

Paul's Acts 13 Sermon

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As most of you probably know, I've spent this Bible-class quarter teaching the middle-school class downstairs. I have to say—the class is among the most enjoyable I've ever taught. All three of the regulars down there are bright, attentive, and sincerely committed to figuring out what's going on as we're working our way through the book of Acts. Their parents and their families are certainly to be commended for that.

However, I've found myself enjoying the class not only because of the caliber of student, but because of the material. In many cases, this is their first exposure to extended portions of the text, because only now are they developmentally ready to tackle, for instance, the entirety of the first gospel sermon in Acts 2. Because I'm along for this voyage of discovery, I'm almost re-discovering it along with them.

This has also reminded me of some of the parts of Acts to which we need to pay more attention. We're pretty familiar with the first gospel sermon, but we don't give the same consideration to, for instance, Paul's sermon in Antioch of Pisidia. Let's remedy that this morning. Let's look at Paul's Acts 13 sermon.

Jesus in History

When we examine the entirety of this sermon, it divides logically into two main parts, the first of which is concerned with setting the stage for Jesus by presenting Him in His historical context. Our study of this context, though, must begin with looking at what Luke has to say about **THE SETTING** of the sermon. Read with me from Acts 13:13-15. This is all part of Paul's first missionary journey. He began in Cyprus, landed on the south shore of modern-day Turkey, and now has cut inward through the mountains along Turkey's southern coast into the interior.

Here, he finds the city of Antioch of Pisidia, and in the city, he finds a community of Jews large enough to build their own synagogue. The attendees in the synagogue on this Sabbath are a mixed group. Some of them are ethnic Jews. Others are what Luke calls "God-fearers". These are Gentiles who believe in the God of Israel, accept many of the moral precepts of Judaism, but do not want to become full-fledged proselytes by adopting the more burdensome Jewish customs like circumcision and dietary restrictions.

In any case, Paul appears at the synagogue, and the synagogue officials invite him to speak. To us, this might seem a bizarre decision, but remember: all of this is extremely early in the history of the church. In our dating system, all of this is taking place in 47 or 48 AD, only about 15 years after the crucifixion of Jesus. Christianity is still very much regarded as a sect of Judaism, and Antioch of Pisidia is a backwater. This is almost certainly the first time that any Christian has come to the city. These men invite Paul to speak, then, because they have absolutely no idea what they are getting themselves into.

Paul's first words to the synagogue attendees concern **GOD'S WORK** for His people. His words appear in Acts 13:16-19. One of the things I try to point out to the students downstairs is the way that Paul's audience affects the content of his sermons, and that's clearly obvious here. In this synagogue, Paul has an audience that, even though it isn't entirely Jewish, is familiar with the Jewish Scriptures. They already know and agree with everything that Paul says to them in this section. Paul's not trying to break any new ground here, then. He's working to establish common ground with his audience so they'll accept what he says later.

In addition, Paul is preparing the ground thematically for his unveiling of Jesus. He's explaining God in a very particular way. God isn't some detached, aloof God. Instead, the history of Israel is the story of God's dealings with His people. God rescues from bondage. God is patient with sin. God defeats enemies. God provides the land. Everything that Paul mentions foreshadows in some way the work of Christ.

Even today, 2000 years after Paul and 3500 years after the Exodus, our story is still the story of God's work with us and in us. God didn't close up shop and go on vacation after the writing of the New Testament. Instead, He is active in each of our lives, working still to rescue, provide, and save.

Next, Paul presents a series of Israelite **LEADERS**. We read about this succession in Acts 13:20-23. The order is this: The judges up until Samuel, who were ultimately rejected by the people. Then came Saul, the failed king, who is rejected and removed by God. Finally, Paul comes to David, the greatest king the Israelites ever have. He pleases God, and God makes him a promise.

Here is where we first meet the figure Paul has been aiming at all along: Jesus. Paul introduces Jesus in three main ways: He is the descendant of David, He is the fulfillment of the promise to David, and He is a Savior. Paul is still telling the story of the history of the Jews, but now he has located Jesus in that story.

