

# When One Door Closes

Acts 13:44-52

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There's an old saying that says, when one door closes, another door opens. If that statement describes your house, it's a very poorly built house. But the principle communicated by this phrase is that when an obstacle appears in your path, there may be a different path you need to take. Of course, that belief assumes there is someone directing your paths. The statement makes no sense if you think the world is merely random. Fortunately for us, we know that God is directing our paths.

This morning, we will see this principle at play in the lives of Paul and Barnabas. Last week we saw them begin their ministry in Antioch of Pisidia. They seemed to be off to a good start, but they quickly hit some obstacles. This morning, we're going to look at the conclusion of their time in Antioch of Pisidia, and how they chose to handle it. As we see their response, we will see an example of how we should respond when we face inevitable obstacles in our lives. Paul and Barnabas show us what it looks like to face challenges and closed doors with faith.

## Follow-Up

Last week we looked at the account of Paul and Barnabas arriving in Antioch. They went to the synagogue and were asked to speak. Paul walked the crowd through the history of God's faithfulness and provision for the people of Israel and then connected that to Jesus. Some of the people who heard Paul speak believed what he had to say and asked them to return the following week, as they'd like to hear them speak some more. That's where we pick up in Acts 13 today.

<sup>44</sup> The following week almost the entire city turned out to hear them preach the word of the Lord. <sup>45</sup> But when some of the Jews saw the crowds, they were jealous; so they slandered Paul and argued against whatever he said. (Acts 13:44-45, NLT)

A huge crowd showed up to the synagogue the following Sabbath. Remember that in those days, there wasn't mass media, and Paul and Barnabas had created quite a stir in town. Instead of being able to just check Facebook to see what all the hubbub was about, people in the ancient world had to go and see for themselves what everyone was talking about. As a result, the synagogue was overflowing with people gathered to hear Paul and Barnabas. The majority of those gathered would have been Gentiles, as this was far away from Jerusalem. So it was an eclectic bunch.

As you might imagine, this upset some of the Jews. I can sympathize with them to some degree, because I tend to assume that if something is popular, then it's probably bad. But their issue was not based on Paul and Barnabas' message at all. Luke tells us that their objection was based on jealousy. They were upset that Paul and Barnabas were getting all the attention, and they saw their power and authority as being under attack. So, they decided to defend themselves.

Luke says they slandered Paul and argued against everything he said. We've talked often about how slandering others is a common tactic when you feel you have no other recourse. When you cannot dismantle someone's argument (or just don't want to bother engaging with it), you can simply attack the person, attempting to discredit the argument by discrediting the one making it. This is essentially the basis of modern politics.

It's not difficult to imagine the kinds of insults they might cast at Paul. They might call him a flip-flopper, pointing out that he had once persecuted Christians, and now he was on their side. They might have questioned his credentials, since he had grown up in Tarsus and not in Jerusalem, and he was a Roman citizen. They might have mocked his extensive education, saying that if he'd spent as much time studying the Hebrew scriptures as he had learning about the ways of the world, he wouldn't be so confused.

Of course, none of these statements in any way discredits Paul's teaching about Jesus, but to those who were simply trying to take Paul down, that was irrelevant. Nonetheless, after they became jealous of Paul, they also began to argue against everything he said. We don't know exactly what those arguments were, though the book of Galatians may give us some clues; there Paul describes a group of Jews who tried to convince people that if they wanted to be acceptable to God, they must become full Jews, including being circumcised. Whatever the case was, a small group of people seemed to oppose Paul and Barnabas fiercely, but they were motivated primarily by jealousy.

This reminds us that sometimes people will attack us simply because they do not like the gospel message. Many people today are unconcerned with the claims of Christianity, but they object to what they perceive as a threat to their way of life. In their minds, religious people are trying to tell them what to do, and they don't like it. As a result, they will not even consider the claims of Jesus and simply oppose Him at every turn. If you are seen as part of the problem, they will attack you as a way of trying to silence Jesus.

This is, of course, foolish. You cannot silence Jesus. And clapping your hands over your ears so you cannot hear Him does not make His words untrue. But there are many today who will attack anyone who stands for Christ simply because they do not like what we stand for, not necessarily because we have done anything wrong.

We must be wise enough to examine our hearts and actions closely to determine whether we have genuinely done something wrong, or whether we are being attacked because we stand with Jesus. If we've done something wrong, we should seek to correct it and ask for forgiveness, but if we are simply being attacked for the sake of the gospel, then we should continue in what we know to be right, despite what people say or do to us.

