



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Acts 13:4–12

“The Cypriot Sorcerer Encounters God’s Magic”

TRANSCRIPT

The Scripture reading for this morning is in Acts chapter 13, verse 4 through verse 12. The apostle with Barnabas and with John Mark is engaged in the first missionary journey. And Luke’s account as they left Antioch begins with verse 4 of Acts chapter 13.

“So they, being sent forth by the Holy Ghost, departed unto Seleucia, and from thence they sailed to Cyprus. And when they were at Salamis, [This was a city in Cyprus, on the eastern end of the island.] they preached the Word of God in the synagogues of the Jews, and they had also John to their minister. [And this is John Mark.] And when they had gone through the isle unto Paphos, [this was the capital on the other end of the island] they found a certain sorcerer, a false prophet, a Jew, whose name was Barjesus, which was with the deputy of the country.”

The term “deputy” is a term that refers to the proconsul actually. Cyprus was under the authority and governorship of the Roman Senate, and those that were deputies of the Roman Senate, governing part of their property were called proconsuls.

“Which was with the proconsul of the country, Sergius Paulus, a prudent man; who called for Barnabas and Saul and desired to hear the Word of God. But Elymas the sorcerer [this is Barjesus]

for so is his name by interpretation withstood them, seeking to turn away the proconsul from the faith. Then Saul, who also is called Paul, filled with the Holy Ghost, set his eyes on him and said, ‘O full of all subtlety and all mischief, thou child of the devil, thou enemy of all righteousness, [very unloving remarks on the part of the Apostle Paul, wouldn’t you say?] wilt thou not cease to pervert the right ways of the Lord? And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon thee, and thou shalt be blind, not seeing the sun for a season.’ And immediately there fell on him a mist and a darkness; and he went about seeking some to lead him by the hand. Then the deputy, [the proconsul] when he saw what was done, believed, being astonished at the doctrine of the Lord.”

May God bless this reading of his Word. Let’s bow together in prayer.

[Prayer] Our Heavenly Father, we thank Thee and praise Thee that on this first day of the week, the Lord’s Day, we may come together in a meeting like this and read and study the Word of God, under the illuminating power of the Holy Spirit, through a fallible human instrument. We thank Thee, Lord, for the privilege that is ours and when we think of the fact that over so many places in this globe there is no privilege such as we have, either being contrary to governmental decree or in places where the Word of God is hardly found, we give Thee thanks. We are surely blessed by our great sovereign God in heaven. O Lord, may we be constantly thankful for all that Thou hast done for us. Deliver us, Lord, from the sin of ingratitude and failing to take advantage of the great blessings that Thou hast bestowed upon us. Deliver us from the backsliding and the falling away and apostasy that characterize the nation, with all of the great privileges that they had, of the Father’s ministry, the prophet’s ministry, the psalmists’ ministries, Lord, may that not happen to us. And, individually, Lord, deliver us from backsliding from Thee, from turning away from the fullness of the truth that Thou hast so marvelously set before us.

Lord, we pray for each one in this auditorium, and we ask that we may not turn away but cleave, as Barnabas has exhorted the early church, that we may cleave unto the Lord. We thank Thee

for the blessings of life in a material way. Thou hast marvelously blessed us; we give Thee thanks. We pray for our country. We pray for the whole church of Jesus Christ, and we pray for this church, its elders and its deacons and its members and friends, and the visitors who are here with us today; Lord, may Thy hand be upon us for good. Bless the outreach of the Chapel. May it be fruitful and profitable. May this be a lighthouse for the truth of God. Deliver us from pride and arrogance. Help us to remember, always, that we are simply servants of a sovereign God. And failing ones, at that. We pray for those whose names are listed in our Calendar of Concern, who need the ministry of our sovereign God in their lives. Lord, bless them. Answer the prayers of their family and friends and of their prayers, too. Give healing where healing is desired and needed in accordance with Thy will. Be with us, Lord, in this service. Bless in the singing of the hymn that we shall sing and in the ministry of the Word. And we ask, too, Thy blessing upon the meeting this evening.

