

PAUL'S SERMON IN THE SYNAGOGUE Acts 13:13-52

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It was from Antioch in Syria that Barnabas and Saul had been sent out as missionaries. But now we find them going to **another Antioch**, this one being located a couple hundred miles northwest from where they began. And as was their practice they went first to the synagogue.

Now, this is a lengthy narrative dealing with Paul's preaching at the synagogue in Antioch in Pisidia. As Paul would end up preaching in **many cities** and often at **great length** one has to wonder, "Why was **THIS** sermon recorded at such length while the others were not?"

I think the answer to this is several fold:

1. This is the **first** real "sermon" that we have recorded being given by Paul. Clearly Paul (or Saul as he had formerly been known) had **preached many times in many places before** this, but this is the first sermon that Luke records. Maybe Luke chose this one to give us a sense of where Paul was in his thinking by this point in his spiritual development. Or maybe this was the first sermon by Paul that Luke (who wrote the book of Acts) actually heard first hand. But at any rate this is the first one recorded.
2. As is evident from the text, this sermon solidified **Paul as the spokesman** for this small band of missionaries. Prior to this it was Barnabas and Saul...Barnabas and Saul. But with this Sabbath day sermon, these two become known as Paul and Barnabas. Everyone has their place...their role. Paul's role was becoming clearer: **he was the preacher, the evangelist, the apologist** for the gospel. Barnabas may have been the encourager (and he was), but Paul was the preacher.
3. Antioch of Pisidia was located in the interior of what is called Asia Minor, and only a few cities west of Paul's hometown of Tarsus. Just as Barnabas and Saul's **FIRST STOP** had been Barnabas' homeland (the island of Cyprus), now

we find these two heading towards Paul's homeland. And so with this shift towards Paul maybe there was an intended shift towards his preaching.

4. This text ends with Paul and Barnabas "shaking the dust off their feet" and moving on to another town. Their shaking off of the dust from their sandals was against the **UNBELIEVING JEWS** of Antioch of Pisidia. The Gentiles there had been open to the gospel message but the Jewish leaders, out of jealousy, had risen up against them. And so this text marks how the gospel message was moving...shifting...from being directed towards the Jews to being directed towards the Gentiles.

Well, for **whatever reason**, this is a lengthy narrative of what took place in Antioch of Pisidia.

Now let's consider Paul's message...

1. Like Stephen's message back in Acts chapter 7, Paul's message was full of historical details – details like
 - how the Israelites destroyed SEVEN nations before entering the promised land, or
 - how Israel had been 450 years in slavery
 - Saul, Israel's first king, was the "son of Kish" and
 - Saul was from the tribe of Benjamin and ruled for 40 years.

Many of you, I know, would know these same more minor bits of trivia, just as most Jews of Paul's time would also have known these details. In that sense there was nothing new here: it was the same news that every Jewish boy learned from the time he was very young. But in Paul's recounting of Israel's history it all took **a sudden turn** when Paul brought up Jesus and the idea of his resurrection.

2. Note that Paul brings up Jesus in the context of speaking about John the Baptist. John the Baptist had been well known throughout Israel when he was alive and he continued to be highly regarded long after he had been put to death. In this narrative we are now many years PAST the time of John's death, but still he was remembered and his memory respected. Jesus had

been in the company of John and John had spoken positively of Jesus. To the Jews of that time that alone was noteworthy.

3. (And this will be the main point of where we are going this morning)...Consider Paul's sermon **from a Christian apologetics perspective.**

This past week I received an email from a church member in which they mentioned their adult age son's abandonment of Christ. They wrote that their son now calls himself an "agnostic."

Having gone through a similar thing with our oldest son, as I look at this sermon of Paul's I try and think of what an agnostic (who had grown up in the church) might think of Paul's sermon. What would they be thinking if they heard Paul give this message?

- First we have Paul giving an historical narrative of Israel's early years, including their years under Egyptian slavery. There are SOME unbelievers who question the whole Exodus account, but generally it is accepted as having happened in **some fashion**. So no real problem here.
- Then Paul talks about Samuel and the establishment of the nation of Israel. He talks about King Saul and then about king David. From an archeological point of view there is a growing body of evidence that support the Biblical narrative of Israel's growing role in the region in the early 2nd millennium B.C., so, again, no problem.
- Eventually, Paul mentions John the Baptist and Jesus. He speaks of the life and death of Jesus. Some critics of Christianity have questioned the existence of Jesus, but most accept his literal existence, life as a teacher and death on a cross as historical fact. A number of theologians have labored to "demythologize" Jesus – ridding him of the many miracles attributed to him – but that there was an actual man named Jesus who was known for his teaching and who obviously impacted a number of people, still no problem...

That is to say, your average Joe Agnostic, having grown up in the church, up to this point in Paul's sermon could easily enough have sat through it saying, "Yes...sure...got it...sure...that sounds right" and so on with **no problem**.

But then we come to verse 30. Yes, verse 30. For with verse 30 and following we **definitely have a problem**. Let's read this section and note

how Paul not once, not twice, not three times but **FOUR TIMES** – and throughout the whole rest of his sermon – speaks about the RESURRECTION...the RAISING of Jesus...from the dead.

He doesn't reference **anything else** even more than once. But when we get to the resurrection, then we're into the battle...

