

Acts 13:13-34

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Date: 19 April 2020

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[0 : 00] Great. Well, thank you, Ruth, for reading there. And good evening. My name is James. I'm on the staff team here at St. Silas. And if you've tuned in for the very first time, an especially big welcome to you.

And this evening, you would have noticed from this evening's reading, we're in the Book of Acts, and we're in the middle of a series in the Book of Acts. And the Book of Acts is really the second volume in a two-volume account written by a first-century doctor, Dr. Luke, to his friend Theophilus. And Theophilus really means a God-lover. And he writes to him so that, as he says right at the start of his first volume, Luke, that Theophilus may have certainty of the things that he believes. And it might be that in current events, you might be living with a lot of uncertainty. If you're investigating Christianity, you might say, how can I have certainty that God loves me and is in control with coronavirus?

Or if you're a Christian, you might feel very uncertain in your faith at the moment. You can't meet together as a church family regularly, Sunday by Sunday, in the church building. You can't chat to Christians as freely as you might have done beforehand.

[1 : 20] But the one thing that this passage certainly drives home for us is that God is still at work in the world. And we get this in the very second verse in our reading this evening, where the Holy Spirit says to the church in Antioch, set apart Barnabas and Saul for the work which I have called them to.

And so we could just as well call the book of Acts the ongoing acts or work of the Lord Jesus in the world by his Holy Spirit. And Jesus' chief means of acting in the world that we encounter in the book of Acts is his word.

And the work that Jesus has given his disciples, Luke states for us right at the start of the book of Acts. In Acts chapter 1 verse 8, And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

So if Luke was a painter and he was painting a very careful painting for us, the picture that it would be for us is of all the nations flowing into God's kingdom as God's word goes out through his appointed servants.

And that being said, by way of introduction, let me introduce you to an ideal church in verses 1 to 3. St. Silas' Antioch, year 80-60 or thereabouts.

[2 : 47] And the first thing that we notice is that it's a very diverse church. So I wonder if you see all the inverse too. Simeon and Lucius, they're both probably African.

Then we have Manan, he's the posh boy. He was the playmate of Herod growing up. Then we have Saul, the bad boy rogue who's turned good.

The next thing that we see in this church is they have a love for other Christians and a concern for people in trouble. So there was a great famine in that time.

And in verse 25 of chapter 12, we see Barnabas and Saul returning from Jerusalem where they've been taking aid to the church in Jerusalem who've been affected by this famine.

We also see in verse 2 that they're a prayerful, a worshipful church. In verse 26 of chapter 11, we read that they're a word-centered church.

[3 : 45] God's word is important to them. And then in verse 3 of chapter 13, we see that they're a sending church. They're a church with a heart for mission.

And it's into this context that we see the Lord Jesus speaking by his Spirit in verse 2 to initiate the next phase in his plan to bring salvation to the ends of the earth.

And as Paul and Barnabas are sent by the Holy Spirit, we see the start of three church-planting missionary journeys or circuits that Paul undertakes in Acts from this point onwards.

The first thing that we see is that Paul and Barnabas, they head to Cyprus where they meet a chap called Sergius Paulus. And he's a pro-council. That is, he was sent by the Senate in Rome, by the kings in Rome, to rule over a certain area.

And he's a very intelligent man. He's actually the highest official that we meet in the book of Acts. And in verse 12, we see that he miraculously comes to faith. And how does he come to faith?

[4 : 50] Because he is amazed at the teaching of the Lord. From there, they go to Sidian Antioch. To the bright tide among us, we might have noticed that we've just left Antioch.

Well, this is a different Antioch. We've gone from Antioch in Syria, and we've gone up the Turkish coast, the south coast there, and we're heading towards what is modern-day Istanbul. And we arrive in a town called Sidian Antioch, which is on the slight interior.

And here, we hear a model sermon of the word, of the message, that Paul would have been preaching at that time. So as we look at the rest of Acts 13, I want us to consider two points. And the first one is, God's message of salvation in Jesus is for all people. And the second point is, God's messenger of salvation is the Apostle Paul.

So we're going to look at the message that's preached, and then we're going to look at the messenger who takes that message. So point one, God's message of salvation in Jesus is for all people.

[5 : 57] And Paul's sermon that we read here in Acts 13 is almost a carbon copy for the one that Peter preaches in Acts 2 at the day of Pentecost.

So very often people might skip over the sermon here. And it's broken up by three formal addresses that we see in the speech.

