

Brain and Background

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[0 : 00] So here's two things you might be believing about Christianity this morning. And they both begin with the letter B. First one is to do with your brain.

Maybe you're here and you're thinking all the stuff that Christians believe about this man called Jesus who lived in the first century, who died on a cross, who they claim came back to life. How can any rationally thinking person believe that kind of stuff? And the second B is to do with your background. Maybe you're here and you're thinking the only reason that people become Christians is because of their upbringing.

The influence of Christian family or friends, the fact that you were brought up in a culture which is steeped in Christian things and history. And so had you been raised somehow or somewhere else, then you'd equally likely be a Mormon, a Muslim or an atheist.

Now those two beliefs might ring true for some of us here today. Or if, in my case, you maybe think of people in your mind, friends and family who you love, who think like that.

[1 : 13] Well here's what I want us to do with those two beliefs in mind. I want us to be introduced to one man who's at the heart of our passage. And I want to tell you three things about him.

So his name is Sergius Paulus. Do you see that? Verse 4. Here's now into the text. Here's three things we learn about this man. He lives and he works on the island of Cyprus, which is a good gig if you can get it, I'd imagine.

Second thing, verse 7, he's a pro-consul, which means he's the Roman governor who's got a military background, who's on the island of Cyprus to protect and uphold the interests of Rome, which means he's got absolutely no Jewish heritage.

He's not got a scooby about God. And because he's had zero exposure, he's got absolutely no interest in the things of Jesus. This man is completely in the dark.

And number 3, verse 7, Luke just drops it in. He's an intelligent man. I take it you don't get this kind of gig at this kind of senior level if you're not.

[2 : 25] This passage today is going to end with this man deciding to become a follower of Jesus. So you imagine if he's here today, he's standing on the stage and you're putting those two beliefs to him.

You're a Christian simply because of your background. You're a Christian because you've disengaged brain. Sergius Paulus, if he was here today, and it's been a good day yesterday for the Italians, hasn't it?

Here's Sergius Paulus. He'd be having absolutely none of that. Absolutely none of it. And here's what I love about the book of Acts. All the way through, Luke's helped us see how, and you get it at 1224, he's helped us see how the word of God has gone forth.

And thousands have responded to that. It's the message of Jesus has gone forth. He's gone corporate. Okay? But equally, now and again, Luke hits the brakes and he slows the pace of the narrative right down.

And he focuses in, right in on the one. He goes individual. And I take it both matter to the risen Jesus. Both matter to this God at the heart of the Bible.

[3 : 31] The corporate, the thousands, the millions. Vumpf! The one. It's almost as if God, who of course has loved and known about and called Sergius Paulus to himself before the foundation of the world.

It's almost as if right here, he's saying, Sergius Paulus, now's your time, boy. Now's your time for you to hear and respond about the news about my son Jesus.

Right in this moment in history. And like a moth to a flame, Sergius Paulus can't fly anywhere else but towards the light. Okay? Bam. Can't fly anywhere else but towards the light.

And here's what I want us to do. If you're a Christian here today, I want us to stop and to savor exactly what this tells us about our God.

And allow the thirst of your soul to be so wonderfully quenched as God's Holy Spirit brings to mind this truth.

[4 : 32] That however you're feeling here today, however tired you are here today, whether physically, emotionally, mentally, whoever you are here today, if your trust is in this Jesus, this is exactly what God the Father did to you.

He chose you. He knew you. He loved you. He went after you. He sent his son to die for you. His son redeemed you. His son won you at the cross. His son took you to himself as he rose again. And from the Father and the Son goes the Spirit to apply that work to your heart. So the minute you became a Christian, this is what kicked in. And this is who you are. The words of that Stuart Townend song that we sometimes sing here, Loved before the dawn of time, chosen by my maker, hidden in my saviour.

I am his and he is mine, cherished for eternity. This is the kind of God we have. This is what we're going to see, the God who goes after his people to win them.

