

Main Idea: We see four phases of gospel ministry in Acts 13:6-13. The account teaches us much about the inevitable ups and downs of gospel ministry.

- I. Gospel ministry involves opportunity (6-7).
  - A. The missionaries met Elymas.
    1. He claimed to know the truth.
    2. He was a deceiver.
  - B. The missionaries met Sergius Paulus.
    1. He was a man of influence.
    2. He wanted to hear God’s Word.
- II. Gospel ministry involves opposition (8).
  - A. Elymas resisted the messengers.
  - B. Elymas tried to distort the message.
- III. Gospel ministry involves overcoming-power (9-12).
  - A. God silenced a critic (9-11).
    1. Paul confronted the crime (10).
    2. Paul declared the sentence (11a).
    3. Elymas felt the consequences (11b).
  - B. God won a convert (12).
    1. Elymas experienced darkness.
    2. Sergius Paulus saw the light.
- IV. Gospel ministry involves obstacles (13).
  - A. The team experienced change.
  - B. The team experienced disappointment.
    1. Don’t put an undependable person in a vital role.
    2. If you’re going to do ministry, be wholehearted.
    3. There is hope for those who have failed.

Implications: Three lessons to consider from this account...

1. The preaching of the Word is effectual.
  - ⇒It will irritate some.
  - ⇒It will save others.
2. People who try to hinder God’s work are duped by the devil.
3. No one can stand against God.

This morning we’re continuing our journey through the book of Acts. Last time we saw the church at Antioch send out Paul and Barnabas for a missionary venture designed by the Holy Spirit. In today’s passage, we begin to see gospel ministry in action.

*Scripture Reading: Acts 13:6-13*

Just before Jesus returned to heaven, He gave His followers a mission. “You will be my witnesses...to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).” This is our assignment. We who know Jesus are to make Jesus known to the world, by word and deed. *To make disciples of Christ, locally and worldwide*, as our church mission statement puts it.

However, if we are serious about this mission, and we devote ourselves to it, here’s something we’ll soon discover. *Not everyone shares our excitement.* In reality, gospel ministry is hard, messy at times, frustrating, overwhelming.

Please, don’t misunderstand me. There’s no better life than one lived in obedience to the One who gave His life for us. If you want to experience joy immeasurable and eternal, then put your trust in Christ and live for Him wholeheartedly, and joy will be yours. I guarantee it.

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\*\*Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

<sup>1</sup> For a previous look at this passage, see the Acts series at WBC in 2002.

But so will hardship. I guarantee it.

As we open God's Word today we're going to learn about, "*The Ups and Downs of Gospel Ministry.*" We need to talk about it, for it's true. There are ups, and there are downs, when it comes to doing gospel ministry.

*It's going to be hard. There will be times when you will feel like quitting. But by all means, keep going!*

That's what I would say to you, after three plus decades of gospel ministry. And that's what God says to us in the portion of His Word to which we now turn.

Let's travel to Paphos. In our study of the Scriptures today, we're going to take a look at one snapshot from the first missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas. We can learn a lot from what happened to the church's first missionaries while at Paphos. The account teaches us much about the inevitable ups and downs of ministry, and how to navigate them for the glory of God.

Gospel ministry is not for the faint hearted. If you choose to get involved in fulfilling the Great Commission, there will be thrills beyond description. There will also be battles, disappointments, and periods of loneliness that will bring you to the end of yourself. It's all part of gospel ministry.

Thankfully, through the ups and downs of service there is one constant that makes all the difference. *Lo, I am with you always*, said Jesus, *even to the end of the age* (Matt 28:20). Jesus never leaves us. His strength is sufficient for us. That's as true today as it was for gospel ministers at Paphos in the first century.

As we look at Acts 13:6-13, we're going to see four phases of gospel ministry, and then talk about three applicable lessons at the end.