There's one word in this description that strikes us very differently than it would have Paul's audience in AD 48. That is the word "Savior". Today, we almost exclusively associate it with Jesus and with the spiritual salvation that He brings. However, 2000 years ago, that would not have been the case. Instead, it was associated with earthly kings. For instance, the city of Antioch itself was named after the Selucid king Antiochus I, who was given the title "Soter", which is the Greek word for "savior", after he defeated an invading army. If, as Paul says, God has brought to Israel a Savior who is a descendant of David, he is inviting his audience to understand Jesus as a King who will defeat the enemies of the nation of Israel.

The last historical figure with a connection to Jesus is **JOHN THE BAPTIST**. Paul presents him briefly in Acts 13:24-25. In many ways, John the Baptist is the New Testament figure whom we understand the least. To us, he's an interesting historical footnote. To Jews 2000 years ago, he was a big deal. Apollos was a disciple of John the Baptist. Paul finds a group of disciples of John the Baptist in Ephesus when first he comes to the city. Even if these Jews in Antioch aren't actual disciples of John, they still revere him as a prophet. If John only came to prepare the way for Jesus, then Jesus must be extremely important!

Today, two millennia later, we simply don't have the same perspective on these events that the original hearers of the gospel did. Just about everybody has heard of Jesus, but few people are able to understand Him in the flow of history as Paul invites his audience to do. However, it is critically important for us to understand Him in that way. Jesus didn't pop up from nowhere and get crucified. Instead, He was the culmination of thousands of years of God working patiently with His people. God redeemed His people from captivity in Egypt, but then He sent Jesus as the greatest Redeemer. He sent David as a great king, but then He sent Jesus as a greater one. He sent John the Baptist as a great prophet, but John's role was nothing more than to prepare the way for Jesus. All of God's work only prefigured the coming of His Son.

The Work of Jesus

After explaining where Jesus fits in the story of Israel, Paul explains His work. However, all of this starts with a gigantic left turn—the story of **JESUS' DEATH**. Paul tells it in Acts 13:26-29. All this is in answer of a question that we would never think to ask, but that certainly occurred to Paul's first-century audience. The question is, "What happened?" Why, if Jesus has been sent by God as the successor to King David, is Paul telling the story in Middle-of-Nowhere, Galatia? Why hasn't there been a big war in which King Jesus overthrew the Romans? Why isn't there an earthly kingdom of Israel again?

Paul's answer to this unspoken question has two parts. The first part is that all the Jews back in the Jewish homeland, and especially their leaders, utterly blew it. Jesus was sent to them by God, but instead of recognizing and honoring Him, they rejected Him and plotted with the Roman oppressors to kill Him.

Second, though, and more intriguingly, this rejection of Jesus by His people was what was supposed to happen all along. Paul has already talked about the history of the Israelite nation as it leads up to Jesus. Now, he's talking about the prophecies of the Old Testament as they lead up to Jesus.

Paul's audience was well versed in Scripture. They would have known that the Psalms and the books of the prophets were filled with strange predictions about some man who would be betrayed and murdered by his enemies. In fact, it may well have been that Paul's sermon was immediately preceded by a public reading of one of those prophecies. However, they didn't know who those prophecies were about.

Paul here reveals something that none of the Jews appear to have guessed. The coming King who would be descended from David and the suffering Servant of Isaiah are one in the same person, and both of them are Jesus. The failure of the Jewish leaders, then, was really a double failure. They didn't recognize Jesus as King, and they didn't recognize Him as suffering Servant either, even as they were doing things to Him that the prophecies about Him had predicted. Even their murder of Him was according to God's plan.

God's plan, however, didn't stop there. Paul continues on to proclaim **THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS**. Consider with me Acts 13:30-37. This too is something that I think we often fail to appreciate. We take the resurrection of the Christ for granted, but to first-century Jews, it would have been both extremely hard to believe and extremely telling if true. Here, Paul relies on two different proofs. The first is the proof of the eyewitness of hundreds of Jesus' first followers, who proclaim His resurrection everywhere.

