

Lesson 20: Acts 13:13-52 Paul's Speech in the Synagogue of Promise and Fulfillment

Introduction

One way Luke communicates the theology of the Gospel is by providing for us speeches made by Stephen, Peter, and Paul.

In the first half of Acts, Luke provided for us the one long speech by Stephen and six speeches from the mouth of Peter. The longest speeches from Peter came at Pentecost and after healing the lame man. Peter also made two short speeches on trial before the Sanhedrin. And he gave a speech at Cornelius' house and then one more in Jerusalem, defending his actions at Cornelius' house.

In the second half of Acts, just as we had six speeches from Peter, we get six speeches from Paul. The first three speeches are delivered during the three missionary journeys, each to a very different audience. We have this speech in a synagogue in Pisidian Antioch. Then we will have a speech to a gathering of philosophers in Athens. And one more farewell speech to the elders of the church in Ephesus. The later three speeches are all examples of Paul making a defense of his Gospel ministry before a Jewish crowd, before the Roman Felix and before the King Agrippa.

The speech we are addressing in this lesson is unique as the only example of what Paul said while preaching in a synagogue. And he spoke often in synagogues across the Eastern Roman Empire. This is our only example of the kind of teaching he gave.

As we go through the speech, I will draw your attention to the similarity between Paul and Peter's speeches to a Jewish audience. And I will point out connections in this speech with Paul's later letter to the Romans. Looking back at Peter's speeches and ahead to Paul's later self reveals a consistency of teaching about the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the first generation of the Church. Paul agrees with Peter. Paul also agrees with his later self. He may continue to mature in his knowledge and experience of the Gospel. You hope he does! But his maturity moves him deeper into the basic Gospel truths; not away from those truths on to something else.

The structure of our text has a short introductory arrival in Pisidian Antioch, followed by a long speech in the synagogue, concluding with a description of the response of Jews and Gentiles in the city. We start with Barnabas and Paul arriving. This is in Acts 13:13-15.

Paul and Barnabas Arrive in Pisidian Antioch (13:13–15)

¹³ Now Paul and his companions put out to sea from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia; but John left them and returned to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ But going on from Perga, they arrived at Pisidian Antioch, and on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down. ¹⁵ After the reading of the Law and the Prophets the synagogue officials sent to them, saying, "Brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say it."

Paul and Barnabas have sailed north from Paphos on Cyprus to the coast of what is modern-day Turkey. Luke gives us a very brief travel log, "But going on from Perga, they arrived at Pisidian Antioch." That very short statement took 200 kilometers, or 125 mile journey into a mountainous region. So that was some exertion. In our next lesson, when we move on to Iconium, I will consider some of the geography of Asia Minor and the possible ministry strategy Paul and Barnabas were operating under.

John Mark did not participate on that trek inland. Scholars have guessed that maybe he didn't appreciate the shift that was taking place between the leadership of Barnabas and Paul, as Paul became more prominent as the missionary journey went on. Maybe he disagreed with Paul's invitation to Gentiles that they enter into the Kingdom without practicing customs of the Mosaic Law. Maybe he disagreed with the arduous plan to strike inland. Maybe he struggled with pride and submitting to Paul. Maybe there were personality tensions. He just didn't get along with Paul. I have

been taught that the number one reason missionaries leave the field is that they cannot get along with other missionaries. It could be as simple as that. And we get no hint here that John Mark's leaving was a negative thing. But later we will see that it left a very bad impression on Paul. It is not surprising that Luke gives us just this brief comment without saying more. This is Luke kind of alerting us to something that is going to come. It is kind of a cliffhanger, or a foreshadowing in the text. It is consistent with his style of making side references that prepare us for a story once we get to it. We'll come back to what Paul and Barnabas thought about John Mark and his leaving them.

So they continue on without him, arriving at this city, Pisidian Antioch. They may have had other interactions in the city before the Sabbath day. But Luke takes us directly to that speech in the synagogue. Now, even though Barnabas and Paul had probably never been to this part of Asia Minor, they would have found the synagogue quite familiar. It would be like growing up in a Christian denomination. You know, if you grew up in a Christian church and you visit a city that you've never been to, and showing up at a church, there's another one that is the same denomination you grew up in, or it's pretty much the same, you know exactly how to find out when services starts. You have a good idea about how you're going to be greeted when you go in. You know if you just kind of walk in and sit down, people will mostly leave you alone. You know where to go, when to stand, when to sit. They might not understand the conversation in the local language; that's something kind of new, going to a new city, but their knowledge of Hebrew, and Aramaic, and Greek means that it's going to be no problem for them to communicate. A Psalm would be sung, prayers would be made, Scripture would be read, an exposition of the Scripture would be given. Sounds familiar, doesn't it? It's because our New Covenant Church experience is based off of synagogue patterns. So as visitors, especially with Barnabas being a Levite and Paul being a trained Pharisee, they could expect being asked to speak.

Paul and Barnabas were a long way from Israel, but the cultural distance for them in this place, in a synagogue, it's not very distant. These may not be exactly their people, but they were very, very close.

And as they probably expected, they were indeed asked to speak. Verse 15,

After the reading of the Law and the Prophets the synagogue officials sent to them, saying, "Brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say it."