#### I. Gospel ministry involves opportunity (6-7).

The year was around 45 AD. The church which started in Jerusalem had reached Antioch in Syria, spreading just as Jesus predicted it would. "You will be my witnesses," He had said in Acts 1:8, "starting in Jerusalem and going to the ends of the earth."

When the good news reached Antioch the recipients cherished it. They also determined to share it. In obedience to the Spirit's leading, this mission-minded church commissioned Barnabas and Saul to become missionaries, and the two left to begin what would be Saul's (soon to become better known as Paul) first missionary journey recorded in Acts. John Mark accompanied them.

Their first stop was at Salamis on the island of Cyprus (13:4-5) where "they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues." That's where we left off last time and where we'll begin today.

Notice what the missionaries did next. Verse 6 says, "They traveled through the whole island until they came to Paphos." Paphos was the capital city of Cyprus. How many cities and villages did they visit en route? We're not told, but we can be sure that they preached the good news of Christ all across the island.

There's no escaping the fact that gospel ministry involves *travel*. The lost don't typically come to us. We must go to them, as did Barnabas and Saul in behalf of the church that sent them. Luke informs us that after leaving Salamis they journeyed through the whole island until they reached Paphos, a trip of nearly *one hundred miles*. How did they travel? We're not told. Maybe by cart or donkey or river boat. The trip certainly included walking.

I'm not sure most of us appreciate the physical demands these gospel ministers faced. According to *The Moody Atlas of Bible Lands*, "The distances traveled by the apostle Paul are nothing short of staggering. In point of fact, the New Testament registers the equivalent of about 13,400 airline miles that the great apostle journeyed; and if one takes into account the circuitous roads he necessarily had to employ at times, the total distance traveled would exceed that figure by a sizeable margin."<sup>2</sup>

Any home-bodies here? I like being at home. It's comfortable at home. It's familiar at home. And while giving attention to home is important (that's another message), we'll never fulfill our mission if we're not willing to travel from home, at times, far from home.

Here were some of the first of those 13,400 miles.<sup>3</sup> They traveled through the whole island until they reached Paphos. The Lord had a unique opportunity awaiting them.

Verse 6 continues, "There they met a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus,<sup>7</sup> who was an attendant of the proconsul, Sergius Paulus. The proconsul, an intelligent man, sent for Barnabas and Saul because he wanted to hear the word of God." The opportunity was twofold.

**A. The missionaries met Elymas.** That's what Luke later called this crafty character in verse 8, "Elymas," a Semitic name meaning "sorcerer." His actual name was Bar-Jesus. Bar means son. Son of Jesus was the man's name.

There's a strange twist here. Bar Jesus was a *Jewish sorcerer*. But sorcery was against Jewish law. So here's a contradiction in terms, kind of like referring to someone as a "Christian drug-dealer"! The words just don't go together.

The man was a phony. Luke identifies him as a false prophet. How ironic! Here's a man who bears the greatest name ever, "Jesus," which means *salvation*, yet he's just the opposite. Rather than saving people, he uses them, as we'll see.

Two features stand out regarding this man Luke nicknamed Elymas.

1. *He claimed to know the truth.* He was a self-proclaimed prophet, apparently pretty good at it for he connected himself to an influential leader. But in reality...

2. *He was a deceiver.* In the parable of the Tares (Matt 13:24-30) Jesus warned that wherever the Lord sows and reaps wheat, the devil will sow and reap counterfeit tares. Not surprisingly, this charlatan had attached himself to a key political figure in the region, for the kingdom of darkness often sets its eyes on those with worldly clout.

More about Elymas momentarily. The ministry opportunity for Barnabas and Saul involved a second individual.

**B. The missionaries met Sergius Paulus.** Who was he? The text informs us of a couple things about him.

1. *He was a man of influence.* Luke calls him the "proconsul" [KJV 'deputy'], a title that indicates he was the chief Roman official. A proconsul was over an entire province. This man had some clout.

