

“If You Have a Message of Encouragement...”

Acts 13: 13-43

August 3, 2008

Rev. Curtis J. Young

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This morning, let's focus on Paul's message to the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch on this, his first missionary journey. He started out from Antioch in Syria and sailed to the island of Cypress, Barnabas' home.

Barnabas was the natural leader at first. He must have known many of the people and places they visited.

But upon reaching the far end of the island, Luke records a major change in their relationship. Saul became known as Paul (9), and from this point he was the leader. From then on Luke will write of Paul and Barnabas rather than Barnabas and Saul. (42)

They sailed north to the region of Galatia, Mark left them, but they journeyed inland to the city known as Pisidian Antioch.

READ

I've glossed over many of the interesting details the Luke records for us. It is fair to ask why. Why would I focus on the message Paul delivered?

Look with me at verse 15. The synagogue rulers sent word to Paul and Barnabas seated among them: “Brothers, if you have a message of encouragement for the people, please speak.”

In response and testified. He had far more than message of encouragement. It was, as he put it in verse 23, “the message of salvation,” “sent” from God.

This is Paul's first recorded sermon, but it is not some fossil from history for us to study with curiosity. It is not some frail word from the past that cannot withstand the corrosive atmosphere of our time.

For us as much as for them, it is the message of salvation that God has sent. It is not some specimen we examine in light of our superior knowledge, but the revelation God has given by which we examine ourselves. It is as sturdy and enduring as it is priceless and precious.

The message builds to a climax verse 38, that begins with “Therefore.” We'll get to that shortly, but let's examine how Paul builds his case.

Paul began (vss. 16-25) by summarizing Israel's history. He covered much the same ground that Stephen did in Acts 6, but where Stephen presented Israel's history in terms of the people and their rebelliousness, Paul spoke in terms of God and his grace to Israel. God is the subject of almost every sentence and the verbs, acts of blessing:

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17 “The God of the people of Israel chose our fathers...he made the people prosper during their stay in Egypt...with mighty power he led them out of that country...18 he endured their conduct for about forty years in the desert...he overthrew seven nations in Canaan...he gave their land to his people...God gave them judges...When the people asked for a king, he gave them Saul...22 After removing Saul, he made David their king...23”From his descendants God has brought to Israel the Savior Jesus, as he promised.

After reading this, how do you avoid the conclusion that Israel exists because of the grace of God alone for the sake of receiving his grace. To Israel he proved himself again and again to be “the God who is with us, the God who is with us, “the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin...” (Ex. 3:6-7)

You do not have to be Jewish to appreciate this any more than the gentiles who were listening to Paul. This god is no idol. This is the God who acts in history, who reveals himself, who draws near, who puts up with his people, who hears their prayers, who keeps promises, who may be known.

Yet every person in that synagogue knew the Jewish Scriptures had a beginning and a middle but no end. It was incomplete. It had no conclusion but a hand full of intentional loose ends: Hopes unmet, a monarchy unrestored, a Messiah unmet, a New Covenant unmade, a chosen city under foreign domination.

The Old Testament begs a sequel. It awaits further revelation from God. This is exactly the point Paul proceeds to make, the good news: This God, true to his character, consistent with his deeds, and faithful to his promises has given that revelation. Through David’s descendants, “God has brought to Israel the Savior, Jesus.” (vs. 23-31)

He was crucified and died, he was removed from the cross and buried, but God raised him from the dead (30). Here is the essential core of the Gospel. It is not a theological pronouncement but a proclamation of facts about what God did. They are not changeable. They don’t lend themselves to being recast or refashioned, not for Jewish, Greek, or Roman sensitivities, not for 21st century American assumptions.

Both as revelation and as fact, the message of salvation is certain and true, and the two aspects of the message, the revelation made to the prophets and facts witnessed by the apostles serve to reinforce each other. This is why Paul next moved to quote the prophets, in Psalm 2, Psalm 16, and Isaiah. (32-37)

The history of God’s grace, His bringing the Savior, the confirmation Jesus’ rising by the prophets lead Paul to this conclusion:

38”Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. 39Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses.

Here are key terms that Paul will expound again and again in his epistles: Sin, forgiveness, justification, faith, and Law as summarized in verse 43, “the grace of God.”

Note the parallelism of our verses for where the emphasis lies: “Through Jesus the forgiveness is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is justified...” Back in verse 23 Paul underscored that God has brought to Israel, the Savior Jesus.

