

Saved by Grace

Week Commencing 24 April 2023

Notes for next week's sermon on Acts 13: When people want to hear the Word of God

DAY 1: Read Acts 13: 1-5

The persecution of the church in Jerusalem (ch7-8) had caused many Christians to flee to surrounding areas. One of these was Antioch, and in the previous couple of chapters, it has emerged as an epicentre of Christian activity (see Acts 11:19-30). It is a young church, but it is well stocked with leaders, having both prophets and teachers in abundance. As the church engages with God through his word (listening to the prophets/teachers), they are also involved in worship and prayer (the latter augmented by fasting). It is during these activities that the Holy Spirit speaks to them, perhaps through one of the prophets, "set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." Note that the Spirit speaks in a direct and personal way, giving a divine command. Note also that the church did not decide, "hey, we've got loads of good leaders here. Let's send out some missionaries!" This is God's work and God's design. He calls people to his work at his appointed time. The church is obedient to the call and sends out Barnabas and Saul.

As the two go on their way, they continue to be sensitive to the leading of the Spirit. The Spirit sends and directs them in the way to go. And so they end up on the island of Cyprus. At this stage, their mission is to the Jews, and so they go into the Jewish synagogues and proclaim the word there. With them is John Mark, thought to be the author of the gospel of Mark.

As a church, we can discern and grow in giftedness, make strategic plans, and commission people for various tasks and missions. However, we must always do so in the knowledge and conviction that it is only and always under God's hand. We must be humble, acknowledging that God is king of all and in all. Every good gift comes from him and any kingdom growth is from him and for him. Every good thing we have: faith, wealth, time, spiritual gifts, comes from him. Pray that we will be good stewards of all these things, that we will listen well to his word and teaching, and that we may discern clearly the voice of God in everything.

DAY 2: Read Acts 13: 6-12

Barnabas, Saul and John travel through Cyprus from Salamis to Paphos, a 2 hour drive now, but considerably longer back then! When they reach Paphos they meet two men with very different attitudes to the word of God. The first is Sergius Paulus. He is the proconsul, the leading Roman official of the area, whom Luke describes as an intelligent man. Upon hearing of Barnabas and Saul and the word they are proclaiming, he sends for them in order to hear it.

It is one of his attendants, however, who rejects the word of God. This man is named Bar-Jesus, a Jewish name meaning 'Son of Jesus'. How ironic that a man so named should stand against the work of Jesus! Luke describes him as a sorcerer and false prophet. There is no reason given for referring to him as a sorcerer, however, the sorcery of the day tended to involve healing and fortune-telling, both of which may well have justified such a person's place in the entourage of a Roman leader. Likewise, we do not know how he was known by Luke as a false prophet, however, his behaviour in the face of the gospel message is reason enough! When the word is proclaimed to Sergius Paulus, Elymas the Sorcerer (Elymas likely being a nickname derived from a word for a sage or wise man) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul away from the faith. It brings to mind Jesus' Parable of the Sower, with the birds swooping down to devour the seed before it can even take root! Saul though, will have none of it. There is a time to be mild and let things go through to the keeper, and there is a time to call people out for what they are. The Holy Spirit inspires Paul (who is known thus from now on) to do just that, and in no uncertain terms! It is a troubling enough thing to be denounced by another human, even so powerfully as in v10; how devastating, though, to realise that this broadside comes not just from Paul, but from the Lord! For that is what v11 proves. Whatever supernatural powers Elymas allegedly had, they are no match for what the Lord can do to him. His arrogant voice is silenced. The one who had thought himself so enlightened is now in personal darkness. The once-proud man now has to grope about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand (cf Acts 9, where the arrogant Saul is humbled in much the same way!)

The combination of this dramatic curse and the amazing and powerful teaching about the Lord is too much for the proconsul. He demonstrates his intelligence by believing the message, and so this pagan Roman becomes is among the number of early Gentile Christians.

NB, v9 is the first time Saul is known as Paul and thereafter, the name Saul is only used for him when quoting others in relation to his conversion. Saul is a Jewish name; Paul is a Roman name. It is possible he had gone by either, as a Jewish man living in a Roman province, but fitting that he should prefer the latter as his ministry is more and more to the Gentiles. Also, from this point, Paul's name is given first when Luke mentions the apostles.

DAY 3: Read Acts 13:13-41

Their mission completed in Cyprus, the apostles move on, coming to rest in Pisidian Antioch (as opposed to the *other* Antioch from where they had set out). As is their usual practice, they go at first to the synagogue. Apparently knowing who they were, the synagogue rulers invite them to speak, after the readings from the Bible (our OT only, at this point!)

The congregation is a mixture of Jews, and Gentiles who are God-fearers (just as a church may be a mixture of Christians and 'seekers'). Paul's sermon addresses them both and starts with a very brief history of Israel, focusing on God's provision of leadership, both his own divine leadership and the leadership of his chosen agents. In terms of human leadership, the high point is King David, the man after God's own heart. However, Paul then skips a thousand years of history to show how David, the greatest king, is surpassed – just as John the Baptist, the last of the prophets, is surpassed – by the Saviour both of them had promised. As Paul points out, this is God's message of salvation to both Jews and Gentiles (v26), and it is for *this* generation, the one of which he and they are a part. While the Jewish leaders and the people of Jerusalem rejected and killed Jesus, the promise of God was not only kept alive, but fulfilled in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Once again, it was a promise God had delivered through his servant David.

Finally, having set out the evidence before his listeners, Paul presents it as a choice: Either 1) Believe in Jesus, and you will receive forgiveness of sins. He justifies you from everything that the law could not set you free from; or 2) don't believe in Jesus, and you will receive all the curses the OT prophets had outlined, and none of the blessings! So, choose wisely.

This same choice also confronts each one of us today.

DAY 4: Read Acts 13:42-52

The message is received with enthusiasm and gratitude by Paul's hearers. They not only book him to come and speak the following Sabbath, many of them follow Paul and Barnabas down the road, no doubt full of questions! The next Sabbath, 'almost the whole city' comes out to hear, not Paul, but 'the word of the Lord'; what exciting times! Unfortunately, this triggers opposition from some of the Jewish leaders. Were they upset that Gentiles were apparently flocking into the kingdom? Were they jealous of the apparent power and popularity of this new message and its purveyors? What is definite is their rejection of the message, which issues in abuse toward Paul and his message. Paul responds by telling them that by rejecting this message of salvation, they are actually not considering themselves worthy of eternal life! Being rejected by their own, Paul and Barnabas will go to the Gentiles, in obedience to God's command and in accordance also with the prophecy of Isaiah 49:6.

These scenes are tense. The Jewish leaders are inciting violence and hatred toward the apostles; their lives could be in danger. And yet, even here, the disciples are 'full of joy and the Holy Spirit.'

The time has come for Paul and Barnabas to move on to another area, but God's message of life has already won the day. The Gentile listeners have taken hold of the message with great joy, honouring the word of the Lord, 'and all who were appointed for eternal life believed' (v48). This verse emphasises the part that God plays in salvation. Just as God was sovereign in choosing Israel so long before (v17), so he is sovereign in appointing people to eternal life. This does not mean that people are without responsibility. Somehow, God's choice and human responsibility go hand in hand. We don't know which people in our family/ community/ world are appointed to eternal life, only God does! But we do know that they need to hear about Jesus. Pray about the Gospel, tell people the Gospel, and pray that 'the word of the Lord (may) spread through the whole region.'