Luke also describes him as "a man of intelligence" (ESV; 'prudent' in the KJV). That's interesting. "Only fools fall for the Bible," the critics often say. Not so, says Luke. Here's a man of intelligence and he's willing to investigate Christianity. Psalm 53:1 states, "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'"

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<sup>2</sup> Barry Beitzel, pp. 176-7.

<sup>3</sup> Since the circumference of planet earth is nearly 25,000 miles, they traveled literally half way around the world.

So a person who is willing to humble himself and seek the truth isn't a fool. But seeing massive evidence for the Creator God in His creation and still saying, "There is no God. I don't even want to consider the subject," now, that's foolish.

It's obvious the Spirit of God was at work in Sergius Paulus. Here's the evidence.

2. *He wanted to hear God's Word.* He sent for Barnabas and Saul because he "wanted to hear the word of God." When the Holy Spirit is working, He creates thirst. He opens doors. He prepares hearts to hear. Not everyone is ready, but because the Spirit is at work, some are.

That's what makes gospel ministry possible. There are people whom God is preparing to listen. So let's keep our eyes open looking for the prepared hearts. And tell them about Jesus.

Don't miss the centrality of God's Word in our mission. The Spirit creates interest for it. We proclaim it. And people believe it. It's that simple, right?

Well, not exactly. That's only phase #1. Gospel ministry involves opportunity.

## II. Gospel ministry involves opposition (8).

Have you noticed increasing opposition in our day? It's certainly there.

For Barnabas and Saul, the opposition came in the form of Bar-Jesus. Verse 8—"But Elymas the sorcerer (for that is what his name means) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith." The opposition of Elymas showed up in two actions.

**A. Elymas resisted the messengers.** He "withstood" them, as the KJV puts it. Not everybody applauds when God's Word is preached. The preaching of the gospel is a threat to Satan as well as Satan's messengers. Elymas knows that if his boss listens to this teaching about Jesus, he's going to lose his influence and political connections, and he's not going to let that happen.

**B. Elymas tried to distort the message.** Luke says he "*tried* to turn the proconsul from the faith." ESV, "seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith." Faith is an action, as in the case of the verb *believe*. But *the faith* is the object of this belief. *The faith* is the truth about God and what He has done through Jesus Christ to save a people for His glory. *The faith* is the account of God's redeeming love.

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son—Jesus, who died in behalf of sinners, then conquered death on the third day. That whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life—everlasting life, the gift God gives to those who admit they can't earn it and receive Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

To try to turn someone from *the faith* is to say there is *another* way, that you don't need Jesus, that you are okay without Him. That's what Elymas did. He *tried* to turn the proconsul from the faith.

I emphasize the word *tried* because though he *tried*, he did not succeed. He *could* not succeed. God's sovereign work is effectual. It will produce the effect God intends.

That's the very point Luke makes at the end of the chapter in 13:48, "When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; *and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.*" The order is significant. God appoints. Those whom He appoints believe. The KJV translation puts it plainly, "As many as were ordained to eternal life believed." God has ordained a people, and He will save those people. You see the evidence of His gracious choice when they believe.

This is what keeps gospel ministers going when they face opposition.

From a human perspective, however, the moment was tense. Sergius Paulus was interested in the Word of God. He asked to hear the Word of God. But with a vengeance Elymas set out to derail this gospel moment. He would not give up without a fight.

There's a valuable insight here. Introducing someone to Christ isn't simply an academic task, and it's certainly not a sale's pitch. It is *spiritual warfare*. In a very real sense Saul and Barnabas battled Bar-Jesus for the soul of Sergius Paulus. Evangelism involves all-out-warfare against the forces of hell.

Once we grasp this, it will affect a lot of things. We'll look at unsaved people differently, for they are not the enemy but victims of the enemy. We'll look at prayer differently, for in praying we're asking the Commander-in-Chief for reinforcements for the battle. We'll also look at opposition differently. We won't be surprised by it. We'll even expect it.

Gospel ministry involves opportunities. But it also involves opposition. Thankfully...