In Jesus’ name. Amen.

[Message] Most of us, when we began our studies in Sunday school, were taught things like stories about the Old Testament prophets, and then we were taught things like Paul’s missionary journeys. In fact, that’s one of the standard things that people are taught in the beginning of their studies of the Scriptures, and it’s a natural thing because if we understand fairly well the journeys of the Apostle Paul, we not only understand parts of the book of Acts, but we understand a great deal about the letters that Paul wrote and the circumstances out of which he wrote them. So when we come to Acts chapter 13, we are coming to a portion of the book of Acts that has some practical significance for us in our study of Scripture and may recall for some of you those days when you were in Sunday school many years ago. This is the beginning of Paul’s first missionary journey and the apostle is leaving the city of Antioch and making his way across to Cyprus. And the subject for today as we look at the message is, “The Cypriot Sorcerer Encounters God’s Magic.”

Last week we say that Acts chapter 13, is the Continental Divide, the watershed, of the book of Acts. Chapters 2 and 13 are two key chapters. Chapter 2, which records the coming of the Holy

Spirit and the gift of the Holy Spirit to the church, begins the first work and the missionary emphasis of those chapters is toward the Jews and toward the people of the land of Palestine. But now, in chapter 13, the Holy Spirit speaks again and Paul and Barnabas go out to the world beyond the land of Palestine, and its environs, to the world. This is another step in the fulfillment of, “You shall be witnesses unto me, both in Jerusalem and Judaea and in all Samaria and to the uttermost part of the earth.”

We said last week that the emphasis of the chapters that follow, now, lie upon Paul not Peter, as the prominent figure, upon Antioch not Jerusalem, as the prominent city, and the world not Palestine as the sphere of the ministry of the Word.

One of the finest of the commentators on the book of Acts has summed it up this way. “The true religion appears and confutes the false in the presence of the Roman world. Saul emerges as Paul and as a second Peter at the beginning of his ministry, binds a second Simon Magus or Simon Barjesus, as here.”

This chapter and particularly this incident that we are going to look at this morning has a great deal of contemporary relevance. I’m constantly amazed when I read the Bible; no matter where you’re reading, whether it be Genesis or Exodus or Isaiah or the Epistle to the Hebrews or even 2 Chronicles, one finds the things that are relevant for our day today. And this is certainly a relevant passage. Paul in his first missionary journey is led to the hocus-pocus loving Cypriots. And if you don’t think that describes a large proportion of our population then you don’t understand our population.

We have sorcerers and beads and witches and gods in the plural in the land of Cyprus; and we have very much the same thing today. One may read the *New York Times* to the *Dallas Morning News* and the same things appear, over and over again. Your horoscope, many read everyday. Jean Dixon’s column appears in many newspapers. We are interested even in Ouija boards. Through the decades, it seems, these things become fads, then they fade into the background and a new generation moves on the scene and the old things are resurrected, and we have them appearing again.

People are interested in seances, they are interested in ESP, and strikingly, today, we have a resurgence of the worship of Satan. One might think that was new; it’s not new. You just have to be old enough to know it’s not new, of course. But that’s old. And it’s not surprising that these things appear over and over again because there is something in human nature that responds to those things.

Well, let’s take a look at this incident and remember the context. The apostle, with Barnabas and with John Mark, are in Antioch, which is becoming the new headquarters of the Christian Church. And as they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, which I assume means in the context that they were observing the Lord’s Table, the term that is used to describe the ministering is very suitable for that, for it means to minister in a spiritual and priestly way, as they were ministering to the Lord, observing the Lord’s Supper, listening to the teachers teach the Word of God, the Holy Spirit through one of the prophets, who had the right of expression of his prophecies in the meetings, stood up in the meeting and said, “The Lord God has given me a message. We are to separate Barnabas and Saul for work, to which the Lord has called them.”

