

Acts

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. (Acts 1:8 ESV)

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42 ESV)

Paul's Sermon In The Synagogue

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Acts 13:13-52

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Introduction:

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to Acts 13.

In this passage, Paul and Barnabas will make their way into the region of Galatia and – as is their practice – they will go straight to the Jewish synagogue. We have seen this pattern already, and we will see it all throughout Paul's missionary journeys. Paul *always* began in the synagogue. But what exactly did Paul *say* in those synagogues? In every other instance, we're simply told by way of summary that Paul preached. But *what* did he preach?

Our passage this morning is the one and only instance where Luke records for us the *content* of one of Paul's synagogue sermons. We have a lot of ground to cover this morning, so we're going to jump right in. Please look with me in your Bibles to Acts 13:13-52. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today.

Now Paul and his companions set sail from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia. And John left them and returned to Jerusalem,¹⁴ but they went on from Perga and came to Antioch in Pisidia. And on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down.¹⁵ After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent a message to them, saying, "Brothers, if you have any word of encouragement for the people, say it."¹⁶ So Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand said:

"Men of Israel and you who fear God, listen.¹⁷ The God of this people Israel chose our fathers and made the people great during their stay in the land of Egypt, and with uplifted arm he led them out of it.¹⁸ And for about forty years he put up with them in the wilderness.¹⁹ And after destroying seven nations in the land of Canaan, he gave them their land as an inheritance.²⁰ All this took about 450 years. And after that he gave them judges

until Samuel the prophet. ²¹ Then they asked for a king, and God gave them Saul the son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, for forty years. ²² And when he had removed him, he raised up David to be their king, of whom he testified and said, 'I have found in David the son of Jesse a man after my heart, who will do all my will.' ²³ Of this man's offspring God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, as he promised. ²⁴ Before his coming, John had proclaimed a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. ²⁵ And as John was finishing his course, he said, 'What do you suppose that I am? I am not he. No, but behold, after me one is coming, the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to untie.'

²⁶ "Brothers, sons of the family of Abraham, and those among you who fear God, to us has been sent the message of this salvation. ²⁷ For those who live in Jerusalem and their rulers, because they did not recognize him nor understand the utterances of the prophets, which are read every Sabbath, fulfilled them by condemning him. ²⁸ And though they found in him no guilt worthy of death, they asked Pilate to have him executed. ²⁹ And when they had carried out all that was written of him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb. ³⁰ But God raised him from the dead, ³¹ and for many days he appeared to those who had come up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are now his witnesses to the people. ³² And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, ³³ this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus, as also it is written in the second Psalm,

"'You are my Son,
today I have begotten you.'

³⁴ And as for the fact that he raised him from the dead, no more to return to corruption, he has spoken in this way,

"'I will give you the holy and sure blessings of David.'

³⁵ Therefore he says also in another psalm,

"'You will not let your Holy One see corruption.'

³⁶ For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep and was laid with his fathers and saw corruption, ³⁷ but he whom God raised up did not see corruption. ³⁸ Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, ³⁹ and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses. ⁴⁰ Beware, therefore, lest what is said in the Prophets should come about:

⁴¹ "'Look, you scoffers,
be astounded and perish;
for I am doing a work in your days,
a work that you will not believe, even if one tells it to you.'"

⁴² As they went out, the people begged that these things might be told them the next Sabbath. ⁴³ And after the meeting of the synagogue broke up, many Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who, as they spoke with them, urged them to continue in the grace of God.

⁴⁴ The next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. ⁴⁵ But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began to contradict what was spoken by Paul, reviling him. ⁴⁶ And Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, “It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. ⁴⁷ For so the Lord has commanded us, saying,

“I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.”

⁴⁸ 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. ⁴⁹ And the word of the Lord was spreading throughout the whole region. ⁵⁰ But the Jews incited the devout women of high standing and the leading men of the city, stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district. ⁵¹ But they shook off the dust from their feet against them and went to Iconium. ⁵² And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit. (Acts 13:13-52 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

As I mentioned, Luke has recorded this story to provide for us a glimpse into Paul’s ministry in the synagogues. So, let’s focus our attention in on this sermon.

The Sermon

First, I want to draw your attention to the approach:

1. The approach

We’re told in verse 15 that, after having read from the Law and the Prophets, Paul was invited to stand up to share a word of encouragement. This was standard practice in the Jewish synagogues. Paul and Barnabas would have introduced themselves to many in the congregation – including the rulers of that synagogue – and it was customary to invite the visiting Rabbi to speak.

So, they politely turned to Paul – the student of Gamaliel – and gave him the floor.

So, Paul spoke. His sermon is almost certainly an explanation of whatever the readings were that day from the Law and the Prophets. Most commentators agree that the synagogue leaders had

likely read from 2 Samuel 7 – a passage that highlights God’s covenant with David. So, Paul’s strategy was simple – he would highlight God’s promise to David, and he would demonstrate how that promise was fulfilled in Jesus. That’s the big idea in this sermon.