All right! Let's consider what Paul said. Acts 13:16-41.

Paul Preaches in the Synagogue (13:16-41)

¹⁶ 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 an uplifted arm He led them out from it. ¹⁸ "For a period of about forty years He put up with them in the wilderness. ¹⁹ "When He had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, He distributed their land as an inheritance—*all of which took* about four hundred and fifty years. ²⁰ "After these things 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 "After He had removed him, He raised up David to be their king, concerning whom He also testified and said, 'I HAVE FOUND DAVID the son of Jesse, A MAN AFTER MY HEART, who will do all My will.' ²³ "From the descendants of this man, according to promise, God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, ²⁴ after John had proclaimed before His coming a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. ²⁵ "And while John was completing his course, he kept saying, 'What do you suppose that I am? I am not *He*. But behold, one is coming after me the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to untie.'

²⁶ "Brethren, sons of Abraham's family, and those among you who fear God, to us the message of this salvation has been sent. ²⁷ "For those who live in Jerusalem, and their rulers, recognizing neither Him nor the utterances of the prophets which are read every Sabbath, fulfilled *these* by condemning *Him*. ²⁸ "And though they found no ground for *putting Him to death*, they asked Pilate that He be executed. ²⁹ "When they had carried out all that was

written concerning Him, they took Him down from the cross and laid Him in a tomb.³⁰ “But God raised Him from the dead;³¹ and for many days He appeared to those who came up with Him from Galilee to Jerusalem, the very ones who are now His witnesses to the people.³² “And we preach to you the good news of the promise made to the fathers,³³ that God has fulfilled this *promise* to our children in that He raised up Jesus, as it is also written in the second Psalm, ‘YOU ARE MY SON; TODAY I HAVE BEGOTTEN YOU.’³⁴ “As for the fact that He raised Him up from the dead, no longer to return to decay, He has spoken in this way: ‘I WILL GIVE YOU THE HOLY *and* SURE *blessings* OF DAVID.’³⁵ “Therefore He also says in another *Psalm*, ‘YOU WILL NOT ALLOW YOUR HOLY ONE TO UNDERGO DECAY.’³⁶ “For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep, and was laid among his fathers and underwent decay;³⁷ but He whom God raised did not undergo decay.

³⁸ “Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through Him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you,³⁹ and by him, indeed, everyone who believes is justified from all things—a justification which you could not have received by Moses’ law.^{1 40} “Therefore take heed, so that the thing spoken of in the Prophets may not come upon *you*:⁴¹ ‘BEHOLD, YOU SCOFFERS, AND MARVEL, AND PERISH; FOR I AM ACCOMPLISHING A WORK IN YOUR DAYS, A WORK WHICH YOU WILL NEVER BELIEVE, THOUGH SOMEONE SHOULD DESCRIBE IT TO YOU.’ ”

Paul’s speech has four parts. He begins with a short introductory address, then he summarizes the Old Testament promise of a Messiah who will save, then he supports his claim that this promise is fulfilled in Jesus, and finally he concludes by exhorting his listeners to believe in Jesus.

Introductory Address (16)

The introductory address is just a few words, “Men of Israel, and you who fear God, listen:”

The men of Israel in this case are not men who live in Israel. They are the Jews of Pisidian Antioch. They are the Israelites of the Diaspora. “You who fear God” is a reference to non-Jews attracted to the worship of Yahweh who are also present in the synagogue. Paul will aim his words towards his Jewish listeners. But he is also aware of the Gentile listeners. Since they are God-fearers already connected to the synagogue, they will be able to follow Paul’s language and Old Testament references along with the Jewish listeners.

The Promise of a Messiah Who Will Save Has Been Fulfilled in Jesus (17-25)

After that brief introduction, Paul directs his listeners’ attention to the promise of Messiah, who comes not only to reign, but also to save.

Similar to Stephen’s speech, Paul begins with a summary from the Old Testament of God’s history with Israel, or just a piece of that history. However, the aspects of Old Testament history differ between Stephen’s speech and Paul’s speech, according to the point each of them wanted to make. Stephen’s intent from the beginning was to charge the current leaders of Israel with the rejection of the mediator God had appointed for the salvation of Israel. Just as Joseph was rejected by his brothers and as Moses was rejected by the people, so too, the current leaders of Israel rejected Jesus, having murdered him on a cross.

Paul will make that charge later in this speech, but his emphasis is not on the Jewish leaders’ rejection of Jesus.

Paul’s summary of Old Testament history shows us that we need a true king who can save. He begins with the perspective that God is the true King. This perspective was rejected by Israel. They wanted a different king. So, God gave them human kingship. And even though David will provide a positive foreshadowing of the coming King, his line human line still struggles under the decay of sin and death. The true King who establishes an eternal reign must defeat death.

¹ F. F. Bruce. *The Book of the Acts*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988) 261. All Scripture text is taken from the NASB except for 13:39 which is taken from F. F. Bruce.

So, Paul does not use the word, “king,” to describe God in his summary, but the strong action verbs he uses for God are the actions of a great king. God chose our fathers. God made the people great in Egypt. God led them out. God destroyed seven nations. God distributed their land. This great king has called Israel to be his vassal people. He went to war to save them with an uplifted arm. He expanded his domain by defeating nations that opposed him. And then he made a land grant to his faithful vassal Israel, distributing the conquered territory to them as an inheritance.