### III. Gospel ministry involves overcoming-power (9-12).

For us opposition is bad, so we try to avoid it. But God isn't intimidated by opposition. For God opposition merely creates more opportunity, specifically for Him to demonstrate His overcoming power. He did so in two ways in Acts 13.

**A. God silenced a critic (9-11).** He used Paul to do it. Look how the apostle responded in verses 9-11<sup>4</sup>, "Then Saul, who was also called Paul [here's the first use of his name 'Paul' in the New Testament], filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, <sup>10</sup>"You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord? <sup>11</sup> Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind, and for a time you will be unable to see the light of the sun."

Interesting. Paul doesn't sound very "Christian," does he? Or perhaps we have watered down Christianity too much. Keep in mind this was no personal vendetta. Paul didn't confront Elymas at first. He simply preached. But in time he could see that the hardness of Elymas was harming not only himself but others.

It's one thing not to believe the truth—and that's bad enough. But it's far worse to oppose the truth you've rejected and block others from seeing it.

If Paul was upset—and I believe he was—it wasn't for personal reasons. This was an offense to God, God's gospel, and God's plan. And keep in mind this rebuke was prompted by the Holy Spirit, for Paul was clearly "filled by the Holy Spirit."

Talk about being blunt! Five times the apostle used the pronoun "you" as he pointed at Elymas. First...

*1. Paul confronted the crime (10).* "You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord?"

Paul's question, "Will you *never stop perverting* the right ways of the Lord?," indicates this was not a one time act either, but a persistent pattern.

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<sup>4</sup> ESV, "But Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him <sup>10</sup> and said, "You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord? <sup>11</sup> And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and unable to see the sun for a time." Immediately mist and darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking people to lead him by the hand."

There's a play on words here. "You call yourself Bar-Jesus ('son of Jesus'), but you are actually Bar-Devil ('son of the devil')!"

2. *Paul declared the sentence (11a)*. "Now the hand of the Lord is against you [what a tragic condition, to have the Almighty against you, or as the ESV says, to have His hand "upon you"!]. You are going to be blind, and for a time you will be unable to see the light of the sun."

Elymas was already blind spiritually. Now he was about to experience physical blindness. Verse 11 concludes, "Immediately [there was no delay] mist and darkness came over him, and he groped about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand."

3. *Elymas felt the consequences (11b)*. How ironic! Here's a man who tried to keep his boss in darkness. So God put him in darkness. This was actually an act of *mercy*. God could have killed him on the spot. But the blindness gave him opportunity to reflect, to ponder his true condition, to repent.

Do you remember another time when God used blindness to get someone's attention? This man was also trying to keep people from believing in Jesus. He too was a religious man, a zealot in fact, but he was blinded by his own religion and greed. Who was he? He is the very man who pronounced this judgment on Elymas.

Don't miss the connection. The Lord used blindness to reach Saul of Tarsus. Now Paul calls on the Lord to use darkness again, this time with Elymas.

So gospel ministry involves overcoming power. The gospel minister knows that God must do what God alone can do. And He will, in His perfect time and way. In this case, God silenced a critic. But that's not all He did.

**B. God won a convert (12)**. "When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord." There's quite a contrast here.

1. *Elymas experienced darkness*. On the same day...

2. *Sergius Paulus saw the light*. Why did the proconsul believe? Luke says that the man "saw what had happened." Seeing your friend struck blind right in front of you tends to get your attention.

But this was no mere emotional response. The biblical purpose of miracles is to give attention to the *message*, not to bring attention to the messenger. That's exactly the effect this miracle had on Sergius Paulus. Luke says "he believed for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord." The miracle got his attention, but the teaching changed his life.

Archaeology confirms the biblical record. Sir William Ramsay reports that inscriptions bearing the name of Sergius Paulus have been found on Cyprus confirming that not only was he a Christian but also that his entire family became Christians.<sup>5</sup>

There's an important principle here. God's miracles get our attention, but God's Word changes our lives.