And so, as a result of this, the two men, Barnabas and Saul, with John Mark as their attendant, are going to make their way to the West. Now, this is very fitting, a fitting kind of thing for the Apostle Paul because he describes his ministry in ways just like this; that he is subject to the Lord God. Writing to the Galatians, he described himself as an apostle, “not of men, neither by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father.” So the Lord God speaks through the prophets, and the apostle feeling also a sense of the divine guidance within, with Barnabas, they move out toward the island of Cyprus.

One might ask the question, why did they go to Cyprus? Now, let me say right at the beginning that there are things that happen in the Word of God that it is very difficult for us to find a human reason for. But some things appear immanently reasonable even to us. I’m sure that when we get to heaven, we’ll find all things are immanently reasonable, because God is a rational God. But

one might ask the question, why Cyprus? Why not around to the East and then to the North? Why go out to this island in the middle of the Mediterranean?

Well, there are some reasons that one might think about. In the first place, Cyprus was a kind of meeting place of the Greeks of Greece and the East; and so the culture of the Greeks and the Romans met there in a very significant way and that might be one reason why. It was near Syria and Antioch was in Syria. And, in fact, so near that on a very clear day in Cyprus you can look off and see the high mountains of Syria. So it was not that far away; about sixty miles. In addition, it was the home of Barnabas, remember? He was a Cypriot himself. And John Mark was the cousin of Barnabas; and so they had family there. But not only that, there were synagogues there. We read in verse 5, “They preached the Word of God in the synagogues of the Jews.” So the Jews were numerous on the island of Cyprus. And, in addition, God had already worked in the hearts of some Cypriots and had brought them to the knowledge of the Lord Jesus.

If you’ll turn back just a page or so in the New Testament to Acts chapter 11, we read, “Now they,” this is verse 19 of chapter 11, “Now they which were scattered abroad upon the persecution that arose about Stephen traveled as far as Phenice and Cyprus and Antioch, preaching the Word to none but unto the Jews only. And some of them were men of Cyprus and Cyrene, which, when they were come to Antioch, spake unto the Grecians, preaching the Lord Jesus.” So this was Barnabas’ home, he had family there; there were Christians there and there were numerous Jews there. And it was the apostle’s missionary strategy, remember, as he expresses it in the Epistle to the Romans, to go to the Jew first and also the Gentile. This was in the pattern of our Lord’s ministry, who was a minister of the circumcision to confirm the promises made unto the fathers and that the Gentiles might receive mercy. So the pattern of the ministry was to the Jew first and then to the Gentiles and the apostle followed this ministry as a pattern in his life. There may have been some changes but, generally speaking, that was his pattern. So Cyprus seems an immanently reasonable place for them to go. They had friends, Christian friends, there were Christians on the island, there

were synagogues on the island; this is a nice place for the Gospel to proceed. Here Greece met the East, and no doubt, as a result of it, influential things might transpire.

Cyprus was a Roman province and, therefore, it was ruled by the Romans, and specifically, this particular province was under the Roman Senate and Sergius Paulus was the proconsul of the land. Cyprus was famous for its copper mines, for its shipbuilding. It was called “Macaria” or “The Happy Island.” Macarius means happy and, in fact, even today in the newspapers you will read of Bishop Macarius of the Orthodox Church, that’s kind of name that is given to individuals that is suitable for the land of Cyprus, which is Macaria, the Happy Isle. Paphos was the capital, it was the residence of the proconsul and this island was the seat of the immoral worship of Aphrodite, the goddess of love.

Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty, who beguiled everyone, gods and men alike, the laughter-loving goddess, who laughed sweetly or mockingly at those her wiles had conquered. The irresistible goddess, who stole away even the wits of the wise, so we read, she was the daughter, traditionally, of Zeus and Dione, in the Iliad. But in the later poems, she’s said to have sprung from the foam of the sea, and her name was explained as meaning “the foam risen one.” *aphros* is the Greek word for foam and so Aphrodite associates her with the foam. This sea-birth was supposed to have taken place near Cythera, or “Kithera” one of the small islands south of present Greece. So that this island of Cythera and Cyprus were forever after sacred to the goddess Aphrodite.