Israel’s behavior strikes a sour note in this litany of God’s actions on their behalf. Paul does not make this a strong emphasis, but it is there. He says that God “put up with them in the wilderness.” That’s a reminder of Israel’s constant grumbling. The first time Paul attributes an action verb to Israel is after Paul says God gave them judges. During the time of Samuel, they asked for a king. That’s what they did. And that’s rebellion against their great King. Paul doesn’t say that, but this audience, they know their Biblical history, and they know the story of Samuel: that when people ask for a king, God takes offense, recognizing in their request a rejection of him as king.

Not satisfied with judges, they want a king like one all the nations around them have. So, God gave them a king like the ones all the nations had. A king who was much more concerned with himself than with God, a king who was big and handsome and looked the part. But no heart for God. And after giving them what they wanted and waiting for that to go bad, God removed Saul and gives them a king unlike the kind of kings other nations had. Verse 22,

He raised up David to be their king, concerning whom He also testified and said, ‘I HAVE FOUND DAVID the son of Jesse, A MAN AFTER MY HEART, who will do all My will.’

God made a promise. And usually when I hear a promise related to the Old Testament, I think of the call of Abraham. I don’t know what you think of when you hear, “the promise.” “And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed (Genesis 12:3).” That’s the promise I think of. And that promise did start the promise Paul was talking about. The promise of blessing the nations comes from the line of Abraham.

However, Paul’s intention here is for us to think about the promise God made in his covenant with King David. That promise. Consider this verse, 1 Samuel 7:12,

When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom.

That is the promise Paul refers to in this speech. Paul recognizes Jesus as the descendant of David for whom God will establish kingdom. He will reign and he will save. The reference to promise and savior are here in his speech, verses 23-25.

²³ “From the descendants of this man (*that is David*), according to promise (*you know, that is that covenant promise with David*), God has brought to Israel a Savior (*he’s not just Messiah; he is Savior*), Jesus, ²⁴ after John had proclaimed before His coming a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. ²⁵ And while John was completing his course, he kept saying, ‘What do you suppose that I am? I am not *He*. But behold, one is coming after me the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to untie.’

I am using the word, “Messiah,” because the Jewish audience would have understood that’s exactly what Paul was talking to them about: the Messiah. Messiah, translated into Greek is, “Christ,” and that means, “anointed one.” David was anointed by God to be king. He was anointed ceremonially with oil and spiritually by the Holy Spirit. God’s promise to David that he would raise up a descendant after him and establish his kingdom is a promise to establish a son of David as king. In one sense all of Israel’s kings are anointed ones. That’s the ceremony that happens when they become king. In another sense, the people of Israel recognized God’s promise of a unique king, one uniquely anointed. He is The Anointed One as David’s son to reign forever. He is the Messiah. He is the Christ.

When a human king comes to save, we think of salvation from an oppressor or an enemy, like God’s salvation of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. And that’s the kind of king of salvation many Jews were

looking for in the Messiah. In the days of Jesus what they wanted was salvation from the oppression of Rome. They wanted an earthly salvation, and an establishment of earthly kingdom. But God had communicated through the prophets of Israel that there was a need for a greater deliverance: that this Messiah would deliver from the oppression of sin and death.

The ministry of John the Baptist foreshadowed that. It was a ministry of repentance. It appears to have been a known event. Paul's reference to John suggests these Jews in Pisidian Antioch were aware of John the Baptist's movement. He points out how John understood himself as preparing the way by calling people to turn from sin and turn to God. That's what repentance is. And while confirming that John was not the Messiah, Paul says John said, "I am not," he also recommends John's attitude to these Jews. John was not the Messiah. Don't get that mixed up! This was John's attitude. John refused to define himself based on his own merits and his own ministry, his own calling. His value comes from his relationship to the One that comes after. As the one who baptized Jesus, John should be recognized in a place of honor in the society. Jesus, in a sense, was his student, being baptized by him. And in the honor-shame culture of Israel, Jesus might be expected to tie the sandals of John. You could see a student doing that to a Rabbi or a teacher. John would never tie the sandals of Jesus. The one who baptized is greater. But John reverses that. He indicates the greatness of Jesus by completely humbling himself before Jesus, declaring not only, "Shall Jesus not tie my sandals. I am not even worthy to tie his." So, John is indicating that there is something great, something new about Jesus. And it's not just that he is the son of David. There's something greater.

And the sons of David could never save. They were too burdened by their own sin. Each one would suffer under the curse of death and corruption. Even David who maintained a heart for God proved that he, too, was in the end a sinful man, unable to overcome the temptation in his own flesh. But this Jesus, this son of David, John praises him as being greater than any who came before.

So, this is Paul's first point. God is king. And God has promised a son of David who will come and establish a kingdom. Jesus, the one recognized by John the Baptist is that king God foretold.

Defense of the Claim that Jesus is the Messiah Who Came to Save (26-37)

Paul's shift to a second point is shown when he, again, directly addresses his audience. Again, he says, "Brethren." Having summarized the promise of Messiah and claiming Jesus is the Messiah, Paul now makes a case for his claim. This is Acts 13:26-37. Notice how Paul's recitation of the facts about Jesus parallel Peter's Pentecost speech. These are facts that Peter proclaimed.