We've seen God do some amazing things recently. Reconcile broken relationships. Restore marriages. Heal bodies of cancer. God uses those kinds of works to get people's attention. But seeing miracles doesn't change anybody. His Word does. Faith comes by hearing the Word of Christ.

We're learning about the ups and downs of gospel ministry today. It's not all smooth sailing. It wasn't for Barnabas and Saul, nor will it be for us. Gospel ministry involves opportunities, opposition, and overcoming-power. We see one more phase in our text.

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<sup>5</sup> Hughes, p. 179.

#### IV. Gospel ministry involves obstacles (13).

Verse 13 states, “From Paphos, Paul and his companions sailed to Perga in Pamphylia, where John left them to return to Jerusalem.” A simple verse, so simple we might miss it. Two obstacles that faced this ministry team. Do you see them?

**A. The team experienced change.** There was a change in geography, for they left Paphos and headed for Perga (in modern day Turkey). There was also a developing change in team dynamics.

Who took the lead in dealing with Elymas? According to verse 9, Paul did. And how did Luke describe the missionary team after it left Paphos? In verse 13 he refers to “Paul and his companions.” Something is happening. The roles of the ministry team are changing. Barnabas’ name isn’t even mentioned in verse 13.

It’s been said that there’s a great need for *leaders* in the church, and that’s true. But there’s another great need. It’s for leaders who know how to *follow*. I’m impressed by Barnabas. He’s the man who after Paul’s conversion stood by him when others were skeptical. He’s also the one who recruited Paul for the ministry. He gave him his first job, so to speak. And then he let him become the boss when he saw it was in the best interest of the advance of the gospel.

Change can be a great obstacle for some. Maybe it is for you. I don’t want things to change. I want things to stay the same. May God grant us the spirit of Barnabas.

Luke mentions a second obstacle in verse 13. Frankly, it may have been more difficult to deal with than Elymas, and certainly had ever bit as much potential for undermining this ministry.

**B. The team experienced disappointment.** Verse 13b (ESV), “John [that’s John Mark] left them and returned to Jerusalem.” You say, “So John left them. That doesn’t seem like an obstacle. Why’s that a problem?”

It’s a problem because there’s more to the story. John Mark didn’t go back to Antioch, but rather, according to Luke, went home to Jerusalem. Why? Luke doesn’t tell us. Scholars have debated several possibilities.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps he didn’t care for the rigors involved in ministering in Asia Minor. Possibly he had been intimidated by the spiritual battle with Elymas in Paphos, and left in fear. Then again, perhaps he resented the way his cousin Barnabas was falling into second place. Could it have been disagreement with the change in missionary focus from Jews to Gentiles? Remember this issue of taking the gospel to Gentiles was a great stumbling block for Jews, and later even Peter fell prey to prejudice in Galatians 2:11. Maybe he was just plain homesick.

Whatever the reason, we know one thing for sure about John Mark’s leaving. According to Acts 15:38 Paul regarded it as *desertion* plain and simple.

Notice Acts 15:36-40, “And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, ‘Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are.’<sup>37</sup> Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark.<sup>38</sup> But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them [NIV ‘deserted’] in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work.<sup>39</sup> And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and

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<sup>6</sup> F. F. Bruce states several possibilities which I have listed.

sailed away to Cyprus, <sup>40</sup> but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord.”

This is four years later (around AD 50), but John Mark’s desertion put such a wedge between Paul and Barnabas that they parted company. Several biblical scholars believe that Paul contracted malaria or some coastal disease in the rugged region of Pamphylia. We do know he picked up something else in Pamphylia, a burden that wouldn’t leave for a long, long time. John Mark defected.

With John Mark gone the team lost a valuable assistant. Paul and Barnabas were now forced to carry their supplies without his help. They faced the 3,500 foot climb up and across the coastal range that led to Perga, then journeyed more than one hundred miles north beyond the mountains to the Roman colony of Pisidian Antioch.