The second proof is the witness of prophecy. The prophets didn't merely predict the suffering and death of Jesus. They also predicted that He would actually be the Son of God and that He would receive the blessings promised to David. Then, Paul turns to David's own words, in which David prophesied that God would not allow His Holy One to undergo decay. From here, Paul uses Peter's familiar argument in Acts 2: This can't be about David because David's dead, so it must be about Jesus.

Here, as is pretty constantly true throughout the book of Acts, the resurrection of Jesus is the lynchpin of Paul's argument. In fact, I think that differing treatments of the resurrection is one of the primary differences between the way that first-century Christians thought and the way twenty-first-century Christians think. We may well emphasize the cross even more than they did, but we don't put nearly the same stress on the empty tomb. To them, Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection were three stages of the same event, and they thought of them as a unit. When we don't think like that, when we neglect the resurrection, we neglect what is the single strongest argument for the divinity of Christ and the single strongest support for our hope of eternal life as well. Christianity without the resurrection collapses into logical incoherence.

Having made the case for the resurrection, Paul finally reaches **HIS CONCLUSION**. He gives his Pisidian audience the so-what in Acts 13:38-41. He begins with one final twist. The resurrected Jesus is certainly the Savior that Paul proclaimed Him to be, but He doesn't save from an invading army. Instead, He saves by offering forgiveness of sins. This forgiveness isn't open only to Jews. Instead, as Paul made clear back in 13:26, he is speaking to the God-fearing Gentiles as much as he is to his Jewish countrymen. Paul reinforces that point by declaring that everyone—everyone!—who believes can be freed from all of their sins, cleansed completely, which even the burdensome Law of Moses could not accomplish. Like God led captive Israel out of Egypt, so Christ will lead all of captive humanity from the bondage of sin.

However, that promising alternative is not the only possible one. The people of Antioch can choose to recognize and believe in Jesus. On the other hand, though, they can also imitate the example of the evil rulers in Jerusalem, who neither recognized nor believed in Him. Just as Caiaphas and the rest unwittingly fulfilled the prophecies about the enemies of the Messiah, so too those who don't believe in the Christ will also fulfill prophecy. Because they scoff, they will perish, just as had been predicted of them centuries ago.

In a few moments, we're about to share together in the Lord's Supper. As we do, let's think about where we fit into the grand narrative that Paul has outlined. Every one of us is part of this story somewhere. In Paul's telling, it began with God's rescue of His chosen people in Egypt, continued through judges, kings, and prophets, reached its climax with the coming, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and it finds its resolution in us, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. Are we thankful for this amazing story? Do we claim Jesus for our Savior and serve Him accordingly? Or are we more like King Saul, the rulers of Jerusalem, and those who scoff at the gospel? Do we disbelieve, disobey, and perish? The choice is ours.

Responding to the Gospel

The final section of Acts 13 that we will be considering this morning describes how Paul's audience responded to the gospel. The first reaction that we see in the text is **EAGERNESS**. Let's read Acts 13:42-43. To our modern ears, this account sounds strange. No matter how well I have preached, I don't expect to have people following me out the door trying to pry more information out of me! However, to appreciate what has happened here, we need to put ourselves in the sandals of Paul's Jewish audience. They have been looking for the Messiah to come and rescue their nation ever since the Romans conquered them about 100 years ago. Now Paul is telling them that the Messiah has already come. In other words, the most significant thing that could possibly ever happen HAS happened. Of course they're going to be curious! Of course they're going to want to hear more about Jesus, simply so they can figure out what is going on here.

What's interesting, though, is that the two groups that are named in v. 43 are Jews and God-fearing proselytes. Remember, proselytes were those who, though not ethnically Jewish, chose to adopt all the Jewish customs, up to and including circumcision. Jews were not particularly threatened by the idea of proselytes becoming part of God's people because they had already become Jews in all the ways that mattered. The Jews are still well-disposed toward Paul because they haven't realized the radical implications of his message.