²⁶ Brethren, sons of Abraham's family, and those among you who fear God [that is Abraham's family; that's the Jews and those of you who fear God; again, that's the Gentile worshippers of Yahweh], to us the message of this salvation has been sent. ²⁷ For those who live in Jerusalem, and their rulers, recognizing neither Him nor the utterances of the prophets which are read every Sabbath, fulfilled *these* by condemning *Him*. ²⁸ And though they found no ground for *putting Him to death*, they asked Pilate that He be executed. ²⁹ When they had carried out all that was written concerning Him, they took Him down from the cross and laid Him in a tomb. ³⁰ But God raised Him from the dead; ³¹ and for many days He appeared to those who came up with Him from Galilee to Jerusalem, the very ones who are now His witnesses to the people. ³² And we preach to you the good news of the promise made to the fathers, ³³ that God has fulfilled this *promise* to our children in that He raised up Jesus, as it is also written in the second Psalm, 'YOU ARE MY SON; TODAY I HAVE BEGOTTEN YOU.' ³⁴ *As for the fact* that He raised Him up from the dead, no longer to return to decay, He has spoken in this way: 'I WILL GIVE YOU THE HOLY *and SURE blessings* OF DAVID.' ³⁵ Therefore He also says in another *Psalm*, 'YOU WILL NOT ALLOW YOUR HOLY ONE TO UNDERGO DECAY.' ³⁶ For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep, and was laid among his fathers and underwent decay; ³⁷ but He whom God raised did not undergo decay.

You hear that, the point? We are talking about someone greater, someone who doesn't die. Paul acknowledges right away that the majority of Jews in Jerusalem and their leaders rejected Jesus. It's

not the thing you want to have to say when you're coming out from Jerusalem, and you're in the synagogue in the Diaspora. You would like to be able to say, "The leaders have affirmed his as Messiah!" But Paul can't say that because that's not historically true. He does make the point that in rejecting Jesus they rejected the Old Testament prophets' teaching about Jesus and at the same time, ironically, affirmed the prophets who had declared the Messiah would be rejected.

Paul is not anti-Semitic. He has not turned against his own people. He is stating the facts accurately without embellishment. Our Gospel is based on historic facts and the Jewish leaders of Israel have turned against Jesus. Paul does not change those facts. He doesn't devalue those facts as he moves further away from Jerusalem. He states the same facts Peter stated.

Jesus was rejected by Jewish leadership. Jesus was tried and condemned though innocent. Jesus was crucified under Pontus Pilate. Jesus died and was laid in a tomb. Jesus was raised from the dead. Jesus appeared to his disciples who have become first-hand witnesses to the resurrection. Paul says all of that here. Peter said all of that in his sermons.

As with Peter's sermons, you hear how the Apostles' Creed was later developed with these Acts sermons in mind. "He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried...The third day he rose again from the dead."

Like with Peter, Paul refers to the disciples who spoke with Jesus and became first-hand witnesses to the resurrection, though differently than Peter, Paul does not claim to be one of those people. Also, differently from Peter, Paul does not accuse these listeners of being guilty of the death of Jesus. Now, that's interesting because, you remember, that was a regular pattern of Peter's. Every time he stood up, he is accusing, "You killed Jesus!" That was a regular accusation made by Peter. And we have to remember that was a historically contextualized accusation. Those listeners actually shouted out, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" They were the ones who were there at Passover. Those listeners actually petitioned Pilate to kill Jesus. So, Peter spoke to that crowd. Paul does not accuse this crowd, because this crowd was not present or involved. That's not an accusation against all Jews everywhere. That's an accusation against those who were historically present and involved. So there's no accusation here. Historical context matters.

Peter and Paul both refer to God's promise, but with different promises in mind. Both promises are part of the Good News of the New Covenant. At Pentecost, Peter's focus is what's going on with the Holy Spirit coming down, so Peter quotes Joel and refers to the promise of the Holy Spirit, declaring to the crowd in Acts 2:39, "The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself." Even then Peter, he recognizes that this is a promise to Gentiles - "to our children, we Jews, and to all who are far off." Peter was going to have to struggle a little bit with Cornelius to figure out the implications of that. But he knew it was part of the message. Paul here refers to the promise not of the Holy Spirit, but of the Messiah who is a Savior.

³² And we preach to you the good news of the promise made to the fathers, ³³ that God has fulfilled this *promise* to our children in that He raised up Jesus

Just as Peter supported his claims about Jesus from the Old Testament, Paul here refers to three Old Testament references to support his claims about Jesus.

First, Paul quotes Psalm 2, a recognized Messianic Psalm by Jews and a Psalm referred to already in the prayer of the church in Acts 4. He says, 'YOU ARE MY SON; TODAY I HAVE BEGOTTEN YOU.' As always, we wanna go back and consider the context of the Psalm. In that Psalm, we might at first think that God speaks to David or to one of David's human descendants as his son. In that sense the king, who is already God's son as a faithful Jew, you know, we can call all Jews God's sons and daughters, but he becomes established in a special sense as God's son, begotten as his Son, through his enthronement. And that would be the "today" of the Psalm in that context. "You are my son; today I have begotten you." The day is his coronation as king.