In his opening remarks in verses 16-19 he points to the time of the patriarchs, and he emphasizes God’s sovereign love in choosing His people and His tender mercy in *bearing with* His people in spite of their grumbling. Notice that Paul uses “we” and “our” language in these opening verses. He’s preparing his listeners to understand that Jesus is the fulfilment of *their* story.

In verses 20-22 he draws their attention to the time of the judges and the kings emphasizing that God set apart one king in particular – David – to whom He promised an eternal throne. Thus far in the sermon everyone in the synagogue is nodding along and agreeing with Paul.

But then, in verses 23-40, he draws their attention to John the Baptist who declared the arrival of Jesus – the son of David and the Son of God! We’re going to zoom in on this section in a moment, but first I want you to see the way that Paul masterfully made his argument from the Scriptures. Look again at verses 35-36. He knows that his listeners are going to struggle to identify Jesus as the Messiah, so he enlists another familiar passage to prove his case. We read:

Therefore he says also in another psalm,

“‘You will not let your Holy One see corruption.’

³⁶For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep and was laid with his fathers **and saw corruption** (Acts 13:35-36 ESV)

Paul is making this argument from Psalm 16. Psalm 16 was a Psalm of David, but Paul wants his listeners to see that David must have been writing about someone *other than himself* when he referred to this “Holy One.” He couldn’t have been referring to himself because David DID see corruption! David died. David was buried. David’s body decayed.

Many of Paul’s listeners would have been left thinking: “The Psalm really DOES seem to point towards a king who lives forever. That Psalm really COULDN’T find fulfilment in David. So, who is this Holy One? Who is this King?”

Paul raised that question in their minds, and then he pointed them to the glorious answer:

For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep and was laid with his fathers and saw corruption,³⁷ **but he whom God raised up did not see corruption.** (Acts 13:36-37 ESV)

Do you see what Paul is doing? He is meeting his listeners on their own terms! He is picking up these familiar promises and anticipations and he is demonstrating and declaring that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of ALL of it! That was Paul's *approach*. And that brings us now to the *press*.

2. The press

Paul started on common ground, but he wasted no time in directing the focus squarely on Jesus. First, he preached Christ crucified. We read in verses 27-28:

For those who live in Jerusalem and their rulers, because they did not recognize him nor understand the utterances of the prophets, which are read every Sabbath, **fulfilled them by condemning him.**²⁸ And though they found in him no guilt worthy of death, they asked Pilate to have him executed. (Acts 13:27-28 ESV)

The Messiah – the heir to David's throne – was crucified. In spite of his innocence, in fulfillment of the Scriptures, Jesus was rejected and put to death by his own people. But he did not stay in the grave! Paul goes on to declare:

But God raised him from the dead,³¹ and for many days he appeared to those who had come up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are now his witnesses to the people.³² And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers,³³ this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus (Acts 13:30-33a ESV)

THIS was the glorious news that Paul proclaimed in every synagogue! This is the news that we proclaim today! He is not dead! He is risen! Citing Psalm 2, Isaiah 55, and Psalm 16, Paul goes on to explain to his listeners that Jesus' life, death and resurrection was ALWAYS the plan! There is no relationship with God except through Jesus. Our sin separates us from God, and Jesus is the only one who can make us righteous. That's exactly what Paul says in verses 38-39:

Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you,³⁹ and by him **everyone who believes is freed** from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses. (Acts 13:38-39 ESV)

The word translated here as “freed” is from the Greek word for “justification¹”. This is perhaps Paul’s favourite word for describing the miracle of the gospel. As one commentator explains:

to “declare righteous” or “justify” means to acquit someone in a trial in which accusations of being guilty of wrongdoing have been made, to pronounce and treat the accused person as righteous.²

Apart from Jesus, we are all guilty. When we stand before God – the just and righteous One – all our words, thoughts, actions, and inactions will be exposed. On that day, the law of Moses will have no power to save us. It serves as a light to show the life that we *ought* to live and a mirror to reveal the life we *actually* live but it has no power to bring DEAD PEOPLE TO LIFE. Only Jesus can do that.

If we confess our sins and place our trust in Jesus, then the debt of our sin is placed upon him and it is paid in full at the cross. Everyone who believes in him is FREED – that is, everyone who believes in him is JUSTIFIED. It’s the same word. It means that we are declared righteous, in spite of all the evidence that should condemn us. As one commentator summarizes:

Paul’s main point is clear: the forgiveness that God provides through Jesus is total forgiveness, **an acquittal from everything**, without exception, that separates sinners from a righteous God.³

That’s why we call it “gospel” – that word literally means “good news!” Paul pressed his listeners with this gospel message, and then he called for a response.