Sadly, though, this eagerness soon turns to **JEALOUSY**. Consider Acts 13:44-47. The Jews might have missed the point of Paul's proclamation that *everyone* could be freed from their sins, but the Gentiles clearly didn't. In this, we see a reminder of the appeal of the gospel. In the religion of the Greeks and

Romans, there was no method of regeneration. There was no way to start over, no way to become a new person. You had done what you had done, and you were stuck with the shame of it whether you wanted to be or not. Paul, however, is promising a new beginning, and apparently, nearly everybody who lives in Antioch wants to hear more about it. Things aren't any different today. Outsiders who want a new beginning will listen to and obey the gospel; those who are happy where they are won't.

However, when the Jews see all these Gentiles crowding around their synagogue, they're upset about it. This too doesn't register with us. Would any of us be unhappy if some Sunday, so many people came here to hear the gospel that it was standing room only inside with people spilling out the doors? However, we need to understand something about Jewish psychology here. These are people who have been God's chosen race for 1500 years. Sure, they have to put up with all of these inconvenient rituals, but because of them, they get a special relationship with God that no one else can share.

Now, though, Paul wants to short-circuit the whole thing. He's telling Gentiles that through Jesus, they can have a relationship with God that's even better than what the Jews had through the Law of Moses. To the Jews, that doesn't seem fair. If everybody gets to be God's people now, they're not special anymore. They reject Paul's message, Paul rejects them in turn, and the split between the two begins.

Today, we have every reason to boast in Jesus, but even though we are God's chosen people, we should never take pride in what we imagine to be our spiritual superiority over others. God doesn't love any one of us more than He loves every other member of the human race. We have become His people by His grace, not our merit. Indeed, He desires all men to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth. Rather than proudly looking down our noses at others, let's make sure we're inviting them into the kingdom.

Once the Gentiles hear from Paul that he is bringing salvation to them, they erupt with **REJOICING**. Luke explains in Acts 13:48-49. After just two sermons, Paul finds that he has made a bunch of converts, not from among Jews, but from among Gentiles. This, I think, points to God's wisdom in sending His Son when He did. When we talk about "the fullness of time" in Galatians 4, we usually discuss things like the political stability of the Roman Empire, easy travel on Roman roads, the common Greek language, and so forth. However, the presence of large numbers of God-fearing Gentiles was as much or even more important to the spread of the gospel. These were people who loved and wanted to serve God but didn't want to become Jews. In Jesus, Paul hands them a way to become God's people without taking on all the burdens of the Law of Moses. They are overjoyed because this is the answer they were looking for even before Paul showed up.

That makes spreading the gospel a whole lot easier! Imagine if there were some religious group out there that believed they needed to be baptized to be saved, but didn't believe they were competent to perform baptisms. Any halfway competent gospel preacher could go to a group like that and make 100 new Christians in a night, and that's basically what Paul is doing here and everywhere else he encounters God-fearers.

I say this to not to discourage us from trying to teach others today, but to remind us that our situation is different. There isn't some whole group out there primed to hear the gospel, just hanging out in a synagogue waiting for us to show up. Instead, we encounter those who will listen as scattered individuals, and none of them wear a sign around their necks that reads "Convert me!" The only way we can tell who will obey the gospel is by giving everyone the opportunity, and that's our work no less than it was Paul's.

Of course, there was definitely a flip side to the coin. Just as Paul met with such strongly positive reactions, he also met with **PERSECUTION**. Acts 13:50-52 tells the story. While Paul is busy teaching the God-fearers and whoever else in the area will listen, the Jews are engaged in politicking. Unlike Paul, they're locals, they know who the important people are, and they poison them against Paul and the gospel. As a result, for the first time, but certainly not the last, Paul gets thrown out of a city. Admittedly, the Pisidians don't try to kill him, but they do chase Paul and Barnabas out of the district.

This should be a reminder to us that novelty cuts both ways. The God-fearers of Antioch were eager to learn how they could become part of God's holy nation, but the Jews of Antioch hated the notion so much that they drive Paul out of their city and, later on in Acts, spend some time chasing him around the whole region. I would imagine that being treated like a criminal wasn't high on the list of Paul's favorite things, but the gospel was so important to him that he proclaimed it everywhere he went anyway. Even if we don't meet with quite as much encouragement today in our evangelistic efforts, at least we don't meet with such extreme discouragement either! Regardless, though, our responsibility is the same: keep doing good; don't lose heart.