[5 : 43] And this is just Sirius Paulus having his moment in the sun. Do you know how God does it? He starts by stirring up a church who are up for playing their part in the bigger mission.

Verse 25 of chapter 12. Come with me. Our boys Barnabas and Saul are back on the scene. They've delivered the money that the church in Antioch, if you remember that, that happened a couple of chapters ago, that the money that the church in Antioch wanted to give to their brothers and sisters back in Jerusalem because of the famine and because they knew that they were going to have a really hard time because of that famine.

What did they do? They sent back some money. So Paul and Barnabas are back in Antioch having travelled to Jerusalem and delivered that money. Now, look what Luke tells us about the church here.

It's a diverse church in the text. Do you see? Just look at the five people who are mentioned on the leadership team of this church. I think that's probably just the easiest way to understand the reference to prophets and teachers.

Look at the five guys around the leadership team. And again, just notice the range of them, the international feel of this church in Antioch.

[6 : 57] Right? You've got Barnabas, who is a Levite from Cyprus. This is going to be a big part of the narrative here. Cyprus is where Barnabas is from. And where is the gospel going to go next?

It's going to go to Cyprus. So you can imagine Barnabas at this point amazed at what God would want to be doing in his home turf. Right? You've got Barnabas, you've got Saul, you've got the Pharisee from Tarsus, you've got Simeon and Lucius, who I think to understand are both African. Right? Simeon's called Niger, which just means black. I take it Luke just helping his first readers differentiate this Simeon from another Simeon who must have been in the church in Antioch. And you've got Lucius from what I think is modern day Libya.

And then I find this one fascinating. And if you haven't noticed this before, come and see it. We get this lad called Mannion. I think that's how you would say his name. Mannion. Now notice what Luke drops in the text about who this guy is.

See, a few verses earlier, Herod Agrippa had been struck down by God for trying to be God. Well, Mannion, I think, is most probably that Herod's foster brother.

[8 : 12] Now that's why I call a diverse five. From all sorts of places with all sorts of backgrounds, it's like the beginning of some kind of joke, isn't it? What do a Levite, a Pharisee, two men from Africa, and a member of Herod's family have in common?

Except it isn't a joke, is it? It's a description of this church in Antioch. Answer, Jesus of Nazareth. That's what they've got in common. I don't imagine they have an awful lot else in common. But that thing they have in common, and it's done more than draw them together as mates, is bound them together as brothers in Jesus Christ. It's a wonderful testimony to what Jesus has done.

Now, here's a wee exercise. I'm not going to do it, but if I were to get people here this morning to put up their hands and to shout out the place where they were born, it would be such a powerful example of this precise point.

We're from all over the place, and yet here in this room, what do we have in common? Jesus of Nazareth. Here is a diverse church, and let's never grow tired of celebrating our diversity, because this is what Jesus has done.

[9 : 28] God the Father has drawn us together in Jesus' Son. The principalities, the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places are supposed to look on at this and say, how on earth has this God done this?

How has he done what no other culture in the world can do? He's brought us together as family. This is a diverse church.

It's a beautiful church. And it's the expectant church. Do you see that? Let's just move on. What are they doing? Verse 2. They are worshipping and fasting. Fasting is something that Christians often do, meaning they just stop eating for a while to devote themselves to prayer.

I've done it a number of times in my life. I just found it a really powerful thing to do. And I take it this is the fruit, this worshipping and fasting. This is the fruit of what Barnabas and Saul have decided to devote themselves to back at verse 26 of chapter 12.

Just have a wee look. Verse 26 of chapter 12. What did they give themselves to in this church? They gave themselves to teaching.

[10 : 41] Unleashing God's word in the lives of his people. Seeing God through his Holy Spirit. Transform his people's lives.

Make them more like Christ. How does he do it? He does it through his words as his spirit takes it and moulds us more into the likeness of Jesus.

And here's a simple point. Theology should always lead to doxology. Always, right? Truth about God should always lead to worship.