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Did you know that in the Old Testament prior to David, the term “Savior” is used just once? (Deut. 32:15) Before David, “salvation” is used just once. (Exodus 15:2) It was David who began to write of God as his Savior after he had delivered him from Saul. (II Sam. 22:3)

“Savior” is introduced as a deeply personal way of referring to God. To say, “God, you are my savior,” is like my saying, “Diane, you are my wife.” It is bound up with love, trust, honor, gratitude, the intimate knowing of each other.

“Savior” is that kind of word, so when Paul declares Jesus to be the Savior, he is saying Jesus is the one and only one God has sent to be our Savior, to know, trust, love, and honor as our Savior.

There is no point in talking about salvation just as there is no point in talking about marriage, unless you have a particular Savior or spouse in mind. Otherwise, it’s all a head game.

I never felt the need for marriage until I met Diane. When I saw the person, I felt the void in my life that she could fill.

When I finally met her, there was no more theoretical, “Do I want to marry?” Or, “Can I see myself married?” Rather, it was, “Do I want to marry her?” “Do I hope she will marry me?”

Do you want to be saved, brother? That depends on who’s doing the saving. Who am I obligating myself to? That’s what the message of Salvation is about, the Savior. “Will you take Christ as your Savior? That is the heart question, the real question. It’s not a matter of mere agreement but of faith.

Well, what kind of savior is he? For the answer we turn again to the parallelism of our verses.

Verse 38 says, “through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you; and verse 39, “through him everyone who believe is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses. Forgiveness, justification.

To forgive means to release from an obligation, to erase a debt. Not as if it didn’t matter or never amounted to much. On the contrary, it can’t be paid. So someone else paid it for you. Someone took on your burden, and suffered the loss.

Forgiveness, what a word! I could wish sin was a common term, because if it was we could easily understand what a great thing the forgiveness of sins is.

I wish it was as much on people’s minds and as troubling as pollution or obesity or cancer or dependence on foreign oil or sneezing without covering you mouth with your elbow.

The well being of our planet, the public, and our own individual health get the attention. What about the well being of our souls, the “me” part of me and the “you” part of you.

Every time we harm our souls or someone else’s soul we are ruining ourselves for God. When I disobey the truth, or mistreat someone, or give myself over to wrong thoughts and words, I am harming my soul.

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I did not create myself. God created me, and he didn't create me so I could ruin myself for him. Every time I do, I am sinning against him.

Ignorance is not a defense. Weakness is not a defense. Because at the root of all our weakness and all our ignorance is our willingness to sin. That is the mystery of the human condition.

We have no idea the extent of our sin, the responsibility we bear, or the debt we owe. I could wish there was some quick way we could check the condition of our souls just like we pass by a mirror in a room. If there was, we'd probably get rid of it.

God alone knows. He alone can show us. Through Christ he has. To take our condemnation on himself, to assume the guilt of our sins, he submitted to crucifixion and there on the cross, knew God's complete displeasure and withdrawal. Only in understanding that this was necessary, do we see how desperate our condition is.

Jesus is the Savior. Through him, the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. What's more through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the Law of Moses. Which is, by the way, everything.

Paul was speaking to those who love the law and trusted their ability to obey God's law for his acceptance of them. They really, really believed it. In the same way today, most people today believe that God accepts them for their own special reason.

Paul was saying to them as he would to us, that whatever we have depended on for our acceptance is one more thing that keeps us from God and the Savior.

What is true of God's forgiveness is true of God's acceptance. Only he can show us what is required, and in Jesus he did.

Do you know what the opposite of justified is? It is condemned. I use the term acceptance because it is more familiar. Yet in the same way, do you know the opposite of acceptance is? It is rejection.

God has brought us the Savior to take on our condemnation and rejection due to us for our sins. He and he alone has authority to forgive and justify, to make us acceptable to God in spite of our sin. That is why God calls us to turn to him and believe in him. Because it is through faith we take Christ to be our Savior.

Don't mistake the faith by which we are saved with anything watery and insincere. Jesus said, I came to give my life a ransom for many. On the cross he purchased souls for God. So you might test the genuineness of your faith this morning.

Do you feel Christ has purchased you for God? Have you taken him for your Savior? Are you persuaded that he has forgiven you your sins? Do you love him? Is your life now his?