

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

by

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

THE PREACHING OF THE FIRST MISSIONARIES

(Acts 13:13-52)

OUTLINE

Key verse - 47

A continuation of the first missionary journey.

Paul becomes leader - **“Paul and his company.”**

They sailed from Paphos to Perga - traveled on to Antioch in Pisidia. About 500 miles since they had left Antioch in Syria.

1. The sovereignty of God shown. An historical review.
2. Christ's deity shown.

- A. The testimony of John the Baptist.
- B. The testimony of fulfilled prophecy.
- C. The testimony of Christ's resurrection.

3. God's grace manifested.
4. Forgiveness of sin promised.

- A. Not by the law.
- B. Through faith in Christ - we are justified by faith.

5. Earnest warning given.
6. Results of the sermon.

- A. Inquiry.
- B. Increased attendance.
- C. Opposition aroused, then persecution.
- D. Many won to Christ.
- E. The word spread abroad.
- F. The disciples filled with joy.

This passage records a continuation of the first foreign missionary journey. It tells us something of what they said as well as where they went and the results of their work. Paul henceforth becomes leader of the missionary group. At first they were spoken of as, “**Barnabas and Saul,**” now they are mentioned as “**Paul and his company**” (13:13).

From Paphos, on the island of Cyprus, they set sail and came to Perga in Pamphylia. They sailed northward from Cyprus to the coast of Asia Minor. They did not stop to work in Perga, but passed on through it and the province of Pamphylia until they came to Antioch in Pisidia. Over the course which they had come they must have traveled nearly five hundred miles from Antioch in Syria to Antioch in Pisidia.

At Perga John Mark left the company of missionaries and returned to Jerusalem. The journey up over the mountains from Perga to Antioch was a very difficult one. The climate at sea level, at Perga, was laden with malaria, and on beyond in the mountains there were robber bands. The road was beset with dangers on every hand. It is likely that the knowledge of this caused Mark to turn back. No reason is given in this connection, but when the second missionary journey was to be undertaken Paul would not consent to take Mark again, evidently because he felt that he lacked sufficient courage, since he had turned back on a former journey. It is always a blow, both to the missionaries and the whole church, when a missionary proves unstable. However, in the case of Mark, the failure was not permanent. He became a faithful worker later and regained the confidence of Paul. Mark’s example is a warning to any young man who may propose to undertake a work for Christ for which he is not fully consecrated.

Jesus emphasized the necessity of careful consideration when men promise to follow Him. They should be ready to bear the cross. On the other hand, if a young disciple does err and fall away, he should not despair but resolve to trust henceforth wholly in Christ that he may not yield to temptation in the future.

Sir William Ramsay has presented a long argument to show that, at Perga, Paul took the malaria and was sick; and in order to find a remedy he hastened on, with great difficulty, up to the higher altitude and cooler climate of Antioch. His argument, though it sounds quite plausible, is based upon conjecture. Paul passed through enough real dangers and trials which are recorded that we do not need to spend time upon those which are merely imaginary.

Coming then to Antioch, the point of interest in this passage, the first record of the work of Paul and his company was in the Synagogue on the Sabbath. When they entered the Synagogue they sat down and waited for the rulers to open the service and invite them to speak. As was their custom on every Sabbath, a passage was read from the law and another from the prophets. It is probable that we can point out those very passages today. Paul, in the opening of his sermon, used three words which are rare, but which are found in Isaiah 1:2, and in Deuteronomy 1:31, 38. Even to this day, we are told by an old commentator (Bengel), these two passages are read on the same Sabbath in the Synagogue. So it seems evident that Paul began with references to the very portions of Scripture which had just been read in the hearing of all the people. Paul was an adept in using as a starting point that which was upon the minds of the people to whom he spoke. He knew that in order to convince them he must first secure their favorable attention.

When Paul was given an opportunity to speak he began without hesitation, but in a calm and graceful manner: **“Then Paul stood up, and beckoning with his hand said, Men of Israel, and ye that fear God, give audience”** (13:16). Then follows a synopsis of the first recorded sermon of Paul. It is interesting to note how Paul would begin with an audience such as this, made up of both Jews and Gentiles, and how he would present the Gospel so as to appeal to all of his hearers. This is a marked similarity in it to the defense of Stephen. No doubt that address always remained, as a burning message, in the mind of Paul. There is also a similarity to the sermon of Peter at Pentecost.

THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD SHOWN

Paul began with an historical review of Israel. It is not merely a recital of historical incidents in order to fill in time, or to make an impression. Paul had a definite point in view, namely, to impress upon his hearers the sovereignty, or divine government of God in Israel’s history. It was told to emphasize what God did, not merely what men did.

It is interesting to note that, in every instance, the act is attributed to God, as Paul touches upon some points of the history of Israel. **“God of this people of Israel chose our fathers”; “and exalted the people when they dwelt as strangers in the land of Egypt, and with an high arm brought he them out of it”; “And about the time of forty years suffered he their manners in the wilderness”; “he had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan”; “he divided their land to them by lot”; “And after that he gave unto them judges about the space of four hundred and fifty years, until Samuel the prophet”; “God gave unto them Saul the son of Cist, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, by the space of forty years”; “he had removed him”; “he raised up unto them David to be their king”; “to whom also he gave testimony”** concerning David, He caused David to do His will. (13:17-22).

It was the same supreme, miracle-working, all-powerful God, who, from the seed of David, according to promise, **“raised unto Israel a Saviour, Jesus”** (13:23). Jesus did not come by mere accident or process of evolution; he came by the will and according to the sovereign direction of God. Therefore whosoever received Jesus, received God, and whosoever rejects Jesus, rejects God. As in the ages past safety and the favor of God lay in doing His will, so in the present time safety and blessing lies in accepting the Saviour whom he has given.

CHRIST’S DEITY SHOWN

Paul presented, first, the testimony of John the Baptist. The people recognized John the Baptist as a great man, a prophet who had arisen among them. They would have been pleased to receive him as their leader and deliverer, but John would not receive any honor for himself. He said, I am not worthy to unloose His shoe-latchet. He told them that he had been sent merely to announce the immediate coming of the Messiah. His work was to point out the Christ. He did point him out to the people of Israel. We have, therefore, the evidence of John, the forerunner of Jesus, the greatest of all the prophets, that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. John preached repentance in order that the people might be ready. All who will repent today, who are willing to do the will of God, shall be fitted for knowing and receiving Christ.

Paul presented, as a second source of evidence, the testimony of fulfilled prophecy. The act of the rulers of the Jews in condemning Christ is a fulfillment of prophecy. **“He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not”** (Isaiah 53:3). The act of the Jews and Romans in slaying Jesus is another fulfillment of prophecy. He was led as a lamb to the slaughter. He was cut off out of the land of the living: **“He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth. He was taken from prison and from judgment: and who shall declare his generation? for he was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgression of my people was he stricken”** (Isaiah 53:7-8). When He was taken from the Cross and laid in the grave He fulfilled another prophecy. **“And he made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death; because he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth”** (53:9).

Paul presented, as a third source of evidence, the testimony of Christ’s resurrection. **“But God raised him from the dead”** (13:30). Many days passed and many witnesses saw Him after He had risen from the dead. There are also prophecies which speak of His resurrection. God testified in the second Psalm that He is His Son. He promised that David should not lack a man to sit upon his throne. He is the King who is to sit on the throne of David forever. In the sixteenth Psalm God has said He would not give His **“Holy One to see corruption”** (Psalm 16:10). This evidently cannot refer to David because he did see corruption, but Jesus whom God raised up did not see corruption: **“But he, whom God raised again, saw no corruption. Be it known unto you therefore, men and brethren, that through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins”** (13:37-38).

That Paul took up a similar line of argument to that of Stephen and that he quoted some of the same passages as did Peter is not strange. Paul and Stephen and Peter were all familiar with the history of Israel and the prophecies which their teachers told them spoke of the coming Messiah. They were all guided by the Holy Spirit and they used those passages which were most clear and convincing in proving that Jesus was the Christ.