But reading on, like so many of the Messianic Psalms, you see, “Okay, there’s an application to the human king, but this is too expansive to be talking about a mere human king, a mere descendant of David.” There is something else going on here. And God says of this Son of David in 8-12,

⁸ ‘Ask of Me, and I will surely give the nations as Your inheritance,	And the <i>very</i> ends of the earth as Your possession.
⁹ ‘You shall break them with a rod of iron,	You shall shatter them like earthenware.’ ”
¹⁰ Now therefore, O kings, show discernment;	Take warning, O judges of the earth.
¹¹ Worship the LORD with reverence	And rejoice with trembling.
¹² Do homage to the Son (<i>that literally says, “kiss the Son”</i>), that He not become angry, and you perish <i>in</i> the way,	For His wrath may soon be kindled.

How blessed are all who take refuge in Him!

You can see that as being hyperbole about a human king, or you can see that as being about someone who is greater than a human king. And Paul here has just claimed that God raised Jesus from the dead. That day of resurrection is the “today” of the Psalm in this context. ‘YOU ARE MY SON; TODAY I HAVE BEGOTTEN YOU’. And just like there are two senses where the human king is already the son of God in the sense that he is an Israelite, and he is enthroned and begotten in a special way in the royal Psalm, so also Jesus is already Son of God, but the idea of “today I have begotten you” is a recognition through the power of his resurrection that he is the fully divine and fully human Son of God from the line of David. In this sense, “begotten,” is more like the sense of, “I have shown you to be through the power of the Holy Spirit, by raising you from the dead.” And so recognized, you are enthroned on high as my Son, as the Eternal King. That is the implication of this royal language in the Psalm.

The next quote is a reference to Psalm 55:3. The phrase, “holy and sure blessings of David,” is translated in various ways in the Old Testament in English Bibles. It might be, “faithful mercies shown to David,” or, “steadfast, sure love for David.” So as, again, we go back to context, and when we do, you will recognize this portion of Isaiah as soon as I read it. You’ll be like, “Oh, I know that! I love that!” The context in Isaiah refers back to the covenant of David in 1 Samuel 7 and looks ahead to its fulfillment of the Messiah. I’ll read several verses to give a sense of the passage, Isaiah 55:1-5.

¹ Ho! Every one who thirsts, come to the waters; Come, buy wine and milk	And you who have no money come, buy and eat. Without money and without cost.
² Why do you spend money for what is not bread, Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good,	And your wages for what does not satisfy? And delight yourself in abundance.
³ Incline your ear and come to Me. And I will make an everlasting covenant with you,	Listen, that you may live; <i>According to</i> the faithful mercies shown to David.
⁴ Behold, I have made him a witness to the peoples,	A leader and commander for the peoples.
⁵ Behold, you will call a nation you do not know, Because of the LORD your God, even the Holy One of Israel	And a nation which knows you not will run to you, For He has glorified you.”

Paul connects the idea of an everlasting covenant with “the holy and sure blessings of David”. It’s a promise fulfilled by Jesus who overcame death as a holy and sure promise to David. Paul’s third quote from Psalm 16:10 supports this idea more directly. He says it right out, ‘YOU WILL NOT ALLOW YOUR HOLY ONE TO UNDERGO DECAY.’

Peter referred to that same passage to make the same claim in his Pentecost speech. David died. His body has decayed. We have his tomb. The Psalm must be speaking of another whose body will not be allowed to decay. Jesus, the son of David, is that One. The curse of death cannot remain on him. He was raised from the dead. This is how the promise will be accomplished to establish David’s reign eternally. To have the eternal reign established, we need someone who will never die; who can defeat death. And it’s through Jesus, who forever was and forever will be that an eternal kingdom is established.

This connection to the Old Testament may not create a big “aha!” moment for us. We have always understood the resurrection as essential to who Jesus is, because we have grown up in New Covenant age. But the nature of prophecy is that before the fulfillment happens, there is some mystery about the details. It’s not that clear. And so, this is a potential “aha!” moment for those gathered in this synagogue. “Oh, that’s what God meant! He literally meant that David’s greater son would never die. That’s what it means that he won’t allow his body to decay! And that’s how the kingdom lasts forever. Wow! It makes so much sense! It sounds right!” Some people are going to get that by the Holy Spirit. It’s going to be their moment of, “Whoa! This is awesome! This is fulfillment!”