In the words of Jen Wilkin, who's in her brilliant little book, *Woman of the Word*, subtext, how to study the Bible with both our hearts and our minds. She just simply says this, and I love this. The heart cannot love what the mind does not know. These people aren't going through the religious motions. Here is an expectant church.

[11 : 40] And this is a sending church. For it's while they are worshipping and fasting. Do you see in the text that the Holy Spirit speaks and says, Set aside Paul and Barnabas for the wider work to which I've called them.

Now I take it however the Holy Spirit said that, and we don't know exactly how it happened. Whatever he said, it made complete sense to the church.

In other words, the church here weren't passive. The Spirit spoke. And the church acted. Because you notice how Luke makes it crystal clear that it's the church who laid their hands on Paul and Barnabas and sent them off to Cyprus.

And I take it that's just laying on of hands. I take it that just means, do you know what? We're in this with you too. We're sending you out. Now moving to the other question, how does God the Holy Spirit speak today?

Absolutely. How? Through God's living word. We have to understand in this unique time, we have now what they did not have then.

[12 : 46] We have the completed Bible. The person of the Spirit speaks as we listen to God's voice here. And as he stirs us up in response, as he moves us to action, and I take it as we step out in obedience and as we pray and discern with one another, is this the Lord's will?

I'll give you an example of it. My friend Andy Prime, years ago, he was mulling on the words of Romans 10. Couldn't get over them. Read this in your own time.

Paul's prayer there for taking the gospel to new places. He says, how can they hear without someone preaching to them? It's Romans 10. You can read it. And he goes home to his wife, Sarah, and he says, Sarah, listen, I've been reading this and I can't get it out of my mind.

And Sarah says, listen, why don't you go and walk around the streets of Grace Mount and take what you've been listening to and just see what God does? And so he goes and he starts looking at all the houses, all the people, and thinking about all the brokenness, thinking about all the pain, thinking about all the people who are heading for a lost eternity, facing God's judgment because they just have not responded to the message of Jesus because they've rejected him.

And through the words, God, the Holy Spirit just broke his heart. And in that moment, he traces it back to the very start of what is now Grace Mount Community Church, where the guy who was here last week is a member of.

[14:17] And so Andy starts bringing others in. Is this right? Do you think this is right? How might we do it? The Spirit speaks through the Word.

We want to hear God's voice. We want to hear about the Spirit. We get ourselves into the text. What is God saying? And so the church, do you see how they send off Paul and Barnabas? Now, don't miss who these two dudes are.

This is Paul and this is Barnabas. This is two of their most experienced leaders. These are the two teachers. This is Barney. Do you remember his nickname?

That is his nickname. His name is Joseph. This is Barney. This is the encourager. This is the guy who you want to hang out with. Who just makes you feel great. Who tells you to keep on going with the Lord.

Can we not just keep him? Can we not just keep him? And this is Paul. This is the man who's a trained Pharisee. This is a man who knows his, for want of a better word, who knows his Bible.

[15:19] Can we not just keep him? The guy who's going to the Gentiles. Imagine how well things would go if we kept these two. But this church is sending church. I mean, this is the ultimate tag team match.

Is it not Paul and Barnabas? But this church are up for giving away. Do you notice a few weeks ago what they are up for giving away? Money. And this week, what are they up for giving away? People. Why? Because they've bought into the bigger mission. Now two things I've been challenged by, and I'll chuck these out and see if they hit.

Two things I've been challenged by is would expectant be the word that captures our mood currently as a congregation? Are we praying big things?

Are we giving God the glory when things happen? You know, I think it was wonderful. We made a call as a staff team a few weeks ago to give God the praise that Burrow Me Your SU group has opened up again, that opportunity.

[16:23] It's closed for so, so long. Just didn't know. No way in. What's going to happen? God, just open the door. Just give him the praise. Do we pray big things? Do we pray, God, would you do the things that we cannot do?