GOD’S GRACE MANIFESTED

There are Pauline features in this passage. One of them is that he speaks of “justification” which is so prominently used by Paul in Romans and Galatians. Another is that he speaks of “grace” and ever where he does not use the word he emphasizes the fact. He **“persuaded them to continue in the grace of God”** (13:43). If they continued in grace they must first have experienced the grace of God in their hearts. The apostle Paul uses the word, grace, more frequently than any other writer of the New Testament. If we should divide the writing of Paul, not merely into chapters, but into paragraphs according to their content, we would find that the word, grace, is used at least once in every one. Paul was evidently at this time, near the beginning of his ministry, accustomed to preach the grace of God.

The grace of God is manifest in Paul’s argument. Israel needed grace; God bare them as a nursing father in their weakness.

He dealt gently with them in their waywardness when they wanted a king. He chose them; He was long-suffering in dealing with them; and at last, though they were wholly undeserving, He brought them a Saviour. Paul recognized, in his own life, that he owed all to the grace of God. He said: **“By the grace of God I am what I am.”** He recognized, also, that Israel owed all to the grace of God. They had no claim upon a Saviour; it was due to the grace of God that He had given them a Saviour. Would Israel, then, not realize the undeserved favor which God had showed to them, be moved by His love, and accept Christ as their Saviour? Will not all men who read, or who hear, this sermon of Paul turn from all reliance upon self and believe that Jesus Christ came to be their Saviour? **“By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God”** (Ephesians 2:8).

FORGIVENESS OF God PROMISED

Now we come to a distinctively Pauline passage. **“Be it known unto you therefore, men and brethren, that through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins: And by him all that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses”** (13:38-39). Did not these people seek forgiveness of sins? Does not every worshipper, in some way or other, seek remission of sins? How are we to find forgiveness? How are we to appear just in the sight of God? Paul gives both a negative and a positive answer.

Paul’s negative answer is this: we cannot be justified by the law of Moses. The people of Israel had obeyed the ceremonial law, and they had been right in obeying it in former years. They offered sacrifices, but those sacrifices were not sufficient to pay the price of their sins. They were of value only as they pointed to another and a greater sacrifice, namely, the sacrifice of Christ upon the Cross. That sacrifice had been made. The law was fulfilled. The law was of no value in itself. It had no power to do anything for a man. It found men in sin and it left them so. Men can only be legally right by being perfect; manifesting perfect righteousness in the sight of God. This they cannot do. Consequently the law can do nothing for them. It can never justify any man in the sight of God. This they are unable to do, for no man is perfect. Consequently the law can do nothing for them. It can never justify any man in the sight of God. What then can we do?

We can turn to Christ, which is Paul’s positive answer: **“by him all that believe are justified from all things.”** We cannot be justified by the law, but we can be justified through faith in Christ. That sounds like a simple, it sounds like an easy way to be justified in the sight of God. It is, and Christ intended that it should be so, in order that all might be able to pay the price, and that none might have an excuse. Paul tells us elsewhere that we are **“Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus”** (Romans 3:24-26). **“Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified”** (Galatians 2:16).

No man can make himself just in the sight of God, but Paul made clear the fact that God is willing to receive Christ in the place of sinners: that Jesus was willing to take the place of sinners; that God laid on Him our iniquity; and that this satisfied the law. The man who is in union with Christ is looked upon as just, and in order that we may be in union with Him faith is the only necessary requisite. Those, therefore, who believe are justified, not merely from a part of their sins, but from every sin. All charges which were against them are withdrawn, and in God's sight they are looked upon as just.

This was a revolutionary message to the Jews in that day. When Paul at first heard it he did not believe it. When the Jews in Antioch heard it the most of them did not believe it. They thought that there was something left for them to do that they might appear just in God's sight. Men, everywhere, feel that they must have some part in clearing themselves in the sight of God. They want to do penance for their sins; they want to pay a price; they feel that they must at least pay a part of the cost that they may be justified. It is such a blessed fact that amazes men. No wonder that they are astonished! Christ has paid it all! Believe! Only Believe!

When Luther first grasped the meaning of this great fact on the Lateran staircase in Rome, it sent him home in ecstasies of delight. When others, following him, began to grasp its great significance it shook the world. When men in greater numbers over the world understand its meaning, and lay hold of Christ in faith, it will not become a smaller wonder but a greater one. It shall be the cause of lifting hearts and voices to Christ in resounding praise for ever and ever.