So in verse 16, verse 26, and verse 38. So verse 16, Paul says, And then verse 26, fellow Israelites and you Gentiles who worship God, listen to me.

And then verse 26, fellow children of Abraham and you God-fearing Gentiles. And then finally verse 38, therefore, my friends. And the first thing that Paul does here is he exhorts his audience to listen to him.

In verse 16, listen to me. And then he goes on to give them a mini Bible view over everything that God has been doing so far throughout Israel's history.

[7 : 00] And then he slows down when he gets to King David. And finally he picks up pace and he hits his key point in verse 23. From this man, that's David's descendants, God has brought to Israel the Savior Jesus, whom he has proved.

And the point that Paul is making here is that God has sent his Savior to Israel. Well, as a kid growing up, the best gift that I ever received came on Christmas morning.

My parents had been dropping hints about it for weeks beforehand, but I wasn't the brightest kid, so I didn't really pick up on the hints. But Christmas morning dawned and I rushed downstairs and there was this massive box sitting under the Christmas tree.

Well, I fell on it like a hawk and I ripped off all the wrapping paper. And inside it was the most amazing Lego castle with knights and everything. An eight-year-old like me was blown away. I was absolutely thrilled by this. And throughout Israel's history, we've seen God dropping hints. And finally, here, in Jesus' coming, we have Christmas morning.

[8 : 12] Jesus, the Savior, has come into the world. And from here, Paul broadens out his focus in verse 26. Fellow children of Abraham and you God-fearing Gentiles, it is to us that this message of salvation has been sent.

And what we see here is that God has sent his message of salvation to us. So to the Jews in Jerusalem, Jesus came as a person.

But to everyone else, he comes as a message of salvation. So the nations might have not had access to a Savior walking around them in flesh and blood, but they do have access to salvation through the message that Jesus has sent.

But what we see in verse 27 of our reading is that the Jews, however, had already made their mind up about Jesus. So I'll just pick up in verse 27. The people of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognize Jesus.

Yet in condemning him, they fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath.

Though they found no proper ground for a death sentence, they asked Pilate to have him executed.

[9 : 28] When they had carried out all that was written about him, they took him down from the cross and they laid him in a tomb. But though they rejected Jesus, they crucified him, we read in the

very next verse, in verse 30, that God raised him to life, but God raised him from the dead.

And we've thought about this and we've reflected about this last weekend on Easter weekend where we went through the tragedy of Good Friday and then we came out into the hope of Easter Sunday.

But by raising Jesus to the life, God was not simply saying that Jesus was a momentary king of Israel, like David who decayed, but that Jesus is a king who reigns forever.

And what's more is Jesus is God's own son. And we see that in the Psalm 2 reference in verse 33. You are my son. Today I have become your father.

And as a son, he has become a king over everything that God has created. And finally, we see that in Jesus, all God's promises and amens have been fulfilled.

[10:42] All of them are yes and amen in Jesus. Now ordinarily, this would be astounding news, and it is astounding news. But when we're going through a particularly tough time, as we are at the moment, these words are the words of life.

These words are words of hope. And in Jesus, we have a living hope and a king who hears us, who came down to earth, who suffered in the same way that we do, who died, but who is resurrected and reigns with God now forever.

And the point of all this, of what Paul has been saying, comes in verse 38. And you can tell that by the therefore that he puts there. Therefore, my friends, I want you to know that through Jesus, the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you.

And this is Paul's third point, that God offers complete forgiveness for the sins of all people. So the question there for us is, what are God's promises going to look like for us?

It's all very well that we read about these promises, but what do they mean for us? What do they look like for us? And the answer is forgiveness of sins. Just look down at verse 39 and see how astounding this promise is.

[12:03] Through him, that's through Jesus, everyone who believes is set free from every sin. A justification you are not able to obtain under the law of Moses.

And it's a promise that's astounding in its scope. See what he says there? Everyone. Here, forgiveness is not simply just for the goody two-shoes. It's not for the vicar.

It's not for the one preaching or speaking. It's not simply for the Jew, for the person who's of the right ethnicity. But it's a universal offer of forgiveness, no matter who you are or what you have done.

And it's unfathomable in its depth. It's a forgiveness of every sin. There's nothing done in creation that God does not know about.

He sees everything. His eye goes everywhere. He sees it all, and he chooses to forgive it and forget. And by sending his son, his son dies on the cross for us for those things that we have done.

