

The Picture

Upside Down

By Dr. Jeff Meyers

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Crossroads Ministries
301 S. 8th Street
Opelika, Alabama 36801

Website: www.fbcopelika.com
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/jeffmeyers

This morning, I want to encourage you to open your Bibles to the book of Acts 13. Now as you're turning to Acts 13, hopefully it is somewhat familiar to you, at least the contents therewith for two reasons, the first of which would be this, that Acts 13 contains the first of the three missionary journeys of the Apostle Paul and so when we look at the ministry of the Apostle Paul, typically chapter 13 is one of those proverbial markers in the ground, so to speak. This was that first journey where he and Barnabas went out to share the gospel to the uttermost parts of the earth. Today, we're going to be beginning in verse 44 and we're going to be back in Antioch, but the second reason that hopefully this passage is familiar, for those of you that are note-takers, for those of you that makes note maybe in the margin of your Bible or maybe even you're a journaler, you may see Acts 13 as a familiar spot because several years ago as we walked through that Bible reading plan for about three years one chapter, maybe sometimes two chapters a day, on a Sunday morning when we gathered together, we came to this passage, we came to this story, but today as we look at this story in Antioch in Acts 13, it's not just a chronology of the events, it's not just a biography of the persons that were involved, today we find ourselves just a few chapters away from that statement in chapter 17, verse 6, these early believers who were out-resourced, oftentimes didn't have the numbers, didn't have the buildings, didn't have the means, it says in chapter 17, verse 6, "These are they that have turned the world upside down." When we come to chapter 13, verse 44, we're going to discover that there's a significant number of people who do not want the world turned upside down by the gospel of Jesus Christ, and today I want us to see a picture, I want us to see a picture not just of the events of the past but the events of today and potentially even a picture of the events that are forthcoming because one of the things that we've learned from history is that it always repeats itself.

So today in chapter 13, beginning in verse 44, let me set the stage. The gospel has gone forth here in Antioch. They've been in the synagogue like Paul typically does when he would go into a new community, preaching there on the Sabbath day. Not only the Jews were believing but the Gentiles came to him and said, "We want to hear this." So when you get to verse 44, there's a statement here that almost the whole city was there and that's exactly what is happening here; almost all of Antioch has emptied out into this one place to hear what is to be said. Verse 44,

44 And the next sabbath day came almost the whole city together to hear the word of God. 45 But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy, and spake against those things which were spoken by Paul, contradicting and blaspheming. 46 Then Paul and Barnabas waxed bold, and said, It was necessary that the word of God should first have been spoken to you: but seeing ye put it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, lo, we turn to the Gentiles. 47 For so hath the Lord commanded us, saying, I have set thee to be a light of the Gentiles, that thou shouldest be for salvation unto the ends of the earth. 48 And when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad, and glorified the word of the Lord: and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed. 49 And the word of the Lord was published throughout all the region. 50 But the Jews stirred up the devout and honourable women, and the chief men of the city, and raised persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them out of their coasts. 51 But they shook off the dust of their feet against them, and came unto Iconium. 52 And the disciples were filled with joy, and with the Holy Ghost.

Now at first glance, it just appears as a record of a historical account. The Sabbath day comes, preaching takes place, people get a little upset, the disciples go into a different place, thus Iconium. But I want to peel away the layers here and I'm going to ask some pretty simple questions but I think these basic questions will help us not only see what took place then but really be able to see the picture of what is happening even in our world today.

Let's begin with the "who." I love verse 44 because any pastor in their right mind wishes they could say this Sunday evening when they put their head on the pillow, almost the whole city was there. Now why is that statement important? Because it wasn't just the "Jews," it wasn't "just the Gentiles," this event was more than a church service, this event was more than a gathering, this event wasn't a convention, this was the entire culture, this was the entire community, this was almost everybody who knew somebody within walking distance found themselves at this place in chapter 13. Now the reason that's critical for us is when we look at this passage not just as an event of 2,000 years ago but a picture of our world today, I want us to see this event as a picture of our entire community, our entire culture, society at large. So thus this isn't just a corner or a segment of our culture, this is picturesque of the entirety of our society.