Verses 30-41

Some agnostics or self-proclaimed atheists will tell you that their real problem with the Bible is Genesis chapters 1 and 2. But, in my opinion, these people are drawing the battle line **at a place the Bible doesn't choose to battle**. Sure, there are many questions about the age of the earth, or the age of mankind, or the means by which anything and everything came into existence. But other than affirming that God made everything, and that he did so for his glory, the Bible **doesn't** make much of Genesis chapters 1 and 2. And while Paul, in the book of Romans, will make an argument about the universal character of sin and tie it back to a suggested literal sin on the part of our first parents (Adam and Eve), in this message, Paul doesn't even reference the creation narrative, or the existence of Adam and Eve. Instead he starts his sermon speaking about the years that the people of Israel spend in Egyptian bondage.

So where **is** the real battle? **The real battle is over the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. That is where the battle is.**

And if that is where the real battle lies, then I wonder why these unbelieving sons and daughters don't engage the battle there? Could it be because **they know** that on **that front** they are going to have a very hard go of it? I wonder. I don't know for sure, but I do wonder if that isn't the case.

Have you seen the film, The Case for Christ? If you have not I can only think to say, **PLEASE DO WATCH IT**. I cannot think of a more important film for any person – Christian or non-Christian - to watch. And what **is** "the case" for Christ? It is that Jesus was resurrected from the dead, Jesus was raised from the dead.

Verse 41 sums up the situation perfectly – not only back in Paul's day but in our day as well...

verse 41

A belief in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead is beyond any notion of reasonableness. It is too fantastic...too incredible...too unbelievable. Feeding 5,000 with just one boy's lunch is impossible to simply believe, and the same with Jesus walking on water. But that he rose from the dead is the ultimate affront to any thinking person. And maybe that is EXACTLY why it is placed at the very heart of what it is to be a Christian. For Paul, in Romans 10:9 makes it very clear,

"If you confess with your mouth "Jesus is Lord" AND BELIEVE IN your heart that GOD RAISED HIM FROM THE DEAD, you will be saved."

The resurrection of Jesus is the ultimate fantasy, what the liberal theologian Rudolph Bultmann would have deemed the ULTIMATE MYTH.

But in looking at Paul's sermon one sees that this wasn't some "myth" or idea that Paul was just trying to SLIP IN. No, four times he talks about it. This is a truth that is at the heart of what being a follower of Christ...or in the case of those that Paul was preaching to...of being a completed Jew...this is what it all hinges upon.

So if you want an argument...

If you want to throw away God and the Bible and religion and Christ... then do it by disproving the resurrection. Not by merely saying you don't believe in it, but by showing how...given the evidence that the apostles put forth...how they were wrong, or mistaken, or how the women went to the wrong tomb, or how someone stole the body. Every one of these avenues and dozens of others have been tried.

- Lew Wallace tried to disprove it back in the 19th century. But he ended up becoming convinced that it had to be true. And with that he then wrote the classic novel, Ben Hur: A Tale of the Christ.
- Josh McDowell tried to disprove it some 50 years ago. He too ended up being converted and went on to write the book on Christian apologetics entitled Evidence that Demands a Verdict.
- Lee Strobel was doing great at the Chicago Tribune as a reporter. He was young, brilliant, a great writer, and winning awards. And

all would have been fine with his atheistic life if it hadn't been for his wife showing an interest in God and Jesus...and, of all things, going to church. In an effort to show her the error of her ways he began to explore how the whole notion of a resurrected Jesus was bizarre and impossible. But it didn't work for, in the end, he is the one that the book and then the film are about: The Case for Christ.

So let us learn from Paul and his message as to where we need to be fighting our fight with those who reject God, Jesus and the Bible. The fight isn't over Genesis; the fight is over the empty tomb.

Based upon verse 42, it would seem that Paul's message went over pretty well. People were interested. They wanted to hear more.

This past week the elders here at Burning Hearts met to discuss where we are and where we believe we need to be heading in the future.

We made some headway. I am extremely glad that we were all of one heart and mind.

But near the end of the retreat we dealt with the question as to how we can best promote Burning Hearts in this COVID age. Up until the coronavirus hit I was personally going door to door on Saturdays inviting people to church. Some of you are here today as a direct result of those kind of invitations. But with the coronavirus, I'm not going out knocking on doors right now. So what can we do.

It was then that the comment was made that the greatest means of church growth is by personal invitation. Nothing beats a personal invitation.

Well look what happened here in Acts 13...

verses 42 and 44

How did "almost the entire city" hear about Paul and Barnabas? It wasn't by any billboard, or through Facebook or because of something posted on the synagogue's website. No...it was because people were talking, telling their neighbors, and putting out the invitation to come hear about this **INCREDIBLE STORY of JESUS, RAISED FROM THE DEAD!**

That was it.

And who knows what might have happened if Satan wasn't always out trying to undo what is good...

verses 45 and 50

Some things never change.

There will always be opposition to the truth of God. Be it from someone who feels threatened, or from some small-minded busybody, or from some governmental official. There will always be opposition. And when there is, the best thing is to just "shake off the dust from your feet" and move on. And that is exactly what Paul and Silas did.

But while they may have left some dust behind as they left Antioch of Pisidia, Paul and Barnabas also left behind some new followers of Jesus – disciples – who were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit. So it was worth the grief.