Ministry is full of disappointments. It’s a fact. And one of the greatest heartaches we’ll ever feel is when we see a fellow worker go A.W.O.L.

E.g.—

I think we can learn three valuable insights from what happened to John Mark.

1. *Don’t put an undependable person in a vital role.* Not a “novice,” Paul said in 1 Timothy 3:6. Of potential deacons he also wrote, “They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons (1 Tim 3:10).”

2. *If you’re going to do ministry, be wholehearted.* Better to have two wholehearted workers on a team than two wholehearted and one half-hearted worker. Does the word “wholehearted” describe you? How committed are you to the gospel ministry?

3. *There is hope for those who have failed.* About fourteen years after Mark’s desertion (AD 60) Paul mentioned Mark in his letter to Philemon, referring to him as “my fellow worker (Phile. 24).” And in Paul’s final letter written around AD 67 he gave this instruction to Timothy, “Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry (2 Tim 4:11).”

Thank God that just because you’ve been down doesn’t mean you’re out. God can change you, and restore you through repentance and faith in the power of His Son’s cross-work. Yes, He make you profitable once again for His kingdom. That’s what He did with John Mark.

Oh, the wonder of gospel ministry! There are ups—ministry involves opportunity. There are downs—ministry involves opposition. There are more ups—ministry involves overcoming-power. And there are more downs—ministry involves obstacles. But He remains the same, and His smile makes it so worthwhile.

Let’s talk now about some implications. I see three lessons here.

#### Implications: Three lessons to consider from this account...

1. *The preaching of the Word is effectual.* Effectual means it produces an effect, in fact, a twofold effect. We’ve seen both in our study today.

⇒It will irritate some. Like it did with Bar-Jesus.

⇒It will save others. How good to know that God is preparing the soil in the hearts of people like Sergius Paulus!

God’s Word is effectual. If that’s true we need to make it known! We need to tell our friends and neighbors. We also need to send missionaries to tell the world.



Is gospel ministry easy? No. In fact, if you're thinking about making Jesus and His Word known in this world, which is our mission, know this. There will be a cost.

Kent Hughes says it well, "Never share your faith and you will never look like a fool. Never stand for righteousness on a social issue and you will never be rejected. Never walk out of a theater because a movie or play is offensive and you will never be called a prig. Never practice consistent honesty in business and you will not lose the trade of a not-so-honest associate. Never reach out to the needy and you will never be taken advantage of. Never give your heart and it will never be broken. Never go to Cyprus and you will never be subjected to a dizzy, heart-convulsing confrontation with Satan. Seriously follow Christ and you will experience a gamut of sorrows almost completely unknown to the unbeliever. But of course you will also know the joy of adventure with the Lord of the universe and of spiritual victory as you live a life of allegiance to him."<sup>7</sup>

2. *People who try to hinder God's work are duped by the devil.* God doesn't prevent people from doing wicked things. He even allows them to be a nuisance to His servants at times, as was Bar-Jesus. For a time, that is.

But know this. When people try to hinder God's work, it's because they are under the guise of the Evil One. Paul called Bar-Jesus "a child of the devil." In Ephesians 6:12 Paul explained, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."

That's why we need the armor of God. This is a *spiritual* battle we're in. And that's why we need patience. People who oppose the gospel are not the enemy. They're in the very shape we were once in before God opened our eyes. They're duped by the deception of the devil. So pray for them, and persevere. And never forget this...

3. *No one can stand against God.* God didn't always silence the critics for Paul like He did Bar-Jesus. Sometimes He let the critics beat Paul's body with stones and whips. But He silenced the critics this time just so Paul (and the rest of us) would know that no one can stand against God. There is no greater lesson to sustain you in the ups and downs of gospel ministry. I will build My church.

Closing hymn: *I Gave My Life for Thee* (#453), all four verses

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<sup>7</sup> Kent Hughes, *Acts*, p. 178.