

Antioch: The Sequel

Acts 13:13-43

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As you may know, I am a bit of a movie buff. I enjoy all sorts of movies, from all sorts of genres. In recent years, however, I have noticed a lot of laziness when it comes to movies. More and more, studios are simply concerned with turning out the next movie in their franchise, rather than trying to come up with something new and different. You may have noticed that there have been lots and lots of sequels lately—several have been to movies that were 20 or more years old! They weren't made because there was more story to be told, but because they thought there was more money to be made.

Today's passage could be considered a sequel of sorts. However, it was not written because Luke was trying to pad his page count, but because it was an integral part of the story he was telling. Today, we look at Paul and Barnabas in Antioch. But, you may say, didn't we already see them preach the gospel in Antioch? Yes, we did. But this is a different Antioch, and Luke gives us a lengthy record of what happened when Paul and Barnabas visited there. Today's passage gives us a clear look at the gospel Paul preached and the approach he took among the Jews.

Mark's Abandonment

Last week, as we began following Paul and Barnabas on their missionary journey, we noted that John Mark accompanied them as they headed to Cyprus. We touched on the fact that Mark later left them. Today's passage records that, but without much detail.

¹³ Paul and his companions then left Paphos by ship for Pamphylia, landing at the port town of Perga. There John Mark left them and returned to Jerusalem. (Acts 13:13, NLT)

We do not know why Mark left Paul and Barnabas, but we do know that Paul viewed it as an abandonment of the cause. Most people assume Mark became disillusioned by the whole endeavor and decided to head home. There are many theories about what led to his disillusionment:

- The work was harder than he anticipated
- He was unhappy that Paul was beginning to overshadow his uncle, Barnabas
- He got sick (as we suspect Paul did) and went home
- He may have only planned to go to Cyprus, but didn't tell that to Paul and Barnabas

The reasons for Mark's departure aren't given to us, but he ended up being blackballed by Paul. Paul and Barnabas actually broke up their missionary team later because Barnabas wanted to take Mark on their second missionary journey and Paul refused. I think of how badly Mark must have felt about his failure in the eyes of Paul. Fortunately, he did not allow that to define him (and ultimately neither did Paul).

We know that at the end of Paul's life, he asked for John Mark to come to him because he viewed him as a great help to his ministry. This is a reminder that you do not have to be defined by your failures. We face a choice when we fail: will we remain in that place, or will we pick up and move forward? Mark clearly chose to move forward. Though it surely took some time to live down his reputation as a deserter, he eventually proved himself a faithful and helpful servant of the gospel.

Paul and Barnabas Continue

After Mark left, Paul and Barnabas continued to Antioch in Pisidia.

But Paul and Barnabas traveled inland to Antioch of Pisidia.

On the Sabbath they went to the synagogue for the services. ¹⁵ After the usual readings from the books of Moses and the prophets, those in charge of the service sent them this message: "Brothers, if you have any word of encouragement for the people, come and give it." (Acts 13:14-15, NLT)

When we first were introduced to the town of Antioch, I explained that there were 16 towns named Antioch around the Mediterranean Sea. Antioch in Syria was the largest, and that is where Paul and Barnabas departed from on their journey. But now they come to Antioch of Pisidia, which was quite some distance away from Cyprus, and a fair journey inland.

Many people have questioned why nothing is recorded about Paul and Barnabas after arriving on the mainland in Perga (which is modern-day Turkey). We would have expected Paul and Barnabas to carry out ministry there for a while and eventually work their way toward Antioch. There is one clue that may give us some insight into why things happened as they did.

In Galatians 4:13, Paul said this,

¹³ Surely you remember that I was sick when I first brought you the Good News. (Galatians 4:13, NLT)

The book of Galatians was written to believers in Galatia, which was not a city, but rather a region. Though Antioch was known as Antioch of Pisidia, it was technically located in Galatia. As such, many people have suggested that these words written in Galatians 4:13 might have referenced the people of Pisidian Antioch.

Antioch of Pisidia was located up in the mountains. It's possible that Paul had gotten sick when they arrived in Perga (many assume with malaria), and traveled to Antioch to recuperate, believing the mountain elevation would be better for him. We can't be certain that was the case, but it is a plausible explanation for why there isn't any record of ministry in the region of Pamphylia.

Another possibility put forth by some scholars is that they headed to Antioch at the request of Sergius Paulus (the Roman proconsul who lived in Cyprus and became a believer). He had family that lived and ran a business in Antioch of Pisidia, so he may

have requested that Paul and Barnabas travel there to preach the gospel to them as well.