Concluding Exhortation (38-41)

Having given witness to Jesus, Paul concludes by exhorting his - I am laughing to myself because I can actually imagine a Jew from Pisidian Antioch in a synagogue going, “Whoa!” But you know, there’s some “wow” factor there, right? When they’ve just heard this, and it connects in their mind and heart. All right, concluding exhortation! Having given witness to Jesus, Paul concludes by exhorting his listeners to respond. Verses 38-41,

³⁸ “Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, [he concludes, again, be exhorting his listeners to respond; this is the third time he addresses them directly] - Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through Him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, ³⁹ and by him, indeed, everyone who believes is justified from all things—a justification which you could not have received by Moses’ law.² ⁴⁰ Therefore take heed, so that the thing spoken of in the Prophets may not come upon *you*: ⁴¹ ‘BEHOLD, YOU SCOFFERS, AND MARVEL, AND PERISH; FOR I AM ACCOMPLISHING A WORK IN YOUR DAYS, A WORK WHICH YOU WILL NEVER BELIEVE, THOUGH SOMEONE SHOULD DESCRIBE IT TO YOU.’ ”

Not only is Jesus the Messiah who reigns forever, he is also the Messiah who provides a way for sinful human beings to be forgiven and enter into his Kingdom. We cannot talk about the Good News of an eternal Kingdom without also talking about the Good News of individual forgiveness. The two go together. And like with Peter and his sermons, forgiveness of sins is an essential component of Paul’s message. This is basic Gospel. Individual human beings are sinful and separated from God, and they need to be forgiven. It is not Good News for humanity if Jesus reigns in an eternal Kingdom, but not one human being is able to enter into that Kingdom. That’s not good news, at least from our perspective. Forgiveness is a prerequisite for human participation.

I said in my introduction that Paul’s sermon shows continuity with Peter’s proclamation of the Gospel described to us through the initial chapters of Acts. We’ve seen that. We’ve talked about that. I’ve been pointing out, “remember this from Peter?” I also said that this sermon shows continuity with Paul’s later teaching, exemplified especially in the letter to the Romans. So now I’ll point out a couple of connections with that later teaching of Paul.

I am using the NASB translation through this series. And I love the NASB but I’m disappointed here with Acts 13:39. The NASB, along with other modern translations like the ESV and NRSV, all good translations, translate “δικαίω” as, “to free from,” or, “set free.” so just listen for the English words in 39,

and through Him everyone who believes is *freed* from all things, from which you could not be *freed* through the Law of Moses.

My problem with that translation is that “δικαίω” is the word translated elsewhere in Paul’s writings as, “to justify.” And you can hardly get a more Pauline word than, “justify.” So, if it’s there in the Greek, we need to hear it. Whether it has a different translation or not, we need to know that this is the word that Luke had in Paul’s sermon. So, when I read the Acts text for this lesson, I used F. F. Bruce’s translation do that you would hear that word. I’ll read again. This is the verse I’ve read,

² Bruce 261.

and by him, indeed, everyone who believes is *justified* from all things—a *justification* which you could not have received by Moses' law.

I think the newer English translations are trying to help us avoid an interpretation problem by using, "set free," which is a possible sense of the word, "δικαίωω." But even then, it is "set free" in the sense of set free in a judicial way. And that is probably missing if we do not know that this word for "freedom" comes from this root word, "to justify."

The possible problem the newer translations are helping us to avoid is the misconception that the law justifies in part and the Gospel justifies in full. It is said that is the emphasis of "everyone who believes is justified from all things." Some scholars see a conflict between Paul's teaching here and his later teaching in Galatians and Romans. But that is unnecessary. We don't have to read this as we're justified partly through Mosaic Law, but we're justified in full through the Gospel. It is also valid to interpret Paul's meaning here that we could not be justified by the Law at all, and so are justified from all things - all things held against us, all of our sin, all of the penalty for our sin: we're justified from all of that - through the Gospel, not through Mosaic Law. And that translation aligns fully with Paul. The phraseology here is a little different than in Romans. But there is no reason to create a conflict with different ways of saying the same thing. It is much easier to recognize that you can interpret both ideas as meaning the same thing, so why not do that? In fact, the language of forgiveness here in this sermon requires that we interpret this reference of justification in line with Paul's later teaching. The Law of Moses does not justify. Romans 3,19-20 - Paul is very clear on that. No flesh is justified. And Paul is very clear that we are justified through faith in Jesus Christ. Faith in Christ provides complete justification. That seems to be the point. ³

Now imagine that you were present in this synagogue in the middle of Asia Minor. Your town sits on a major road. There's a road that runs through this town, from Syria to Ephesus. And you have heard some of this story. You have heard a bit about John the Baptist. You've heard about Jesus of Nazareth. It's been a decade since it's happened. People have come through. And you have not known what to think. Everyone seems to have their own opinion. In your own fellowship, everybody's got their own opinion. Now here are two fellow Jews, both who grew up outside of Israel, so these are kind of like you. One from the nearby province of Cilicia. He is the Pharisee. And the other one is from Cyprus, and he is a Levite. They are Jews with some clout, but they are also your kind of Jews, who grew up in the Diaspora. But they have been to Jerusalem. They have met the followers of Jesus who gave a first-hand witness to the resurrection. And this Paul speaks powerfully, full of conviction, grounding his message in the Law. He keeps referring to, "As it is written in the Prophets, in the Psalms." He speaks of promise and of fulfillment. And he speaks of forgiveness in the name of this Jesus. And you're wondering. Could the Messiah be crucified? Could it happen that way? Could he be raised from the dead? What does this mean? Is this real?

Paul's proclamation would not be delivered merely in the strength of his oratory skills or religious insight. Paul's proclamation would have been empowered by the Holy Spirit. Jesus promised at the beginning of Acts, "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you shall be my witnesses." So when you think about yourself in that synagogue, it's not just the logic of Paul's argument but the Holy Spirit is at work in your heart.