Now, Luke tells his story, and he says in verse 5, when they came to Salamis, on the east of the island, “They preached the Word of God in the synagogues.” They had John as their minister. And when they had gone through the island, to Paphos, this is on the Western end of the island, a bit over a hundred miles away from Salamis, they found a certain sorcerer, a false prophet, a Jew, whose name was Barjesus.

Now, Luke’s three-fold description of Barjesus falls like the blows of a hammer. First of all, he is called a sorcerer; one of the magi. In fact, the very term used to describe the Magi is the term that is used to describe him. A sorcerer, an individual who claimed by his spells and incantations to

have power over the spirit world. He gave himself the name of Elymas, which means, “sage” or “wise one.” You could probably see in modern terms his placards, “Come hear Elymas, the sage, the wise one. He’ll give you the answer to the eternal questions.” Paul and those people over from Judaea are talking about their Jesus, well, this is Cyprus’ answer to Judaea’s Jesus.

Now, Luke also describes him, secondly, as a false prophet. Elymas was out to con the individuals for gain; and he, particularly, wanted to con Sergius Paulus, because Sergius Paulus was the most important man on the island, and no doubt paid him well. Most great men in those days kept wizards and soothsayers, who dealt in magic and spells, because they needed to touch all of the bases in order to be sure that their authority was an authority that would last. And so they had their coterie of false prophets with them. That’s the second thing.

He’s a sorcerer, he’s a false prophet and now, startlingly I think, he’s described as a Jew. You might wonder about that because it seems as if when you read the New Testament and then when you read history of these early times, why is it that so many of these false teachers were Jewish men? Well perhaps the reason is this: The early preachers of Christianity came into frequent contact with pretenders to magical powers because of the fact that they were talking about eternal salvation. And the Jews were those who have a rich heritage of knowledge of God. Like so many people in Christian churches, they have a rich heritage of the knowledge of God. If you go into our liberal churches today, all over the land of the United States of America, and you talk to individuals in the churches, you don’t have to explain to unbelievers that there is such a thing as the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. They already know about that. But if you go out in the center of a pagan land, you have to begin at the beginning. You have to begin at Theology 101. And there, you have to begin with things like the existence of God, the nature of God, the nature and being of the attributes of God, and so on. You must begin at the beginning. But in Christian churches, the heritage of years of instruction, you do not have to do that.

Jewish people had all of the advantage of the great traditions of the past. And so, therefore, they had knowledge of spiritual things that the average pagan did not have. But false men, untrue

men, apostate Jewish men, prostituted their clearer knowledge to personal ends. And they tacked onto the real knowledge that they may have had some theosophic rubbish that they had learned in Alexandria or some mysticism that had filtered to them from the East, some magic arts from Frigia and went forth as the only missionaries that Judaism sent out at this time to bewilder and torture the minds of men. What a fall, from Israel’s divinely intended designation and ministry as those who were to spread the oracles of God. So we have Simon Magus, we have Elymas and men like this. I think this is one of the most tragic things in the world. And when we think of the advantages that the Jews have to be finally a dispenser of false knowledge of God. Remember when Paul in the Epistle to the Romans is expounding the gospel and talking about human sin and trying to point out that no matter how much information you may have had, outwardly, still faith is necessary for salvation. He says, “The man who is the true Jew is the one who is the Jew inwardly, not simply the one who is the Jew outwardly.” True circumcision is circumcision of the heart, not simply the outward. He wasn’t saying the outward things are not necessary; but he was saying the reality must be there or the outward things have no meaning at all. Then, he asks the question, what advantage then hath the Jew? Or what profit is there of circumcision? “Much every way,” is Paul’s answer, in this age, “chiefly because under them were committed the promises of God.” So they had great advantage, but when they prostituted it to their own special needs for evil, ah, what a fall.

And so, Barjesus, do you know what his name means? Son of Joshua. What does Joshua mean? Salvation of the Lord; Barjesus, son of Joshua, son of God’s salvation. Even the name, itself, is a contradiction in terms.