Do we say, I think this is how I was challenged. Do we say, Lord, lead us? How often we make our plans and then we lay them at the Lord's feet as if to say, Lord, could you just bless them? Right? Like some kind of divine expenses sheet. I just need you to kind of sign off at the bottom here and just bless what we're trying to do. It's the challenge here, isn't it, to do it the other way around. Lord, would you lead us out of a worship, a heart that wants to worship, a heart that overflows with love for him.

Lord, would you lead us? So expectancy, it's the second thing, and this is the confession of a city center pastor who's coming up for a decade here. Do you know what?

For years I used to loathe, I used to loathe the turnover of people in this place. Right? People would come for a season and you'd get to know them, you'd invest in them, you'd have high hopes for them, you'd have their future planned out.

[17:32] But a few years later, what they'd be off, job, uni, moving, house, getting involved in another church. I used to find it so, so difficult operating like some kind of golem with a dog calling, my precious, you know.

I just convicted, what an idiot. What an idiot. And the Lord used this church in Antioch to challenge my thinking.

Because these folks weren't interested in building brand Antioch. And nor should we be interested in building brand Brunsfield. Like we're kind of pitching on a version of Spiritual Dragon's Den or something.

You know, this is not about us and what we can attract people to. This is about a kingdom mindset that says, train, love, invest. What's the word? Send.

Train, love, invest. Send. And I think we should be greatly encouraged, if you've been in the church for a while, the amount of people who have gone on and done wonderful things.

[18:36] Not just mission parts of the world, not just things in Edinburgh, but just being a good church member of another church. Just being an employee who is glorifying Jesus through what they do. And you guys have played a part in that.

Train, love, invest. Send. And of course, don't miss this. Who are we reflecting in that? We're reflecting our Heavenly Father.

Who out of an overflow of His love, sent His Son to save us. To ransom us. To rescue us. To die for us on the cross. To save us. And as almost the Father sends the Son and says, the purpose of this, ultimately, is that I want you to delight in the Son, like I delight in my Son. And I want an overflow of that love for Him. To transform you and cause you to go with the message of Him. And in turn, do you see how that conquering King of love at the end of Matthew's Gospel, He has all authority and He's the one who's with us always.

[19 : 52] He calls us to go. As He's sending, is right at the heart of who our triune God is. Here is a church up for playing its part in the bigger mission.

And from there we meet a man who's up for investigating the biggest news. Because where do Paul and Barnabas go? Do you see it? Verse 4.

Where do they go? In obedience. They go to Cyprus. And after they've preached at the synagogue in Cyprus, they head to Paphos.

Which you can kind of see it on the map there. It's at the other end of the island. And in typical Acts fashion, there's opposition and there's hunger. And those two things will always be there, I take it, as the Gospel goes forth.

Opposition and hunger. And the opposition comes from this man called Bar Jesus. Do you see him in the text? Do you see him? Bar Jesus. And there's great irony in that name.

[20 : 58] Because Bar means son of, and Jesus means Jesus, right? Son of Jesus. And he's anything but. And I think that's why Luke tells you his local name, Elemas.

To try to bring out the irony here. He's a Jewish sorcerer. Do you see in the text? He's a false prophet. And he's an attendant to Sergius Paulus. And I've been wrestling with this guy this week. He's kind of like a spiritual advisor to Sergius Paulus. He's kind of like Jafar in Aladdin. He's kind of that kind of deal. Okay? And he meets Paul and Barnabas. And he hates their message. He hates it with a passion. And what's happened? And I love this. Get this. What's happened is that Bar Jesus has opposed the message.

He's gone back to work. And he's told Sergius Paulus about the deluded men peddling a ridiculous message who he's just met in the marketplace.

[22 : 02] And instead of joining in the laugh, Sergius Paulus is intrigued. I love it. So in control is this God.

So sovereign is he. So determined is he to get to Sergius Paulus that he's used the Jesus hater as the matchmaker. Right?

Sergius Paulus meets Paul and Barnabas. As I was just encouraging this morning that the opposition was the very thing that God used to open the door for opportunity.

Now never underestimate what God can do and might be doing through your whispers of witness. Right? In every season of your life.