[13:08] Well, recently I heard the story about a chap. It was a very third-party story, but about a chap who had an immaculate lawn. It was one of those lawns with that two-and-a-half-inch grass where every blade was perfectly cut and the exact same height and faced the same way.

And a friend of his son's had a truck, a Ford 250. If you're English, you probably don't know what that is, but it's a massive truck with great big tractor tires on it.

And one night, this friend of his son's took this truck and started doing donuts on this lawn and absolutely tearing it up, wrecking this lawn, this man's pride and joy.

Well, the friend of his son went home and slept. But the next morning, he woke up with a terrible sense of guilt. Why had he done this?

Why had he been so cruel to his friend's father? And he went over to the house to ask forgiveness and to say sorry for what he had done. But what had happened in the night was that snow had fallen.

[14:17] And so he had come up the steps and he had knocked on the steps and he was greeted by the father. And he sheepishly said to him, look, sir, I'm very sorry, but I actually wrecked your lawn last night.

I tore it up in my truck. And the father looked at him and then looked at his lawn and he saw that the snow had completely covered the lawn.

All that carnage was covered over was absolutely forgotten and made as white as the driven snow. And that's what Jesus does for us and offers us in offering us forgiveness of sins.

All the carnage that we've done in our lives, all the carnage and the mess that we've made of it, Jesus covers over and he makes it as white as the driven snow. And it's a forgiveness that wipes away every wrong and every tear.

every time that you thought that you were better than someone else. It's a forgiveness that washes away every time you wished that someone else was dead.

[15 : 21] Every time you watched the wrong thing. Every time you wished that you had something that someone else had. Every little white lie you told. And it's such an astounding offer of forgiveness that Paul implores his audience to listen to him, to accept it, and to not make the same mistakes as the Jerusalem Jews did in verse 40.

Look, you scoffers, wander and perish, for I'm going to do something in your days that you'd never believe even if someone told you, listen up, is what Paul is saying.

Don't make the mistake, accept it. Accept the forgiveness that is offered to you in Jesus. And I wonder if where you are watching from tonight, this is an offer of salvation, an offer of forgiveness of sins that you have never accepted personally for yourself.

If that's so, why not accept it tonight? Why not say a short prayer together and accept that offer now? So a prayer is going to come up on the screen.

You might like to just close your eyes and say that now together. And it simply says sorry and asks God for forgiveness. Father, I'm sorry that I've turned away from you.

[16 : 42] Please forgive me, not because of anything I have done, but because of Jesus. Amen. Well, if you've prayed that, why not tell someone about it?

I'm sure there'll be someone in our welcome Zoom groups afterwards who'd love to chat to you. Well, and getting back to our story, initially, the crowd, having heard the sermon, are blown away by Paul's speech.

And so we read in verse 44 that on the next Sabbath, the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. But soon, the Jews, out of jealousy, start stirring up strife for Paul and Barnabas.

And the result is that Paul and Barnabas have to flee the city, and they resolve to go to the Gentiles, who we read in verse 48. They joyfully receive God's word.

So verse 48, when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord, and all who were appointed for eternal life believed. And so rather than hindering the spread of the gospel, the spread of God's word, the opposition actually propels God's word into more abundance and more fruitfulness in God's perfect plan.

[18 : 01] And constantly, throughout the book of Acts, we see the word being preached, going out, but we also see it being opposed. But we see the word spreading and having results despite the opposition.

And so the big work that we see God doing in the world here is God saving people from all nations despite opposition through Jesus, giving them eternal life as his word goes out.

Let's go on to consider our second point, and rather more shorter, that God's messenger of salvation is the apostle Paul. Now, at this point in the talk, this might seem like a bit of a handbrake turn to make.

And the reason for that is that chapter 13 in Acts is quite a big pivot point in Acts. So I remember at Bible College, when you do the exam on Acts, there are two options regarding questions.

You could either do the first half of Acts, chapters 1 to 12, in one question, or you could do the second half of Acts, 13 onwards, as one question. And everyone, 99% of people, chose the first question.

[19 : 15] And it's easy to see why if you're reading Acts 3 in one sitting. Acts 1 to 12, are the exciting bits of Acts. Those are the bits of Acts that we know and love.

But the second bit of Acts, from chapter 13 onwards, is marked by these long speeches that just go on and on and on. And so no one really wants to learn that for a big exam.