EARNEST WARNING GIVEN

Christ is not like some material gift which can be taken or left without any important difference. Paul warns men of the danger of neglecting to receive Him. **“Beware therefore, lest that come upon you, which is spoken of in the prophets; Behold, ye despisers, and wonder, and perish: for I work a work in your days, a work which ye shall in no wise believe, though a man declare it unto you”** (13:40-41).

The prophet referred to is Habakkuk. The central thought of Habakkuk was, like that of Paul, justification by faith: **“the just shall live by his faith”** (Habakkuk 2:4). Those who wandered from the way and would not trust God in faith were facing danger. God warned Jerusalem that she should be destroyed by the Lord if her people did not turn to him. The secret of security then, as in Paul's day, and in our day, was, and is trust in the Lord. There was an eternal contrast, then as now, between the righteous and the wicked. The people to whom Habakkuk spoke would not repent and would not believe. Will you be like them, says Paul? Will you also choose to perish? Will you not rather believe and be saved?

One of the present-day evangelists is using a card on one side of which is the question, “What must I do to be saved?” and following it are Scripture passages which point out the way of salvation. On the other side of the card is the question, “What must I do to be lost?” and the answer follows, “Nothing.” Do not believe in Christ; allow your soul to remain in sin, and you are surely lost. It is not necessary to engage in all the vices of the world in order to be lost, all that you need to do is to neglect Christ.

Dr. Maclaren used to tell of an old rabbi who said to his disciples, “A man should repent the day before he dies.” The disciples answered him, “but we do not know when we are going to die.” “Then,” said he, “Repent today.” There are smiling little villages all around the base of Vesuvius, the volcanic mountain of Italy, and the people rejoice and sing there; and they tend their little vineyards, and seem never to remember that the white wreaths of smoke from the cone at the top may one day darken, and the lava flood come down the sides and bury them. Let me put to you a plain question, If you knew that tomorrow you were to stand before God’s judgment seat, what would you do tonight? Then do it. **“To day if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts”** (Hebrews 4:7), but, **“Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house”** (Acts 16:31).

RESULTS OF THE SERMON

The results of Paul’s sermon were evident. Different persons were moved in different ways. At first they nearly all became inquirers. **“And when the Jews were gone out of the synagogue, the Gentiles besought that these words might be preached to them the next Sabbath”** (13:42). Some no doubt wished to hear that they might find reason to criticize. Others wished to hear that they might know more of Christ. Paul and Barnabas urged those who were believers to continue in the grace of God.

Another result was, increased attendance. The next Sabbath the attendance was wonderfully increased. **“And the next Sabbath day came almost the whole city together to hear the word of God”** (13:44). That would be no small audience because Antioch, as is shown by the ruins today, was a large city. There were multitudes present to hear Paul. No doubt there were many more than could be accommodated in the synagogue. In all probability Paul found it necessary to address the crowd in the open air as Jesus had done. This had its advantages and its disadvantages. Paul wanted to reach the people. Nothing pleased him better than to have the opportunity of proclaiming the Gospel abroad to the world. But this very popularity made the Jews jealous.

A third result was, therefore, that opposition was aroused which soon developed into persecution. Many of the Jews began to contradict Paul and to blaspheme the name of Christ. Paul and Barnabas would not endure to hear the name of the Lord used in blasphemy, and they spoke out boldly, and said, **“It was necessary that the word of God should first have been spoken to you: but seeing ye put it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, lo, we turn to the Gentiles. For so hath the Lord commanded us, saying, I have set thee to be a light of the Gentiles, that thou shouldest be for salvation unto the ends of the earth”** (13:46-47). This brought joy to the Gentiles. They glorified the Word of God and many of them believed. It turned the Jews, however, into a state of fury, who stirred up the chief men and women of the city until they persecuted Paul and Barnabas and cast them out of their borders.

If this were all that we were told of this first recorded sermon of Paul it would sound like a disastrous ending. But it is not all: there were many who were won to Christ. This is a fourth important result. **“as many as were ordained to eternal life believed”** (13:48). The apostles had reason to rejoice notwithstanding the opposition and persecution.