In the high points when things are good, witnessing to Jesus. In the low points when life is just really hard. And we're slogging it out trying to be faithful to Jesus.

[23 : 12] In every season of life. As mundane and as boring and as insignificant as you think your witness is. You have no idea. We have no idea whose ears around the office might be picking it up.

We have no idea whose eyes on the school run might be drawn to you. Love it. There's this woman in our prayer group for our primary school.

She's just called Anna. She's just known in the community as the woman who smiles. The amount of conversations that have come from Anna. Anna, why do you smile? Why are you happy?

Because you know Jesus.

No idea the whispers of your witness. You've no idea whose heart in your student halls God might be working in to respond to who he is through the whispers of your witness.

And that's encouraging. You see verse 7. Sergius Paulus who I'd imagine having had the most twisted version of the gospel as Bar Jesus lays it back to him.

[24 : 18] Sergius Paulus what does he want to do? He wants to hear the word of God. I want to hear it. See what God's doing? He's just working in his heart. Just stirring up his heart.

Maybe that's you here today. Maybe you're here and you just want to hear it. Best place to do it read the accounts of Jesus for yourself. You can pick some up I think on the desk at the back.

Just read the accounts of Jesus. Read it to someone else. Listen I'm game if you are. Right? I love doing it. Who is this man Jesus? Bar Jesus tries to stop it.

Do you notice? And God strikes Bar Jesus for his deceit and trickery. He's unable to see. Okay verse 11. Paul makes it clear why this is happening.

Will you never verse 10 sorry. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord? The Lord is against you. What happens? Mist and darkness comes over him and he starts groping about. Now who does that remind you of? Reminds you of Paul doesn't it?

[25 : 17] A few chapters earlier. This is exactly what happened to him which I think might suggest we don't know what happened to this man afterwards but it might suggest that there's a loving opportunity for Bar Jesus to change his ways and turn to the Lord.

To do everything that his name suggests he should be doing. And similar to what we saw last week you see here God just removes the barrier. He just removes the barrier because nothing is going to stop this good and gracious and loving God getting to Sergius Paulus.

And notice what sealed the deal verse 12 Sergius Paulus is not so much amazed by the scene.

What's he gripped by? He's gripped by the teaching about the Lord.

And so verse 24 of chapter 12 the word of God continued to spread and flourish. Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, the ends of the earth and here it is on this little island of Cyprus.

And just as we close I want you to take one take you to a conversation that happened on the 746 train from Edinburgh to Glasgow at the train of end of last week. I think I said that right.

[26 : 38] My friend John gets on and being a smart man he gets a table seat and he sits down and he starts reading his Bible and the woman opposite him after a little while notices that he's reading Psalm 132.

And she asks him son what are you reading? So John talks to her about the psalm that he's on and she says you know what I've never really had any time for any of that. but another voice pipes up and this time it's not from the table sheet here it's not from the table sheet there as I understand it from John it was from the one around the back and she's been doing what everyone does on trains they've been listening in to the conversation and another voice pipes up and she's been listening in and she's provoked by this lady's refusal and she says you know what I've never read the Bible before I've always fancied it but the problem is I just wouldn't know where to start wouldn't know what to do so John hands her a book and his number and he says let's get together and read it together and that was ten days or so ago right so that's hot off the press I've got no idea how it ended up but I think it makes the exact point the same as what Luke is telling us in this passage with Sergius Paulus to be a Christian is to disengage your brain to be a Christian you're a Christian because of your

Christian background I take it this lady on the train I take it that Sergius Paulus would say no no the gospel Luke is saying is simple enough for anyone to understand the gospel is deep enough and glorious enough for everyone to be swimming in for the rest of their lives and realise you've not even scratched the surface and the gospel is available for anyone to respond to and place their faith in this Jesus and this God is the message about the crucified risen and crucified and risen Jesus goes forth to see how this God nothing will stop him get in the way of his determination to win his people for himself and that's the glory of this chapter I think that this is who this God is mortalUD inferred and qui neither the Sin or the he who is is his