And there are going to be those in this synagogue who, they hear it, they hear this Gospel and they smell death. In the darkness they will not understand, and they are going to oppose it. This is bringing about change. This is not what we want. This is not what we believe. But there are others whose eyes are, even at this moment, opening to the light of day. And they would hear and see that Jesus indeed is the fulfillment of the promise and the source of salvation. Still, others who are in the synagogue, they would not know which way to turn. They are going to be like Nicodemus. Maybe they are ready to come out of the dark and investigate these things in the light of Jesus, but could

³ Bruce 263.

they possibly be true? We don't know. And they cannot yet see or understand the message that Paul proclaims so they don't respond right away.

Knowing that the destiny of his listeners sits on a knife edge, Paul concludes his appeal with a challenge from the prophet Habakkuk that is much more relevant than we might recognize at first. Paul is saying a lot with this quote.

'BEHOLD, YOU SCOFFERS, AND MARVEL, AND PERISH; FOR I AM ACCOMPLISHING A WORK IN YOUR DAYS, A WORK WHICH YOU WILL NEVER BELIEVE, THOUGH SOMEONE SHOULD DESCRIBE IT TO YOU.'

In his day, Habakkuk called on God to do something about the wicked hypocrisy of Judah. "God, you've got to do something!" God declared that he would do something wonderful, unheard of, that if you were to hear it, nobody would believe you. "I'm going to send the Babylonians to punish the unfaithful majority of Judah." Habakkuk heard. He asked for it, and he heard it. And he recoils at that news. "That is not what I asked for, God!" How can that be the plan of to save by using a nation that is even more wicked than us to punish the wickedness among us?

Paul knows that all Jews await the coming of the Messiah. They continuously pray for his coming. But like Habakkuk, nobody could have described this Gospel. They never would have thought of God coming as man, dying on a cross and initiating a new covenant open to Gentiles, and so they recoil. That cannot be the plan. And the majority are going to reject it. That can't be Good News. And they're going to hold on to their vision of who they want the Messiah to be rather than accepting the reality of who the Messiah is.

In his prophecy, (you can go back and read Habakkuk) Habakkuk's eyes were opened. It's chapter 3. His mind is changed. He becomes silent before God and he believes, and he sees with new eyes. And he ends with a testimony of faith. Even in light of the coming destruction of Judah. Even though it's still rolling up inside of him, this negative sense that something terrible is getting ready to happen, but he believes. And he writes in 3:18-19,

¹⁸ Yet I will exult in the LORD, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation.
¹⁹ The Lord GOD is my strength, And He has made my feet like hinds' feet,
And makes me walk on my high places.

You know, he has set me up in the rocks, on his places above the destruction. He has saved me and I will trust in him. That's what Habakkuk was saying. Paul has preached the Good News to Jews for a decade already. (*) He knows the majority are already set to resist him, like Habakkuk initially resisted God's declaration of his plan. The New Covenant overturns the religious order that Jews hold on to so tightly. John the Baptist told his disciples, "He must increase, but I must decrease (John 3:30)," so too, the Church of Jesus Christ among Gentiles must increase, but this means that Jerusalem, the Temple, the priesthood, that precious identity, that special uniqueness of the Jews must decrease. That's not something easy to accept.

The prophecy of Habakkuk served for Paul as a foreshadowing, or as an example of the resistance he experienced among the Jews that reject the newly revealed plan of God. Paul quotes Habakkuk here. He's going to quote Habakkuk in Romans, too. It's in the thesis,

¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷ For in it *the* righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "BUT THE RIGHTEOUS *man* SHALL LIVE BY FAITH."

That last bit, "but the righteous man shall live by faith," is Habakkuk 2:4. And it is not simply just a proof text that Paul pulls in for justification by faith. Paul's quote of Habakkuk is more like a hyperlink in a text. You know, you click on, "but the righteous man shall live by faith," click on that, and it imports the whole prophecy into the background context of Romans. Just like the whole thing is imported here in the speech in the synagogue. It brings to mind all of Habakkuk. And that's what Paul does in the letter to the Romans. He proceeds to set up a Jewish opponent, a type of Habakkuk. And as Paul goes through teaching in chapters 1-11, there's these questions that keep being raised up,

objections that cannot be true. It's a refusal to believe that the Gospel that Paul presents could be true of a righteous God.

Paul expects resistance to God's plan. But there is also a background narrative of hope in Habakkuk. There is the narrative of resistance to the plan, but Habakkuk believes. He was one of a remnant in the day of captivity. Paul believes there is a remnant in his day. And despite rejection from the majority of Jews, some will believe and be saved.

We will see that reality play out in the final verses of this section.