## **The Response**

Verses 46-49 record the response of Paul and Barnabas to the opposition from the Jews who were attacking them.

<sup>46</sup> Then Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and declared, “It was necessary that we first preach the word of God to you Jews. But since you have rejected it and judged yourselves unworthy of eternal life, we will offer it to the Gentiles. <sup>47</sup> For the Lord gave us this command when he said, ‘I have made you a light to the Gentiles, to bring salvation to the farthest corners of the earth.’”

<sup>48</sup> When the Gentiles heard this, they were very glad and thanked the Lord for his message; and all who were chosen for eternal life became believers. <sup>49</sup> So the Lord’s message spread throughout that region. (Acts 13:46-49, NLT)

To their credit, neither Paul nor Barnabas seemed to be slowed down by this opposition. They felt they had a responsibility to bring the gospel to the Jews first, as they were the people to whom Jesus had come (and we know Paul desperately wanted to see the Jewish people come to faith), but since they had chosen to reject Christ (which Paul and Barnabas described as “judging yourselves unworthy of eternal life”), they would instead preach the gospel to the Gentiles.

They made it clear that this was not a flippant decision. They did not just suddenly decide to shift their audience. Rather, they said this had been God’s plan all along. They quoted from the book of Isaiah to point out that God had always intended to use the Jews to bring all people (including Gentiles) to Him. They had offered the gospel to the Jews, who had rejected it, so they would now offer it to the Gentiles, as was God’s plan all along.

As you might imagine, this did not make the Jews happy at all! They surely viewed this as an affront to their dignity and possibly even to their religious beliefs. The Gentiles, on the other hand, were grateful for the opportunity to come to God. Many of them believed that day, and we are told that the Lord’s message began to spread throughout the region, as people carried it with them wherever they went.

## **Chosen for Eternal Life**

There is, however, a seemingly strange statement in these verses that deserves closer scrutiny. Luke said that “all who were chosen for eternal life became believers.” This language seems out of place to us. We might expect Luke to say that all who chose to believe were appointed for eternal life. But Luke’s choice of words is intentional. He seems to indicate that the driving force behind these people’s belief came from God—that they believed because God had chosen them, not the other way around.

This is what is known as the doctrine of election. This is not the only place we see this doctrine taught in scripture. It appears in multiple other places.

Even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes. <sup>5</sup> God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. (Ephesians 1:4-5, NLT)

<sup>29</sup> For God knew his people in advance, and he chose them to become like his Son, so that his Son would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.

<sup>30</sup> And having chosen them, he called them to come to him. And having called them, he gave them right standing with himself. And having given them right standing, he gave them his glory. (Romans 8:29-30, NLT)

There are many other places like this, but what we clearly see is that the Bible teaches that God makes the first move in our salvation. We respond in faith, but only because God has called us.

This opens a whole can of worms, which I cannot fully get into, but it certainly raises many questions for us. After all, we feel as though we have chosen to believe in Christ. I believe we have chosen to believe! But I think the Bible makes it clear that we have chosen to believe only because God has chosen us.

There is a clear tension taught in scripture. On the one hand, God is sovereign. He is the One who changes people's hearts and brings them to a place of salvation, forgiveness, and new life. On the other hand, we are each responsible for our own choices. When we choose to reject the gospel, we are responsible for that choice. When we choose to sin, we stand guilty before God.

I don't know that I can fully make sense of every aspect of this truth. And I'm actually ok with that. As you've heard me say before, if God is as big as I believe He is, then I shouldn't expect to be able to understand everything about Him. I rest in the tension of these twin truths the scriptures teach: God is sovereign, and humans are responsible for their choices.

Here's why this matters. It affects our theology of evangelism. If God is not who changes people's hearts, then if we did not succeed in convincing a person to believe in Christ, their eternal destiny would be on our hands. We would be responsible for the fact that they spend eternity in hell. But if we recognize that only God is able to change a person's heart, then we can share the gospel freely and boldly and without pressure. It is not our responsibility to change people's hearts; it's God's. Our responsibility is to share the message clearly and leave the rest in God's hands.

Paul and Barnabas had proclaimed the truth. They had done their best to convince these Jews of the gospel message. They had the information they needed. Now it was in the Lord's hands. They could move on to the next group of people in peace, knowing God would work as He saw fit in the hearts of those who had not believed.

But there's another important implication of this truth: we cannot take credit for our own salvation. We do not believe because we are smarter or better than other people. Apart from God working in our hearts, we would not believe. We are saved wholly by God's grace. This should do a couple things: First, it should humble us, but it should also remind us that no one is a lost cause, because God can change even the hardest of hearts. While this concept hurts our heads, it also lifts our eyes, reminding us that God is at the center of everything.