It's a lot more fun learning the first 12 chapters in Acts. But what we see in the first 12 chapters is lots of action all focused around the apostle Peter.

But in chapter 13, the action goes to focus on the apostle Paul as Paul takes the word out to the nations. It's easy enough for us to understand why we should listen to Peter.

Peter was Jesus' biggest disciple. He was the one that he asked to care for his church. But why listen to Paul?

[20 : 17] Paul never even met Jesus in the flesh. And Luke, anticipating this objection, writes these chapters so that we can realize that Paul is fully endorsed by the Lord Jesus as Jesus' chosen instrument and spokesperson.

See, it's often tempting for us to malign Paul or play him down. We like to say Jesus says the bits that we like, the love, love one another.

But Paul, he's got the bits that we are less keen on. All the really awkward bits that we kind of shuffle our feet around when we speak to our friends. But Luke wants us to understand that you cannot get a cigarette paper between Paul and Jesus.

Let me show that to you in a couple of ways. So I wonder if you've got your Bibles open, you might turn back to Acts chapter 9 and verse 15 where Paul, at Paul's conversion.

And I'll just read it for us, verse 15. This man, speaking of Paul, Jesus says to Ananias, is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel.

[21 : 33] And we've seen all of that fulfilled in Acts 13. we've seen how Paul has evangelized Sergius Paulus, the emissary of the kings of Rome, the senate, as it were, and how he's preached to the Jews in the city in Antioch.

And then we saw that Jesus, through commissioning Paul and Barnabas in the start of our reading in verse 2, set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work for which I have called them.

And then in verse 11, we see Paul's ministry being endorsed by a miraculous defeat of Elimas. And we see a wonderful miracle there that shows that his authority is from Jesus.

How else could he do that miracle? But then Luke also painfully sets out for us the parallels between Paul's and Jesus' ministry.

So if you think back, cast your mind back to Luke chapter 4 where Jesus starts his ministry, we see Jesus going into a synagogue. He preaches a wonderful sermon.

[22 : 42] The people are initially impressed but later they reject him. And then here in Acts 13, we see the exact same pattern happening.

And then look at verse 47 on our reading. For this is what the Lord has commanded us. I have made you a light for the Gentiles that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.

And this quotation coming from Isaiah 9, it is in Isaiah 49 even, it is speaking of Israel, the nation who are meant to be a light to the watching world.

They were meant to show God to the world that they might know God and be saved. But then right at the start of Luke in chapter 2 of Luke's gospel where Jesus, the baby Jesus is presented in the temple, we see Simeon praising God saying that he has seen God's salvation in the baby Jesus and that Jesus is the light for the Gentiles.

But here, Paul ascribes this to his ministry. He says here, this is what the Lord has commanded us, that he is a light to the Gentiles.

[23 : 59] And so what Luke is saying is that the risen Lord Jesus may be ascended in heaven, but he is working through his spirit-empowered messenger as he proclaims his word, the message of salvation and the forgiveness of sins to the Gentiles and to the ends of the earth.

Well, if you're anything like me, the temptation is when you're speaking to your friends over Zoom or chatting to your family, is that you'd want to play down Paul's words and play up Jesus' words.

And so what I do is, in essence, is I say the red bits are really important and the black bits, well, I can kind of take them if I want to. You can take or leave them.

And that's not right, is it? Luke says, if you reject Paul, you're rejecting Jesus. And so he warns us, doesn't he, in verse 41.

And in those words of Habakkuk, he warns us against scoffing against Paul. He says, look, you scoffers, wander and perish, for I'm going to do something in your days that you'd never believe, even if someone told you.

[25 : 07] And what's he saying to us? Listen up. Listen up to what Jesus is doing in the world and listen up to Paul. Don't play him down. Great.

So there's our two points there. God's message of salvation in Jesus is for all people. And it's that wonderful message of forgiveness. That no matter who you are, where you are, you can be right with God.

That you can be washed as white as the driven snow. And you can know true forgiveness. And that's hope, real hope, to a desperate time, in a desperate time for a desperate people.

And then secondly, that God's messenger of salvation is the apostle Paul. Don't neglect him. Let me pray for us as we close. So Father, we thank you for this wonderful passage in Acts. Lord, thank you for encouraging our hearts in it. Thank you for those wonderful sermons that Paul preached that we can read about here. Please help us to respond in life and faith and love throughout this week.

[26 : 14] In Jesus' name. Amen.