Paul and Barnabas, Opposed by the Jews, Turn to the Gentiles (13:42-52)

This last paragraph reports what happened the week after Paul's speech in the synagogue. Acts 13:42-52,

⁴² As Paul and Barnabas were going out, the people kept begging that these things might be spoken to them the next Sabbath. ⁴³ Now when *the meeting* of the synagogue had broken up, many of the Jews and of the God-fearing proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas, who, speaking to them, were urging them to continue in the grace of God (*so there were some who truly believed*). ⁴⁴ The next Sabbath nearly the whole city assembled to hear the word of the Lord. ⁴⁵ But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and *began* contradicting the things spoken by Paul, and were blaspheming. ⁴⁶ Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and said, "It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you first; since you repudiate it and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. ⁴⁷ "For so the Lord has commanded us, 'I HAVE PLACED YOU AS A LIGHT FOR THE GENTILES, THAT YOU MAY BRING SALVATION TO THE END OF THE EARTH.' " ⁴⁸ When the Gentiles heard this, they *began* rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed. ⁴⁹ And the word of the Lord was being spread through the whole region. ⁵⁰ But the Jews incited the devout women of prominence and the leading men of the city, and instigated a persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district. ⁵¹ But they shook off the dust of their feet *in protest* against them and went to Iconium. ⁵² And the disciples were continually filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.

The problem for Paul's Jewish listeners seems to be less the specific truth claims about Jesus and more the fact that the New Covenant Gospel message has created such a positive response among Gentile believers.

Let me just interject. I think this happens every generation in the Church. Old people love the way things were and we want to hold on to it. And if we don't change, we are not going to reach our generation. And there is a right reason to be nervous, because for some, change means changing the basic facts of the Gospel. That change is of no good. We reject that change. But while we're rejecting that change, we have to be careful that we don't also reject changes in music, changes in expression, changes in the way we worship and interact. There is real change that needs to happen in order to help young people feel like this Gospel is for their generation. And these Jews get jealous because there is this positive response. And you might look around you, and you might be in an older church. You might see this church down the road is having a great response. And be careful because if your first response is, "Well, they must be just telling them what they want to hear," that's what the Pharisees said about Jesus. Why does he have sinners gathered around him? He must be a sinner, like them. So, it may be true that a church has gone off and left the Gospel. But don't let your first response be jealousy. Rejoice in the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And rejoice that God will raise up in every generation different churches and movements that will reach the heart of that generation.

So nearly the whole city assembled to hear the Lord. This is where Jews who shared the heart of God would rejoice also. They would be excited, "Look! The Gentiles are coming out!" But instead, Luke writes a different response, "When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and

began contradicting the things spoken by Paul, and were blaspheming.” This response was so typical by Jews Paul encountered in his ministry that he refers to the phenomena in Romans 11. In this section of Romans Paul is describing how the majority reject God’s plan of salvation through Jesus, though a remnant accept. And listen for the word, “jealousy.” He writes in 11:11-14,

¹¹ I say then, they did not stumble so as to fall, did they? May it never be! But by their transgression salvation *has come* to the Gentiles, to make them jealous. ¹² Now if their transgression is riches for the world and their failure is riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be! ¹³ But I am speaking to you who are Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle of Gentiles, I magnify my ministry, ¹⁴ if somehow I might move to jealousy my fellow countrymen and save some of them.

He expected a response of jealousy and the majority rejection. But even with that jealousy, he was hoping that a remnant would be saved. Paul says here he felt an obligation to go to the Jews first. We recognized that on Cyprus. Paul says it directly here. And he hopes a remnant will believe. But he is also quite prepared by the words of Isaiah, one of his favorite prophets, he is prepared to turn next to Gentiles.

“For so the Lord has commanded us, ‘I HAVE PLACED YOU AS A LIGHT FOR THE GENTILES, THAT YOU MAY BRING SALVATION TO THE END OF THE EARTH.’ ”

They stayed for some time in Pisidian Antioch. Long enough for the Gospel to begin to spread from the city into the region surrounding the city. Long enough for disciples to be established in the faith. And then they were forced from the city after Jewish pressure raised significant opposition against them.

Luke has given us here an example of a pattern that will repeat. You know, going to the synagogue, being welcomed, seeing a Gentile response, being rejected, seeing more fruit and finally being forced out. Luke has also given us a valuable, precious example of the teaching Paul delivered when he preached in the synagogue. He preached Jesus. Just like Peter did. He preached a promised fulfilled. He preached justification by faith. He preached hope for a remnant, knowing the majority would resist. He preached a light to the Gentiles. And he continued preaching this message of salvation in Jesus Christ through the course of his entire ministry.

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 13:13-52. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. What was the service in the synagogue like? How does it compare to your Sunday church service? Though there is not a lot of detail here, there are some interesting points to observe and consider.
3. How are these Jews different from Elymas in the previous story on Cyprus? Who in your culture seems similar to Elymas and who seems similar to these who are gathered in the synagogue?
4. This speech from Paul is different from Peter’s Pentecost speech and Stephen’s trial speech. It is also very different from the speech Paul will make to a Gentile audience in Athens (17:22-31).
 - a. Scanning through Peter and Stephen’s speeches (2:14-36 and 7:2-53), what are some similarities you notice? What are some differences?
 - c. What are some ways Paul speaks to this Jewish audience that you would not expect him to speak to a Gentile audience? What are some assumptions or references he can freely make with Jews and God-fearing Greeks in a synagogue?
5. What main points does Paul make in this speech about the Messiah?
6. What word does your Bible use in 13:39? Does it use “set free” or “freed” or something else? Does it help you see continuity with Paul if you recognize that this word used here two times is the same word normally translated in Paul’s letters as justification? Compare the conclusion of this speech (Acts 38-41) with Paul’s statement in Romans 3:19-30. Does that seem to you to be the same idea?