Now, Luke continues and he says he was with the deputy of the country, Sergius Paulus, “a prudent man.” He hadn’t swallowed everything. Sergius Paulus, by the prevenient grace of God is a man who wants the Word of God—prudent. The devil dreads a man who loves to think; he loves people who don’t want to think. He loves people who will let someone else do their thinking for them. He loves people who will say, “I believe whatever the elders believe.” If someone asks them a question, “What do you believe?” They run off and say, “What do we believe?” I used to have

students like that, still have some. They will say, if a question is asked, “What do you believe?” They will say, “What do you believe?” And then they will come and say, “So and so said such and such. What do we believe?” I always say to them, “I don’t know what you believe. I believe this.” Wouldn’t it be a terrible thing if we had in Believers Chapel people that say, if someone asks them, “What do you believe?” If they should then go to one of the teachers and then say, “What do we believe?” That’s a child’s kind of reply. The Devil loves people who will not think. He loves people who will be treated just like we treat our children. You know, they are sitting in the highchair and we want to feed them a little castor oil. I don’t know even whether they use that kind of thing anymore but some kind of medicine. So we say, “Close your eyes, open your mouth and swallow.” And we hope they’ll swallow before the taste. So, my fine congregation, close your eyes, [Laughter] open your mouth and swallow! How pitiful. The Devil loves people who will not think about spiritual things.

And so here is Sergius Paulus; he’s a prudent man, an understanding man. And he’s heard about Paul and Barnabas, and he’s not one of those fellows who will listen to Barjesus’ close your eyes, open your mouth and swallow. He’s been listening to him but he hasn’t been swallowing everything. The man who was wise in understanding and will keep thinking about spiritual things will, inevitably, come to the truth. And grace is working in the heart of Sergius Paulus. He’s a prudent man. He desires to hear the Word of God. We don’t desire to hear the Word of God naturally. No one desires to hear God’s Word naturally. When you hear a man say, “I want to hear the Word of God,” God has already worked in the heart of that individual. So Sergius Paulus sought to hear the Word of God from Barnabas and Saul. But Elymas the sorcerer, he’s disturbed by that, because this is his meal-ticket. Sergius Paulus and others who are willing to follow his kind of teaching; they are the things that keep him going. And so, we read, “When Elymas the sorcerer heard about this, he began to withstand them.”

In the Greek text, the tense of that verb suggests that there was some interaction, back and forth; they had debate, they had discussion. And, in fact, one of the ancient family of manuscripts adds the words, then, in verse 8, “Desired to hear the Word of God,” or, I should have said verse 7,

“Desired to hear the Word of God.” And Elymas withstood him, seeking to turn away the deputy from the faith, this family of manuscript adds the words, “For he was listening with much pleasure to them.” So Elymas saw that things were slipping out of his hand and he began to debate with Saul and Barnabas. Now, we don’t have any of the words that he said. I’m sorry. I wish that we did. It’s a situation very much like Moses debating with Pharaoh and the magicians Jannes and Jambres or like Peter and Paul who had a debate at Antioch over the relationship of the Law to the gospel. But I can just imagine that he brought forward things like the high criticism that is brought forward today. I can imagine him saying, “How can you believe men like Paul and Barnabas? Why, they’re telling us things that are found in the Gospel, but the Gospels are the works of theology. The individuals who wrote the Gospels have already made decisions about theological things. We cannot be sure that they are writing what actually happened. Furthermore, is the Christ of faith, the same as the Christ of history, is the Christ that they are talking about, the same as the person who lived in the land of Palestine.”

Fortunately, by the way, Paul had an eyewitness of the things of the life of our Lord because there was John Mark; and John Mark had been an eyewitness. As a matter of fact, he was the fellow in the Gospel who had his clothes jerked from him when they sought to arrest him. And he let them have his clothes and ran off naked. So he had some first hand experiences that enabled him to say, “Wait a minute, I was there and it’s as Paul and Barnabas are talking.” I can just imagine, too, that they maybe had a little discussion on what was the antecedent of liberation theology. Not the same thing, but all kinds of false teaching are just, usually, the working over the same old principles.

