toward the harvest fields of the world

1. First, we need open eyes that are looking toward the harvest fields of the world.

Soon, Lord willing, I will be traveling to India to preach in the massive city of Delhi. Why would I travel there? Because I need open eyes to see how God is working worldwide. I need that global flame fanned in my own heart. It infects my preaching and teaching. You and I both need a reminder that our God was the first missionary sending agency. He, the Father, sent His own Son into our world to seek and to save those who were lost.

We need to have eyes for the world. Antioch sent the first missionaries – we become like them when we send our own!!

We need strong hands that are firmly gripping biblical truth

2. Secondly, we need strong hands that are firmly gripping biblical truth.

We need to know the word!

Let me read this rather funny incident to you.

A New England high school teacher was teaching a class – “The Bible as Literature.” Only seniors in the top 10% of the class could enroll in the class. A pre-test was given to evaluate the students biblical knowledge. Bizarre answers were turned in. One student defined the Epistles as “the wives of the Apostles.” Chuck Swindoll was so humored by this answer that he shared it during one of his sermons at his former church in Fullerton. To his embarrassment, one of his church members approached him after the service and asked, “Listen, if the Epistles weren’t the wives of the Apostles, whose wives were they?”

Look again at verse 12b,

. . . [Sergius was] amazed at the teaching of the Lord.

The word “teaching” comes from the Greek word “didakn,” which means teaching “an established and formulated doctrine”. It is the body of truth that God has revealed through the Lord Jesus, and later, through the apostles, and finally, through the completed canon of scripture.

We are responsible, as Paul declared to Timothy, to be the pillar and support of the truth; to communicate that body of truth to faithful men who will teach others also.

I have had many people come to me over the years and say, “This is the first church I’ve ever come to where I expect to learn something new from the Bible.”

We have forgotten that our purpose is not only to make disciples, but to teach them a body of truth.

Pastor Scott of our children’s ministries along with Pastor Brian of our youth ministries, are working on a scope and sequence that will teach a child, from first grade through twelfth grade, comprehensive biblical truth. I talked with Pastor Scott yesterday and he reminded me of some of the things children will learn, if their parents want them to sign up for a new program. They include:

- first grade – memorize and recite the Ten Commandments, the books of the Bible, and the fruit of the Spirit;

- second grade – memorize and recite Psalm 23 and learn to use a Bible dictionary;
- third grade – memorize and recite the Lord’s prayer and learn to use a concordance;
- fourth grade – draw a timeline of prophetic events and memorize and recite the first sentence of each major section of our church doctrinal statement;
- fifth grade – memorize and recite Psalm 103, read selected missionary biographies, write a personal testimony, and memorize and use, at least once, a method of personal evangelism from the book of Romans.

As II Timothy, chapter 2, verse 15, says,

Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.

We need courageous hearts that are exposing the father of lies and worshipping the Father of truth

3. Finally, we need courageous hearts that are exposing the father of lies and worshipping the Father of truth.

This past week, one hundred seventy three Protestant churches closed their doors and went out

of business. Divisiveness; immorality; bankruptcy; loss of vision and purpose; collapse of doctrinal distinctives; empty pews; disillusioned leaders are all reasons for this.

Are we running out of harvest? If the Protestant evangelical church in America simply kept up with the population in America today, we should have approximately two hundred thousand more churches. We do not. In fact, this year we have nine thousand fewer than last year. And every week, one hundred seventy three turn off the lights and walk away.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are engaged in a battle over the truth. One of the strategies of the enemy is to dilute the message so that it has no clarion call; no distinction or power; no reformation of the individual or high view of God.

However, for those who, like Paul and Barnabas, are willing to speak the truth, you will not see churches folding, you will see churches flourishing. May it be for us. By the faithful grace of God and by the submissive believers that make up this church, may we face every day as a new opportunity to worship our Lord.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 7/20/1997 by Stephen Davey.

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