While we've got lots of unanswered questions about why Paul and Barnabas went to Antioch, we do know what happened when they arrived. As was their custom, when the Sabbath came, they went to the synagogue along with the Jews and God-fearing Greeks in the community. When the time came, Paul was invited to speak, and he seized upon the opportunity.

Paul's Message

Most of the rest of this passage records the content of Paul's message to the synagogue that day. Rather than reading all of it to you again, I want to draw attention to Paul's approach and highlight not only what he shared, but also why he shared it.

Paul began by reciting the history of the Jewish faith, or more accurately, the history of God's actions among the Israelites. He began by recounting the many ways in which God had provided for the Israelites through the years.

- First, he provided for them in Egypt, allowing them to grow strong and multiply
- He provided deliverance for them as He led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt
- He didn't destroy them despite their constant grumbling for 40 years in the wilderness
- He gave them victory over the Canaanites that inhabited the Promised Land
- He provided judges for them up until the time of the prophet Samuel
- He gave them kings, starting with King Saul, and then put David, the man after God's own heart on the throne.

Paul was speaking to a mostly Jewish audience, so why was he telling them a bunch of stories they surely already knew? I think there were a couple of reasons.

First, he was showing God's sovereignty over history. Paul was demonstrating that at every step along the way in the history of the Israelites, God had been working and accomplishing His purposes. He wanted them to remember that everything was under God's control and was being used for His purposes. That was true in the past, and it remained true then. I would remind you that it is still true today as well!

Second, he was building a bridge. One of the best things we can do in evangelism is to look for common ground with people before we begin pointing them to the places where their beliefs miss the mark. If we simply come in and begin attacking another person's belief system (or the person themselves), they are likely to tune us out before we even begin. A better approach is to find the things on which we agree, the elements of truth they have already discovered, and then use those common grounds to build a bridge to show them where their belief system is faulty. Paul was a master at doing this. We will see him use this approach often in the book of Acts. And this approach is something we would be well-served to use as we try to share the gospel with others as well.

The Gospel

After building a bridge by establishing some common ground with his audience, Paul started speaking of recent history. He jumped from King David to John the Baptist.

Paul begins his shift toward Jesus by talking about how John said that he was merely a messenger for the One God had promised. He said that while he was not the Messiah, the Messiah was coming soon.

This surely would have gotten the attention of the Jews, as every Jewish person was waiting for the Messiah, though most had incorrect notions that the Messiah would be a mighty warrior who would overthrow the Roman empire and make Israel into a world power. Paul pointed them in a different direction. He said Jesus was the promised Messiah and that the message of salvation had been sent to them through Him! To bolster this point, Paul pointed to several prophecies that were fulfilled in Jesus' ministry.

First, he was persecuted and executed. This first point would have shocked them. This did not seem like the Messiah they knew, but Paul was building his case from scripture. They might not have been surprised that the Messiah would be persecuted, but to be executed? This would have been shocking. Paul emphasized that Jesus was innocent, but the religious leaders had conspired with the Romans to have Jesus killed. But Paul pointed out that these things were prophesied in advance. He reminded them that they knew these prophecies, as they read them every week!

Second, he was buried, then rose again. Paul's first evidence of this was the eyewitness accounts of Jesus' resurrection. He explained that many people had seen Christ after His resurrection, and those people were now His witnesses, attesting to the reality of what happened.

But Paul also explained that the resurrection was the fulfillment of prophecy.

³⁴ For God had promised to raise him from the dead, not leaving him to rot in the grave. He said, 'I will give you the sacred blessings I promised to David.'

³⁵ Another psalm explains it more fully: 'You will not allow your Holy One to rot in the grave.' ³⁶ This is not a reference to David, for after David had done the will of God in his own generation, he died and was buried with his ancestors, and his body decayed. ³⁷ No, it was a reference to someone else—someone whom God raised and whose body did not decay. (Acts 13:34-37, NLT)

Paul quotes from several different Psalms to emphasize that God had prophesied about the resurrection of Jesus well in advance. His final argument focuses on a psalm of David, where David declares "You will not allow your Holy One to rot in the grave." Paul points out that David surely couldn't have been referring to himself, because if he was, then he was wrong. David was dead, and his grave was a well-known landmark. So if God wasn't saying that David wouldn't rot in the grave, then who was He talking about? Paul states emphatically that this referred to Jesus! Jesus didn't rot in the grave because He rose again! Jesus uniquely fulfilled all these Old Testament prophecies.

Paul's Conclusion

Paul had built a strong case. He had laid the foundations of the gospel in their minds, but now he reached the point to which he had been building all along.

