

Who Will Respond to the Gospel and Believe in Jesus?

Acts 13:44-52

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And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed. - Acts 13:48, ESV

As a pastor, it's interesting to see the reactions on people's faces while I'm preaching. I'm sometimes amazed how two different people can hear the same message and have two completely different reactions. Why do some people react to the Gospel so positively, while others react with strong disapproval?

In today's passage, we find Paul and Barnabas in the Synagogue at Pisidian Antioch on the next Sabbath, where they have been invited back to present the Gospel again. This time, massive crowds are filling the synagogue to overflow capacity. The Jewish leaders are filled with jealousy over the popularity of these new preachers, and they begin to contradict Paul and Barnabas' message and also to insult them, reviling Paul.

One thing is clear from Paul's reaction to this mistreatment: When anyone attacks, harasses, contradicts or reviles the Gospel, they lose. The Gospel does not change, does not become untrue and does not wither in the face of criticism. Rather, the critics of the Gospel lose, since they "*thrust it aside and judge [them]selves unworthy of eternal life.*" (v. 46)

So, Paul and Barnabas walk out of the synagogue and take the Gospel to the Gentiles. It is at this point that we're told, "*they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.*" Notice that Luke does not record that "as many as believed were appointed to eternal life." Their appointment to eternal life came first and then came their faith in Jesus Christ, as he was offered to them in the Gospel.

The wording of this verse reminds me of something Jesus said to the Pharisees in John 10:25-26: "*The works that I do in my Father's name bear witness about me, but you do not believe because you are not among my sheep.*" (ESV) Notice again that Jesus didn't say what we might expect. He didn't say, "You are not among my sheep because you do not believe." He said the exact opposite. Their lack of faith comes because they are not Jesus' sheep.

We cannot say with absolute authority that those who reject the Gospel at a given point in time do so because they are not appointed to eternal life. That's because they may later have a change of heart and come to faith in Jesus. What we can say is that all those who respond to the Gospel with genuine saving faith in Jesus do so because they are appointed to eternal life. Or, to use Jesus' words, they believe in Him because they are His sheep.

This truth is clearly taught repeatedly in the Bible, not only in John and Acts but in Romans, Ephesians and 1 Peter, too. When we understand and believe what God is telling us, it humbles us as believers and gives us great confidence at the same time. It humbles us to know that we were appointed by God to eternal life; we did not just believe in Jesus because we're smarter or better than unbelievers. We are also given great confidence because we know that our eternal life and our position in God's flock are not ultimately dependent on us. We're safe in the hands of Him who saved us by His grace and who will now keep us in that same grace.

Heavenly Father, Thank You for being so gracious to us, for saving us from our sin and drawing us to Christ. You are the giver of the gift of eternal life. We have received what You have graciously given. We rest in You and You alone. In Jesus' name, Amen.