Now the "where" question. Where it took place is important to understand the gravity of the story. Notice it says that the next Sabbath day. Now if you read the entirety of chapter 13, you'll discover, as we see all throughout scripture, is that on the Sabbath day when the apostles, when Paul, when they spoke, they didn't go to the town square, they didn't go at the crossroads of Main and First, whatever it may be. What did they do? They always initiated, they always began at the synagogue. Can we just kind of parallel that today to the "church"? They begin at a place of worship. You say why is this so critical to the story? Who's upset in the story? Who is envying, who is blaspheming? Non-believers. There are those that are not just non-believers but they're antagonistic to the gospel and

they've decided not to wait for them when they get out of church but to actually infiltrate and to disrupt that which is taking place.

Let me remind you of one of the most famous stories in all of your Bible, in fact, all of human history. It's found in 1 Samuel 17, it's the story of David and Goliath. Oh, it's a great story of the underdog gaining victory. We use it in stories about sports and business and whatever it may be, and I think there's just something within us that just loves when the underdog prevails over the overwhelming favorite. We know the story. Young man, youngest of all his brothers comes forth to the battle, questions why will nobody fight, don't Saul's armor, it won't fit, he gets a slingshot, five stones, battle's over, victory's won. You know, there's a very critical verse in that story that, to be honest, even the most, shall we say, I guess attention to detail reading often overlooks, the very first verse. You know those verses in the Bible that just talk about So-and-so was at a certain place at a certain time and you're like, "Can we just get to the good story? I want to see his head cut off. I mean, come on, let's get to the good stuff." Do you know what it says there in verse 1? It says the Philistines crossed over the border into Israel. Now let me share with you the criticalness of that. The Israelites didn't pick the fight with the Philistines. The fight was brought to them. Paul and Barnabas didn't pick a fight with the Jews in this story. And can I draw a parallel? Today there is a battle for the soul of humanity in our culture and we, the people who believe in Jesus Christ, we didn't pick this fight. The fight has come to us. They have said, "You must change what you believe. You must change how you live. You must change how you speak." We, believers in Jesus Christ, we didn't go out there and pick a fight, the fight has been brought, it has infiltrated our circles of faith, our churches, our communities of faith, just like it did in this story.

So what happens? Well, it's interesting here in verse 45 it says, "when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy." You think about that word "envy." It means to desire something that somebody possesses so much that you'll do whatever it costs to have it for yourself. That's why that famous literary line "the green eyes of envy" is so relevant. What was it these believers possessed? They didn't have buildings. Remember this is Antioch. They didn't even have a piece of property. They didn't have a church building. I guarantee you they didn't have a bank account, so to speak. There's no assets. There's no property. What did they possess that they had to have so bad that they came in and disturbed the whole thing? Well, there's two things they possessed: they had influence and they had impact. They may not have had buildings but just a few chapters later they are turning the world upside down.

You know, this isn't a picture of just 2,000 years ago, it's actually a picture of our contemporary culture as well. In fact, just for the sake of time, I just want to do a brief survey of some of the things that we've seen the world at large infiltrate the faith of Jesus Christ, the body of Christ, and not only desire it but take it over.

Let's begin with institutions. You know, there are a lot of universities and colleges in our land that were started for the purpose of training pastors and missionaries to be promoters and speakers of the gospel, and yet today many of those institutions are the most contrary to the gospel that we discover in our world today. I've got one that's probably familiar to

each and every one of us. We know it by its acronym, the YMCA. Originally in 1844 was the Young Men's Christian Association. D. L. Moody was famous for preaching within and ministering through what we know as the YMCA. And yes, there may be one here or there but when's the last time you've seen a promotion for YMCA Bible studies? You don't, do you?

How about our language? You know, it's interesting we live in a world today where we're increasingly being told because of envy that if we quote the book, the chapter and the verse of the Bible it's hate language. It hurts somebody's feelings. It makes them feel alienated, whatever it may be, all because the language. They want to take our language from us even though it is the words of the Lord.

And last but not least, how about some symbols? You know, there are some pretty key symbols in the Bible, one of which in the very first part of your Bible talks about God promising that he will provide, promising that he will protect, promising that one day he will judge the world but not in the same way he did back then. That has been completely hijacked by our culture today.