3. The response

In verse 41, Paul concludes his sermon with a warning from the prophet Malachi:

¹ Δικαίω BDAG, s.v. “δικαίω,” 249.

² Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 584.

³ Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 584.

Beware, therefore, lest what is said in the Prophets should come about:

⁴¹ “Look, you scoffers,
be astounded and perish;
for I am doing a work in your days,
a work that you will not believe, even if one tells it to you.” (Acts 13:41 ESV)

In this conclusion, Paul is essentially pleading with his listeners. “So many of our brothers and sisters have already failed to recognize what God is doing! So many have rejected Jesus and are perishing! Beware! Don’t let that be you!”

Paul was direct in his evangelism, and we should be to. Heaven and hell are at stake. Everlasting life and everlasting death hang in the balance.

Paul met his listeners on common ground, he led them to Jesus, and then he called for a response. We read in the following verses that many believed! In fact, the following Sabbath, the *whole city* gathered to hear him preach!

But the Jewish leaders in the city grew jealous, and they stirred up the people to drive Paul and Barnabas out of the region. As Paul and Barnabas departed, they declared in verse 46:

“It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. (Acts 13:46b ESV)

Here, again, we see the pattern that Paul will follow throughout his ministry of preaching first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles. The Jews were the people to whom God first made His promise. God *chose* Abraham and declared that He would bless the nations *through* Abraham’s seed. Therefore, as one commentator explains:

The people of the promise must be the first to hear about the fulfillment of God’s promises to the fathers⁴

Paul essentially says to the Jews, “Brothers and sisters, this is YOUR good news! This is the fulfillment of God’s promise TO YOU! Don’t miss this!” Thankfully, many Jews put their trust in

⁴ Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 587-588.

Jesus. Tragically, many more did not. So, Paul and Barnabas turned to the Gentiles. As they exited the city, we read:

But they shook off the dust from their feet against them and went to Iconium. (Acts 13:51 ESV)

In performing this sign, Paul and Barnabas were indicating that they no longer recognized these Jews as children of the promise. By rejecting Jesus, they had departed from the true faith, and they themselves had become the outsiders.

So, that was the sermon. Luke included it here because it is indicative of the type of sermon that Paul preached in every Jewish synagogue whenever he was given opportunity. But, as we conclude, I want to spend some time thinking about how we can apply what we have learned here. I don't imagine that many of us will be invited to speak in a Jewish synagogue. But, can we draw any lessons from this example to help us with our evangelism to our neighbours? Our friends? Our co-workers? That's the question I'd like to ask before we move on from this passage.

What Can We Learn From This Example About Our Evangelistic Approach?

The first lesson is an obvious one:

1. Begin on common ground and bring your listeners to Jesus

When Paul delivered this sermon, he was in a Jewish synagogue. So, where did he begin? In the Old Testament! He drew their attention to the details of *their story* and from those details drew his listeners into *THE story*.

This isn't unique to his ministry to the Jews. Paul will adopt the exact same approach when he evangelizes unbelieving pagans in Athens. Flip ahead to Acts 17:22-23 where we read:

So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious.²³ For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: 'To the unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, **this I proclaim to you.** (Acts 17:22-23 ESV)

Everywhere Paul went he found common ground and began his evangelism there. This is the approach that he commends in his letter to the Corinthians:

I have become **all things** to **all people**, that by all means I might save some. (1 Corinthians 9:22b ESV)

Now, Paul is not saying here that we should change the gospel message to suit the desires of our listeners. To be clear, the gospel that Paul preached NEVER changed. Paul later wrote to these same Galatians, and warned:

If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed. (Galatians 1:9b ESV)

So the MESSAGE doesn't change. But the APPROACH *can* and *should* change.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to evangelism. Every person that you talk to is unique. The gospel conversation that you have with your atheist neighbour is going to look entirely different than the conversation that you will have with your Muslim co-worker. They're starting in entirely different places with entirely different objections. This, by the way, is one of the reasons why our kids are in their classrooms right now. You explain the gospel differently to 5-year-olds than you do to 85-year-olds.

Good evangelists learn how to *listen*. Good evangelists learn how to *observe*. Good evangelists are humble enough to *adapt*. Become all things to all people that by all means you might win some! Find the felt need. Find the common ground. Start there. And then lead them to Jesus.

The second lesson that we learn from this story is a painful lesson. In our evangelism we need to:

2. Recognize that there is a time to move on

Having been rejected by the Jewish leaders, Paul and Barnabas departed to the next city – shaking the dust from their sandals on their way out. G. Campbell Morgan observes:

The principle involved in that statement is that when people have heard the offer of the age-abiding life through the crucified Christ, if they will not accept it, it is the duty of the prophet, the apostle, the evangelist, to turn to others.⁵

This is a difficult lesson for us.