And I think, too, that there might have been some discussion about what is today known as prosperity theology, too. I think I can just imagine Elymas looking over at Paul and Barnabas and John Mark, and evidently seeing that those fellows didn’t have full pocketbooks. And I can imagine him saying, “Look! Look at me. It’s obvious God has blessed me, because look at the way I dress, at the chariot I have outside, and various other things. That’s the sign of the blessing of God; material prosperity is the sign of the blessing of God. The true God expects his servants to live well. The fact

that they live well is evidence of the blessing of God. Now, take a look at that guy over there in those tattered clothes. He’s not dressed in the latest style and I’ll tell you the truth, I bet you if you could look in his pocketbook, you’d hardly find a drachma there at all.” That would mean a lot to a lot of people. They would think, “Surely that’s the evidence of the blessing of God upon Elymas the sorcerer.” So they had this debate; and, finally, Paul had enough. He felt the Holy Spirit working in his heart and we read in the 9th verse, “Then Saul, who is also called Paul, filled with the Holy Ghost, set his eyes upon him.” He was indignant. The Holy Spirit came upon him in the special ministry of enduement with power; that’s usually the meaning, incidentally, of the filing of the Spirit, in the Word of God. He was filled by the Holy Spirit with power for the performance of a particular task. And this one a very striking one; he is indignant at what is transpiring and now we have a gentle appeal of love.

You know, Paul had a low flashpoint when it comes to heresy. Listen to what he says. Would you call this an unloving comment? Many would. In the twentieth century, this would be very unloving. Suppose I were to say, concerning some false teacher today, “O full of all deceit and villainy! You child of the Devil! You enemy of all righteousness!” What would we in the twentieth century say? He’s very unloving. That’s obvious that the Spirit of God is not working in him to say things like that. And, yet, this is precisely what the Word of God says is the word of the Holy Spirit, through his chosen servant, the Apostle Paul. So he speaks in the power of the Spirit and in the truth of the Spirit. “O full of all deceit and villainy! Child of the devil! Enemy of all righteousness!” That three-fold description matches beautifully the description of Elymas above. Above we read that Elymas was his name, which means “wise man,” but actually Paul says, “You monster of villainous trickery!”

Now, Elymas is described as Barjesus: son of a savior. But Paul says, “You son of the Devil!” And Elymas is described as a prophet of God; Paul describes him, by the Holy Spirit, as “You enemy of everything good.” And, at this point, in the 11th verse, we read, “And now, look!” And with this, Paul speaks to the quailing Elymas and says, in effect, “Take a look at God’s magic.”

“You work sorcery. God works the real thing.” And so, blindness falls upon Elymas. You know, the account is written in such a way that you know that this is true. It’s not a sudden kind of thing. Elymas, as the apostle says to him as he quails from these words, under the power of the Spirit, “Immediately there fell on him a mist and darkness.”

Do you ever have that in the morning when you get up? Now, you’re young people but, you know, when people get up in the morning and they’ve been in deep sleep, and it takes you about fifteen or twenty seconds before you can even open your eyelids. And when you look, everything seems to be out of perspective. Now, I can tell by the looks on your faces that none of you have ever had this experience. [Laughter] So I’m describing what I occasionally feel. And it’s about a minute or two before I can see clearly. And then, I say, “Good morning, Martha.” And the reverse happens to Elymas. He is an individual who is able to see and suddenly he feels a little mist falling over his eyes. And I can see him rubbing his eyes and saying things like, “My, I cannot see too well. Where are my spectacles? O, Zeus, I’m going blind!” And the whole thing has the aspect of reality about it because it’s a gradual thing. It happened suddenly but it gradually works itself out as the mist and the darkness falls upon his eyes. And, finally, he cannot see at all. The whole room goes black, and he begins looking around for someone’s hand to hold upon, to guide him around. Well, it’s so fitting, I say, because this man is spiritually blind. And so God inflicts upon him a disciplinary judgment that is designed to be instructive to him and to others. This man is spiritually blind. And so he is made physically blind.