You see, when envy sets in, you take that which was rightfully somebody else's and you try to make it your own. When it says they envied them, they wanted their impact, they wanted their influence, we're seeing the exact same thing today. So here's a critical question: how did it happen? How did it play out? How is it happening today? Look in verse 45 again, I want you to see two things that take place there. It says, "they were filled with envy, they spoke those things against which were spoken by Paul, contradicting and blaspheming." Now there are two words I want to just simmer on for just a moment. What does it mean they were contradicting them? What it means there is they were not just pushing back but this is important to understand our modern world today, they were establishing that there were two sets of rules, the rules for those that were antagonistic and the rules for those who had met to worship.

We see this all throughout not only the Bible but our world today. Think about these individuals, can you imagine what it would have looked like, just work with me, if Paul and Barnabas had showed up to their synagogue and done what you saw here. They'd say, "Oh, no, no, no, you can't do that here." You see, one of the things that we discover in a "world of contradiction," that the rules for you do not necessarily mean the rules for me. In fact, you've heard of the Golden Rule, right? He who has the gold makes up the rules. And yet today we have a very contradictory world. On college campuses near and far, organizations built on the faith of Jesus Christ and the Bible are being told when they can or if they can even meet, who must be a part of their leadership, what must go forth from them, but other groups can do whatever they want. In fact, we encourage them to do so in the name of all types of academic words. Why? Because there's two sets of rules. We have rules for those who believe in the Bible and we have rules for everybody else.

Now allow me just to apply this to a very oftentimes controversial but very important issue in the Bible. You know, within our culture there is this and has been a just raging debate regarding life versus choice, and oftentimes more than not, you see those that are

Bible-believers, what we might call Christians hopefully and thankfully on the side of life and there's all kinds of tension. And maybe it's just me, maybe I'm the only one who's noticed this but I think there's probably some like-minded folks here. One of the statements, one of the bumper stickers, one of the slogans that we always here is, "Well, it's my body, it's my choice." But you know, it's interesting on other issues if somebody says it's my body, it's my choice, "Oh, no, no, no, no. You see, we'll tell you what you must do." Do you see how that plays out? We've got a world today that says if it fits our agenda, then it's what I want. If it doesn't fit my agenda, it must be eradicated. It's a contradictory life.

Then it says they blasphemed. Now in a true spiritual sense, blasphemy is speaking ill or evil of God. Well, are not believers today being spoken ill of or evil of? Again, it doesn't matter what the issue, it doesn't matter what the struggle, it doesn't matter what the debate, it just seems that more often than not at the end of the day those Bible-thumping Jesus people, if they would just shut up, sit in the corner and get away, everything would just be all so much better. It's gotten personal, hasn't it? It's not just that you hold a different view. It's not just that maybe you see it as A, they see it as B. All of a sudden if your opinion is different, you are evil, you are contrary to, you are to blame. Can I remind you 80 years ago that's what they did to the Jewish people. That's what happened. Learn history. They blamed them for the economy. They blamed them for the healthcare. They blamed them for everything. And today who are they blaming? More often than not you're in a room full of them today.

Now those are just the first two, we've got to skip to verse 50 to get the other two. You go over to verse 50, they not only did what we spoke of but in verse 50 look what it says, but they stirred up, they stirred up the people. In other words, they got people of high profile, of influence, to speak contrary to, to come out and, shall we say, rally the troops. In the political world we would call this a majority whip or a minority whip. Within the House of Representatives, their job is to get everybody in the party in line, right? That's what's happening in the culture. This person has influence, that person has influence, let's get them to get everybody riled up and then maybe just maybe we won't have to hear from these believers anymore. Notice what happens after they rile them up. It says they got the honorable women, the chief of the city, and they raised persecution against Paul and Barnabas. You see, no more at this point is it just words, they're actually using their connections to bring physical harm to those that would claim the name of Jesus Christ.