³⁸ “Brothers, listen! We are here to proclaim that through this man Jesus there is forgiveness for your sins. ³⁹ Everyone who believes in him is made right in God’s sight—something the law of Moses could never do. ⁴⁰ Be careful! Don’t let the prophets’ words apply to you. For they said, ⁴¹ ‘Look, you mockers, be amazed and die! For I am doing something in your own day, something you wouldn’t believe even if someone told you about it.’” (Acts 13:38-41, NLT)

Paul explained that not only was Jesus the unique fulfillment of the prophecies, not only was He the long-awaited Messiah, but He provided forgiveness of sins! Unlike the law of Moses, Jesus makes us right in God’s sight.

Theologically, this is called justification. Justification is sometimes described as being made “just as if I’d never sinned.” And that’s true. Through Jesus, God no longer looks at us and sees our sins and failures; He sees the righteousness of Jesus! No amount of sacrificing bulls and goats or trying to keep the tiniest letter of the law could accomplish what Jesus did.

This truth would surely sound appealing, but the people would also struggle to embrace it. So Paul called them to believe by warning them with the words of the prophet Habakkuk, saying that God would do something they wouldn’t believe even if someone told them about it. Paul was saying, “I’m telling you about the amazing thing God has done, don’t be so foolish as to reject the message!” He was calling the people to examine their own hearts, and then to examine the message he had proclaimed. Forgiveness is available through Jesus Christ alone, and Paul didn’t want them to miss out because their traditions, their expectations, or their pride got in their way. He was calling them to repentance and faith in Christ.

Some seemed to have responded favorably to what Paul said,

⁴² As Paul and Barnabas left the synagogue that day, the people begged them to speak about these things again the next week. ⁴³ Many Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, and the two men urged them to continue to rely on the grace of God. (Acts 13:42-43, NLT)

Paul and Barnabas were invited back to speak the following week. Several began to follow Paul and Barnabas, but their message continued to have a singular focus: rely on the grace of God. God’s grace is a wonderful gift, but we must embrace it and rely upon it in order to benefit from it.

Conclusion

In many ways, there isn’t a lot of new ground broken in these verses. Paul spends most of the time recapping the Old Testament, then retells the story of Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection. But watching the way Paul does these things is wonderfully instructive to us. So let’s draw some lessons about how to share our faith from Paul.

First, we should find common ground. We can find some common ground with everyone we encounter. For Paul with the Jews, it was pretty easy—they were in the same place he had been a few years prior. He shared the things he had learned and had resonated with him. But he did this with everyone, even people who didn't believe in God. He found common ground and then found a way to connect that to Jesus.

We can do the same thing when we interact with people. It might be as simple as pointing out that we share some of the same beliefs about morality or about the nature of our world. There may be a lot of agreement, or very little. But the key is to start with where we agree and begin building toward the gospel from there. Starting with points of agreement lowers the temperature of the conversation at the outset, and opens the door to meaningful dialogue.

Second, explain what Jesus did. Some people do not know the story of Jesus at all. They may have heard bits and pieces about Him, but don't know the story. More and more people are completely ignorant of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection today. But we must not only explain the facts of what Jesus did, we must explain why it matters. Paul showed the people that the things they had been hoping would earn them heaven were insufficient to do so. Many today have a similar belief. This past week, our president made a statement that showed his own misunderstanding of the gospel, when he said that he hoped his efforts to make peace would make him fit for heaven. This kind of thinking is more common than we realize. So we must explain to people not only the facts of the gospel but the truth that Jesus alone can make us right with God. Jesus provides what we all desperately need.

Finally, we must call people to action. Paul did not merely recite the facts and then sit down; he called his audience to respond. We must do the same. Knowing the facts of the gospel is not enough to save you. Only a relationship with Christ, following Him and submitting your life to Him, can save you. We must call people to embrace Him wholeheartedly so that they may experience the blessings He provides.

Today, I want to call you to action. Evaluate where you stand with Jesus. Are you hoping you can be good enough to earn heaven? Let me assure you, you aren't. You can't be. The good news is that God knew that—which is why He sent Jesus. Let me challenge you today to embrace Him with your life if you haven't yet. It doesn't matter how you have failed in the past, and it doesn't matter how messed up you think you are. You don't have to get your life fixed before you can be acceptable to God. Jesus makes you acceptable.

The message of the gospel is good news! It is essential for each person to believe and embrace for themselves. My prayer is that if you have not yet believed, you will do so today because you understand what is at stake. And if you have believed, then I pray you will share the message with others...because you understand what is at stake. We can a great deal from Paul's example. Now let's emulate it!

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