Even if they were not permitted to remain in Antioch to preach any longer the Word would not perish for there were those there who believed and who would cherish it and teach it. It has always been so, that the earnest teaching or preaching of the Gospel caused division. It is not always so marked as upon this occasion. But it is ever true that some will believe and some will not believe. A revival stirs up the foes as well as the friends of Christ. But opposition never has and never can stop the progress of the Gospel.

A fifth result was that the Word spread abroad through the whole region. It is amazing how the Gospel spreads when the Spirit of God is working. The glory of the Lord is made to shine in the hearts of men. They realize the love of Christ and they receive Him. The humble and earnest and enduring spirit of His followers, which is shown more clearly in the presence of opposition, often awakens men to seek the love of Christ in the hearts of His ministers. They are led to seek Him as their own Saviour. Just as the captain of a sea-going vessel would rather see a storm than a fog, so the minister of Christ would rather see opposition aroused than calm and unconcerned indifference to the Gospel.

The last result of Paul's sermon is the most surprising, at least it is a surprising fact to the world. **“And the disciples were filled with joy, and with the Holy Ghost”** (13:52). The whole church was persecuted, Paul and Barnabas driven from the city, forced to flee to Iconium, and yet the disciples who were left, yes and no doubt also the disciples were forced to flee, were filled with joy. Sometimes opposition makes missionaries morose and fills them with discouragement. This is not surprising, and yet it is not true of the man who is filled with the Holy Spirit. In the midst of every sort of opposition he finds joy in Christ.

Paul said later to the Romans that nothing could separate him from the love of God which was in Christ Jesus his Lord. He said still later to the Philippians that he had learned in whatever state he was therewith to be content. He was then in prison, he had been in prison for years, and yet he was happy and content. Then he had long experience in the Christian life; he had endured many persecutions. But even at the beginning of his missionary work when persecuted and driven out from Antioch he was not only content, but filled with joy. We think that it is a splendid thing to see that spirit in the elders, but it is also a blessed thing to see in the younger Christians, as it was in the disciples at Antioch. May the spirit of joy and the Holy Spirit remain in us in the midst of every discouragement and trial!

The question should be answered by every one, what effect does Paul's sermon - every sermon - have upon us? Are we better or are we worse? The reading or hearing of the Word brings us face to face with Christ. Are we drawn nearer to Him, or are we at greater enmity to Him? Do we believe in Christ as our Saviour? Are we justified by faith? Are our sins forgiven through Him? Or do we judge ourselves unworthy of eternal life? That decision must be faced by every one of us as it was by the Jews and Gentiles of Antioch. May we face it seriously, honestly and believingly! May Christ be ours and we be His!

May we here and now have eternal life! **“He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life”** (John 3:36).

QUESTIONS
(Acts 13:13-52)

1. Who appears to become leader of the missionary company?
2. How do you distinguish between the two Antiochs mentioned in this chapter?
3. About how far had the missionaries traveled since they left Antioch in Syria?
4. What became of John Mark at this time and why?
5. Why did Paul go into the synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia? Did he make use of the opportunity?
6. What doctrine was Paul bringing out in his historical review?
7. Through what three lines of evidence did Paul prove the Deity of Christ?
8. Of which of these points were there still living witnesses at that time?
9. What do you say as to the strength of the evidence when fulfilled prophecy is supported by living witnesses?
10. What two passages did Paul quote, to prove Christ's Deity, which Peter had quoted at Pentecost?
11. Through whom did Paul say we are to be forgiven?
12. By whom are we to be justified? How are we to be justified?
13. What New Testament writer emphasizes grace more than any other?
14. Why was it so hard for the Jews to believe in justification by faith?
15. What is the substance of the warning which Paul uttered?
16. What is necessary for us that we may not perish?
17. What were some of the results of Paul's sermon?
18. May we expect opposition today when the multitudes turn out to hear the Gospel?
19. Were any won to Christ? May we expect a similar result from our preaching?
20. May we expect Christ's disciples to be filled with joy even though they meet with serious opposition?

~ end of chapter 23 ~

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