I know that the effect was electric in that gathering. You could see this proud false prophet, this wise man who had placarded himself as having the answers to the problems of life and now he’s groping about for a guide. And no one seems to want to help him, either. He’s looking around for someone to hold his hand and, I think, if I had been there and I didn’t know anything about this, I’d be a little hesitant about taking his hand, too, because it might be contagious, you know. Well, I don’t know what happened. From the standpoint of the scientific explanation, someone might say, “Well, it just so happened that at that moment there was a blockage of one of the central veins of his head.”

Well, Sergius Paulus was a prudent man, and he thought otherwise. And we read in verse 12, “Then the proconsul, when he saw what was done, believed, being astonished at the miracle.” No, that isn’t the kind of faith to which Sergius Paulus evidently came. The text says that, “He believed, being astonished at the doctrine of the Lord.” The apostle had been proclaiming the Word of God and the miracle attested to the messenger, but it was the doctrine that came home to him at the time that the miracle took place, and he was saved through the doctrine.

Now, I’d like to close with just a few comments. I’m sure that if you will look at these words in the light of the way in which we regard spiritual things, Paul’s strange, startling, burning, scorching words are very shocking. Think of God saying to a man the things that he said through the Apostle Paul. Here is a man who posed as a teacher of spiritual things, and yet, God calls him, through the apostle, “A child of the Devil.”

John Milton, many years ago described false teachers, who are incidentally described in the Bible by Jeremiah and Ezekiel in similar ways. He described them as, “Blind mouths.” And John Ruskin took up that phrase, “Blind mouths.” And he expounded it. He said, “A shepherd is a person who should watch and oversee. That’s the point of shepherding. When Paul spoke to the elders, who were shepherds, he said, “Take heed to the church of God, over which the Holy Spirit has appointed you overseers.” Bishops, people who look out for the flock of God.” That’s what our elders are to do in Believers Chapel and do, I believe, they are concerned about the people of God. But, an overseer, who is blind; who doesn’t know the truth; who doesn’t know therefore how to oversee and shepherd the flock, he is denying his very purpose of being. Blind! What a terrible thing for a person who’s to be an overseer, to be spiritually blind. And then, a blind mouth! What is an overseer to do? Well, he’s to oversee and he’s to feed the flock of God with the Word of God. But when he’s blind, he cannot do his overseeing. And when he’s just a mouth, he’s not feeding the flock, he’s expecting the flock to feed him. In other words, he doesn’t live to feed the flock, he lives that the flock may feed him. And the Christian church is filled with “blind mouths,” individuals who do not teach the Word of God, who really even, when they think they are teaching the Word of God sometimes are

not teaching the Word of God, and whose ultimate goal seems just as surely to be a “mouth” as to be a shepherd of the flock of God.

Our radio waves, our TV screens, are filled with individuals who are blind, who oppose the teaching of the Word of God, who oppose the proclamation of the truth of the grace of God. Men like Jimmy Swaggart, who preaches contrary to the sovereign grace of God, who denies that God and sovereign grace moves in the salvation of men, whose Gospel message is so mixed up with human activity and works that it is confusing, at best. And others, who add to this the desire to con Christian people just like you, who listen and sometimes respond and give your money, in order to keep going the kind of thing that is false to the Word of God. “Blind mouths!” Milton was right. Ruskin was right. We have many people today who are “Blind mouths!” That noble sarcasm fits so many of us who preach the Word of God today. May the Lord deliver us who preach the Word of God from the grasping kind of mentality that preaches, not to feed, not to oversee, but to be fed.