Now there's an important division here. Notice the first two, they come against them, they speak ill of them, but in the second half they actually do something about it. Here's an important question: when does it go from the first part to the second part? I mean, can we all just agree we live in a world today as a believer in Jesus Christ, there is a lot of rhetoric contrary to the faith, there is a lot of rhetoric contrary to gathering and expressing and worshiping around our Savior Jesus Christ. There's a lot of rhetoric out there but when you go to verse 50, I don't quite yet, I mean it happens all over the world, I get it, I'm talking about our context, our culture, we're not yet experiencing true physical ramifications for our faith. So when's it going to happen? Oh, I could wish I could give you a time and a date but I can't, but if you will go back to verse 46, I can show you when

it will happen. Now I want you to think about the scene here. They've set two sets of rules, they've spoken ill of them, they've threatened them basically saying if you don't conform to us, then there will be consequences. Well, they did bring upon the persecution but notice when it happens. Verse 46, "Then Paul and Barnabas waxed bold, and said, It was necessary that the word of God should first have been spoken to you." Can I tell you when verse 50 will happen is when we as believers in Jesus Christ say, "Thus saith the Lord. I cannot and I will not change." Yet they want us to. They want conformity. They want their agenda. It got real when they said, "We will not cave to that which we believe."

Now lest you think this is the only time in history since Acts 13 that we, the believers, have been called upon, can I take you back about 500 years. 500 years ago there was a world system that was corrupt at best, and it wasn't just a world system, it was this myriad of religion and politics, it was just a mess, agenda upon agenda, power-brokers everywhere. Ah, but there was a small little monk by the name of Martin Luther who saw what was going on and said, "You know, this doesn't line up with thus saith the Lord." In fact, if you want the specific references, it was Romans 1:16-17, the just shall live by faith, is what really motivated him to write those 95 theses, to stand up against the councils and do everything that he did. The day came where they gathered all the power-brokers around, they gathered all the people of influence. There weren't a whole lot in his "court" that day and they began to put the pressure on and here's what they wanted him to do, recant what you believe and burn the books that you wrote. You know the famous story, you know the famous line, "I cannot and I will not."

Ladies and gentlemen, the picture is that that's where we are today. The language has accelerated, the volume is up to 11 if the dial went up that high, and the question is will we wax bold? Will we? Now notice they didn't go out in the streets and fight, they just said, "We will not alter what we believe. We will not change whom we believe in, Jesus Christ. We're not going to alter that. It's not going to change us. We will wax bold." Why is this so important? Go back to verse 50 again. I want you to see the goal. Now some of you may be thinking, "Jeff, you're over-reaching here." No, it's just what the Bible says. It says they stirred up the devout and honorable women, the chief men of the city, they raised persecution against Paul and Barnabas. They expelled them out of their coast. They got rid of them. They said, "Off with you! Be gone!" I want you to understand that is the goal of those who oppose biblical Christianity. It has been the goal. In fact, in the first 300 years that we, the people of faith, existed there were 10 formalized state-sponsored and endorsed waves of physical persecution. They have not changed their means. They have not changed their ways. That is their goal. That is their desire.

Why is this so critical? Because the lost dark world doesn't just want to silence, it wants to eradicate. But here's the last part of the "why." Why is it important that we recognize this? Why is it important that we study this? Why is it important that we see the story of Acts 13 and we parallel it to ourselves? Because you're four chapters away from turning the world upside down. And can I just go there for a moment? What would their world have looked like, what would our world look like if they hadn't turned the world upside down? What would it look like if they had not stood strong? If they had not made the

difference? If they had not said, "You may take my life but you're not going to take my soul"? What would it look like?

Well, you know, Gamaliel earlier in Acts 5 may have been right. Remember what he said about these early believers to these same Jews? He said, "Guys, if this is of God, you can't stop it. If it's of man, it'll just fade away." So the important question as you look throughout time and there's always been moments where the believers had to wax bold and say, "Thus saith the Lord." I feel pretty confident we've already seen a very contradictory culture, we've seen a very blasphemous culture, the question is will we walk in the footsteps of our spiritual forefathers and will we say, "I refuse to alter what I believe. I refuse to quit worshiping. I refuse to keep believing." Because do you know what? The Lord might just turn the world upside down again and I would hate to stop four chapters short.