In fact, I wonder how many of us would have suffered from a great deal of guilt and shame if we were in Paul's shoes. As we left the city, how many of us would have been asking: "Have I done enough? Am I leaving too soon? Am I a quitter? Am I a coward?"

Let me ask you a question: Right now in your life, who are actively seeking to evangelize?

Here's a follow up question: Is this person the same person that you were pursuing a year ago? Two years ago? Five years ago?

Perhaps it is time to shake the dust from your sandals and to focus your attention elsewhere.

Now, to be clear, this principle doesn't apply to your family. God has bound you to those people and – for as long as they have breath – you give them all you've got.

However, if you've been giving all of your time and attention to co-worker Bob for five years – then perhaps it's time to start giving your time and attention to co-worker Steve instead. Rather than spending a lifetime trying to press one seed through a block of granite, give your life to throwing handfuls of seed over wide patches.

That's not to say that God is done with the person you've been working with. He's never done! You just might not be the one to see the end result.

In fact, one of the details that I didn't mention earlier is that Paul's sermon here is filled with overlap from Stephen's sermon before he was executed. Remember that story? Do you remember that Paul was the one who watched everyone's coats while Stephen was murdered? In those final

⁵ G. Campbell Morgan, *The Acts Of The Apostles* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1924), 337.

moments, I don't imagine that Stephen thought his message was getting through to Paul. But here, some ten years later, Paul is regurgitating it seemingly *word for word*.

Paul had heard Stephen's defence, and had never escaped the power of it.⁶

It may be time to move on, but that doesn't mean you've failed. Remind yourself that God's not done. Turn your attention to the next person that God has placed in your life. And, as you do that:

3. Trust that God is already working

As we conclude, I want to draw your attention to this amazing detail in verse 48:

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 one commentator observes:

“All who were appointed for eternal life believed” suggests that belief in Christ is not just a matter of one's faith but primarily involves divine appointment.⁷

In theological terms, what we are seeing here is referred to as the doctrine of *election*. And, if I can be honest, in my younger years I *rejected and despised* this doctrine and I did my very best to ignore verses like this. “What's even the point!” I would object, “If God has already appointed some to eternal life but not others, then why should we even bother sharing the gospel?”

I thought that this doctrine was a *hindrance* to evangelism. But now, I see that the exact opposite is true!

As Paul preached in Galatia, he KNEW that nothing and no one could stand in the way of what God had planned. Paul understood that there were people in Galatia *who had been appointed to eternal life*, and that not a single one of them would be lost! He knew that those whom God had

⁶ G. Campbell Morgan, *The Acts Of The Apostles* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1924), 325.

⁷ Richard N. Longenecker, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary (John - Acts)*, ed. Frank A. Gaebelein, vol. 9, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 430.

predestined would most certainly be glorified! In fact, that's exactly what he writes to the Romans:

For those whom he foreknew **he also predestined** to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, **and those whom he justified he also glorified.** (Romans 8:29-30 ESV)

Think of this doctrine of predestination like a dog whistle. If you went into a crowded park and blew a dog whistle, what would happen? People would pass you by without noticing a thing. Birds would fly by unbothered. Kids would keep playing. But every dog would immediately perk up and look to you.

The doctrine of election teaches that the elect will respond to the gospel in the same way that a dog responds to a dog whistle. God has given them ears to hear. Paul BELIEVED this! He believed that everywhere he went he would encounter men, women, boys and girls who had been set apart before the foundation of the world to receive and believe the gospel of Jesus Christ!

So he preached! He preached even as crowds mocked him. He preached even after the previous town tried to kill him! He preached even though he witnessed countless rejections on a daily basis.

Because the doctrine of election does not nullify evangelism. It EMPOWERS it! As you go into your school – as you go into your workplace – as you fly into a distant land to speak to an unreached people group – you can be sure that there are people there who – unbeknownst to them – are just WAITING for someone to BLOW THE WHISTLE! As Paul writes in Romans 10:

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? ¹⁵ And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!" (Romans 10:14-15 ESV)

"As many as were appointed to eternal life believed." That's what the Word of God says. Let me ask you, do you believe it? Because this is a GAME CHANGER! This takes all your fears and excuses and insecurities about evangelism and runs them through the shredder.

I don't know who they are, but there are people in this city who are one conversation away from a transformed life! Paul believed this. He watched as the eyes of particular men and women in the congregation lit up with wonder as he preached the gospel. And that privilege – that joy – enabled him to endure all the setbacks and discouragements. Paul and Barnabas were forced out of Galatia, but we read:

the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit. (Acts 13:52 ESV)

There is no greater joy than that which comes from leading someone to Christ! Have you experienced it? Let this be the week. Get out into the world. Share the hope that you have with anyone who will listen. Blow the whistle! And watch what God does!

As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” (Romans 10:15b ESV)

Let's pray together.