I’m thankful for a man like Dr. Criswell at First Baptist Church. There are many things about Dr. Criswell’s preaching with which I don’t agree; but, essentially, with his preaching I agree. I hope he agrees with mine. We are friends. We are personal friends. But there is one thing I admire about him, he is a true shepherd, I think. And, furthermore, when he made his decision a few years back to say he wasn’t going to take anymore money from the church, he was going to give back the money that he had received from them, I thought that was an admirable thing. I appreciated that. That made it plain to me, at least, he wasn’t a blind mouth. He was a man who wanted to glorify our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. I am thankful for men like that.

Why did God speak through the Apostle Paul with such words as he did? Well, Barjesus is standing in the way of Sergius Paulus’ coming to faith. It was an expression of the divine love for Sergius Paulus that caused God through his servant to say the things that he said to him. The Lord Jesus said he did not pray for the world, he prayed for those who were his given ones, and for those who would believe on him, through the preaching of the Word. God is concerned that his saints come to the knowledge of himself; and he will do all that is necessary to bring them to himself. But,

someone might say, “Well, what about Barjesus?” Well, God gave him an instance of his mighty power and working, and blinded him, the text says, “For a season.” Gave him an opportunity to think about the power of God and to think about the message that the apostle had preached. And it would be nice, if we got to heaven, we should find him there, as having found the grace and mercy of God, through this instance of the miraculous working of the Holy Spirit.

And one last thing, if I may, it’s one minute to twelve, it’s strange that I’m going to quit on time today. A man may have many advantages and yet be lost. The proconsul was an influential man, but he was lost. The small and great shall stand before the Great White Throne in judgment someday; not simply the small. The small and great.... He was an intelligent man, but he was lost. Not many wise, not many noble, are saved, Paul says.

And then, he was also an enquiring man; weary of Jewish religion, weary of Greek philosophy, weary of the sorcery of Simon Magus of Simon Barjesus, weary of Roman materialism; seeking rest for his heart. Augustine said some famous words about such. “Man is made for God and kind find no rest till he finds rest in Him.” And Sergius Paulus was not resting. He wanted that rest that means the possession of eternal life. And so Paul preached the faith to him. The faith. Verse 8: and he found rest in the faith.

So to you who are weary of political panaceas, philosophical dead ends that lead to despair, so shall gospels that have no remedy for guilt and sin and condemnation and Satanic deceits found in the emotional jags to which so many preachers of what is supposed to be the Word of God tell us about. We preach the faith, the faith that Paul preached. The faith that’s bound up in the sovereign grace of God through the Lord Jesus Christ, the faith that Paul in just a few days will preach to the Antioch people in Presidia. And when he says to them, “Be it known unto you, men and brethren, that through this man Jesus Christ is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins. And by Him all that believe are justified from all things from which he could not be justified by the Law of Moses.”

And so we preach to you Jesus Christ, through whom you may have the forgiveness of sins. And if God through His Holy Spirit, as he worked in the heart of Sergius Paulus, should give you the

sense of inquiry and desire in the message of the Gospel, the faith, there is the answer to the needs of the human heart, the forgiveness of sins, through the preaching of the Lord Jesus Christ, who offered himself an atoning sacrifice on Calvary’s cross for sinners and who invites sinners, sinners like Barjesus, sinners like you, sinners like me, to come and receive the grace of God freely.

May God so work in your heart that you come to him. There is no salvation in any other, for there is none other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved. Come to Christ. Believe in him. Give yourself to him. Enjoy the assurance of the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. May God give you the light and the urge and the desire and may you come. Come to Christ!

Let’s stand for the benediction.

[Prayer] Father, we are so grateful to Thee for these ancient events described for us so vividly by the New Testament writers. They speak so directly to our situation today. And, Father, if there should be someone in this audience who has wondered about eternal life and eternal salvation, has desired to know the truth, O, unveil the truth of the ministry of the Lord Jesus for all of their needs. By the Holy Spirit, bring them to Christ, to confess their need of Him, to lean upon Him and what He has done for time and eternity. May they at this very moment give thanks to Thee, for that which the Lord Jesus has done. And, give them, Lord, the sense of rest in the saving work of Christ.

We pray, in His name. Amen.