## Moving On

After the Gentiles began to believe and follow Paul and Barnabas, the Jews got even angrier.

<sup>50</sup> Then the Jews stirred up the influential religious women and the leaders of the city, and they incited a mob against Paul and Barnabas and ran them out of town. <sup>51</sup> So they shook the dust from their feet as a sign of rejection and went to the town of Iconium. <sup>52</sup> And the believers were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit. (Acts 13:50-52, NLT)

The Jews decided they needed to put a stop to Paul and Barnabas once and for all. So they gathered a crowd of influential people in the city and incited a mob. The mob became so unruly that they ran Paul and Barnabas out of the city.

I would have been incredibly discouraged by this! Here were two men who had left everything, who had traveled across land and sea, who had maybe even contracted a disease (and were possibly even sick during this whole ordeal), just to come and share the message with them, and now they were being run out of town! I might have been tempted to throw in the towel at that point. I might have concluded that apparently this was not the path the Lord had wanted me to take and given up. But that's not what Paul and Barnabas did.

They shook the dust of the town off their feet (symbolizing that they would have nothing more to do with them) and moved on to the next town. Even more shocking is that the believers (which presumably included Paul and Barnabas) were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit!

How could they still be filled with joy? The answer is that they had still seen the Lord working through them. We tend to focus only on the failures and hardships of life, and as a result we miss out on some of the great blessings that are all around us. Yes, the Jews of Antioch had opposed them fiercely, but there were many who had chosen to believe! God was using them. They surely knew at the outset that not every person would believe. That fact did not (nor should it) dissuade them. They continued to preach the gospel to anyone who would listen.

Paul and Barnabas had been rejected in Antioch, so they headed out to more fertile ground. They decided to continue preaching, knowing that some would be receptive.

## Conclusion

So, what are we supposed to learn from this passage? What do we learn from seeing the rejection of Paul and Barnabas among people who had previously seemed to be their friends?

**First, rejection of the gospel is not necessarily a rejection of you.** Sometimes people will treat you differently after finding out you are a Christian. Sometimes they will respond negatively to you trying to share Christ with them. Some may even avoid you for a time. In those times, remember, it is not a rejection of you. They are uncomfortable

with the implications of the gospel message, and like the Jews in Antioch, they are trying to run from it. Don't allow the potential for people to treat you differently keep you from sharing Jesus with them. There's too much at stake to keep silent; and there's also the potential that they will hear what you have to say and believe.

**Second, God is the active party in salvation.** People cannot respond to the gospel message unless they understand it, and they cannot understand it unless someone shares it with them. But ultimately, people believe when God moves in their hearts to make them receptive to the message. That means our job is simply to share the gospel as clearly and accurately as possible. Make sure people understand that they are sinners in need of a savior, and that they cannot save themselves. Explain to them that salvation is available through Jesus Christ alone, and invite them to trust Him and follow him with their lives. Ultimately, you can change no one's heart. Fortunately, that's also not your responsibility. The fact that God is who changes hearts should make us bold, because we know that He can change *anyone's* heart! He can use our feeble efforts to impact people in a meaningful way. And when we are stumped, when we mess up, when we stumble over our words or are rejected, we can rest in the fact that God is not limited by our frailties. So, we can share the message boldly, knowing that God can work in and through even people like you and me! He'll take care of the results, we just need to be faithful in sharing the message.

**Finally, don't allow people's opposition to faith stop you from practicing yours.** Through the years, I've experienced my fair share of rejection. It hurts. When you pour your life into someone else, when you love them, sacrifice for them, pray for them, and do all you can to serve them, and then they lash out at you, it is painful. The temptation is to give up because you've been wounded, and you want to ensure that can't happen again. That's not what Paul and Barnabas did, and it's not what we should do either. Instead, we should recognize that while that door may have closed, other doors are open. God is in control and always provides opportunities for us to share, to serve, and to minister to others. When you find ground that isn't fertile, don't stop planting seeds—look for a different field! Recognize that God wants to use you, and find the place where you can serve Him effectively. Knowing God is in control allows us to follow His lead, and to continue serving Him, even when we meet resistance.

Paul and Barnabas were convinced that God was in control. He is who changes people's hearts, and He also directs us in how we should serve Him. Though a building where when one door closes another opens would have some serious flaws, when we recognize that God is in control of life, we understand that a closed door doesn't mean we're stuck—rather it means that God has something, someone, or somewhere different for us to serve. Whatever we face, we can serve Him faithfully, believing He's in charge.

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