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A Tale of Two Sabbaths

Acts 13:14-52

Intro: We are well into Paul and Barnabas' first missionary journey. They have moved across the island of Cyprus, preaching the Gospel as they went and have seen some great blessings as well as experienced some problems along the way. There was a great door of opportunity opened to them to share the Gospel with the highest ranking Roman official on Cyprus but this great opportunity was accompanied by some serious opposition. This shouldn't have surprised these traveling missionaries because this is almost always the case, so it shouldn't surprise us today either. We have a great opportunity to share the Gospel in our own community and it also comes with a healthy dose of opposition but that shouldn't discourage us, it should actually encourage us! For, if we will but trust the Lord and continue to obediently pursue His will for us, we will receive the same divine empowerment to face the opposition and see the same success in our witnessing that Paul and Barnabas saw.

As we follow Paul's missionary endeavors in Acts, we notice that he follows a particularly effective procedure when he enters a new area. He picks out the most strategic city or cities in the region, plant churches in them and then launch out into the surrounding areas with a sustainable evangelistic effort. Wherever possible, when he enters these new cities, he will begin his ministry in the local synagogue. He does this for 2 reasons: 1) he has a great burden to win his own people to Christ and; 2) he knows the synagogue will have both Jews and Gentiles who are ready to hear the Word of God. We will see the effectiveness of this strategy in today's text.

14-15 – Upon sailing from Cyprus, the missionary team – now short one assistant (John Mark) – landed on the southern coast of Asia Minor (Turkey) in the harbor city of Perga. We don't know if they stayed there long or immediately set out for the interior. Antioch in Pisidia was about 135 ml inland from Perga, to the north. The general area was known as the region of Galatia and the churches that would be establish in this vicinity would later be the recipients of a letter from Paul that is included in our NT Canon.

It's not likely that Paul or Barnabas had ever been to this city or had any

contacts there so it's only logical that they go to the one location where they know they will be readily accepted – the synagogue. These people spoke the same language, lived under the same culture, had the same religious heritage. The synagogue was the most reliable starting place they had in a foreign city and nearly everyone they visited had one.

A 1st Century synagogue followed a general order of service. First, opening prayers were offered then there was a reading from the Law (Pentateuch). This would be followed by a reading from the Prophets and finally, if there was an educated person present, they would be invited to speak on subjects related to the readings. Paul had been trained as a Pharisee by no less than Gamaliel himself and Barnabas was from the priestly tribe of Levi. These were the kinds of authoritative voices that dispersed Jews wanted to hear from. As far as speaking in relation to the readings of the day, the entire OT points to Jesus so it didn't matter where they read from, these missionaries could preach a sermon that would reveal the true meaning of the passage as it relates to Jesus Christ. The invitation to speak was given and Paul was more than happy to make good use of the opportunity.

16-41 – This is the first synagogue sermon of Paul's recorded by Luke. Like any good sermon, it has an introduction, 4 main points and a conclusion. Paul begins by addressing the 2 categories of people present in the synagogue that day: Jews (men of Israel) and Gentiles (God-fearers). This shows that there was a mixed worshipping community in this synagogue. So, not only would Paul be able to preach to Jews who had a limited knowledge of OT truth, but he could also make contact with Gentiles who were sensitive to spiritual things. These Gentiles would also have been instructed in the OT and as such, they would be fertile ground for his evangelistic preaching.

1) With this theological background in mind, Paul begins his sermon with a survey of OT events. This was not a general survey of the OT but a list of specific saving acts of God for His people Israel. Paul moves from the period of the patriarchs to Israel's growth into a nation while under bondage in Egypt, to the Exodus, the wilderness wanderings, the conquest of Canaan, the period of Judges up to Samuel and the first 80 yrs of the monarchy. Paul stops with David because after his reign, the history of Israel goes downhill. The real story behind this list is that it shows us that the Jewish view of history is really the Jewish view of God. The Bible is all

about God's saving acts. Paul repeatedly says "God did this" or "God did that." God is always calling, moving, saving, delivering. It's a wonderful theology but it is more than just a theology – it's a theological worldview.

2) Not content to leave them in the OT, Paul continues by speaking of God's saving acts in their time, what we would consider a NT survey. Of course, this was the whole point of speaking. Paul had been reminding his mostly Jewish hearers of what God had done in the past for His people. Now, to include his Gentile audience, Paul reminds them that God isn't just a God of the past or of the Jews. He's *still* acting and is doing something new. He had established an old covenant with Israel but now He has established a new covenant through the work of Jesus Christ.

In this section, Paul connects Jesus directly to David and reveals Him as the fulfillment of God's promise of a Savior. He does this first by introducing the ministry of John the Baptist, who announced the coming of the Messiah. Next, he mentions the trial and crucifixion of Jesus, which is the heart of the gospel. Then he deals with Jesus' burial and finally; he declares the resurrection, making particular reference to those who witnessed it. This is the same essential core material that is found in nearly every Gospel presentation made to Jews in the NT.

Every pious Jew knew the Messiah would come from David's family and that a prophet would go before Him and announce His coming. John the Baptist was that prophet. The religious leaders in Jerusalem rejected and crucified the nation's Messiah, not because they hadn't read or heard the message of the prophets but because they didn't understand the message, they refused to accept that Jesus was, in fact, the promised Messiah. Of course, the resurrection was the crucial event. It proved Jesus was exactly who He claimed to be, who John declared Him to be.

This list also proves something else. It proves that Christianity is not just a philosophy or a set of ethics. In essence, Christianity is a declaration of facts concerning what God has done. That's why Christianity is not malleable. People sometimes try to remake Christianity, thinking a new version would be more acceptable to our modern culture. But it never works because, like it or not, Christianity constantly brings us up against the facts. Instead of trying to change them, we must instead learn to conform our thinking and conduct to these facts, then proclaim these facts to others.

3) Since Paul's not expecting them to just take his word on all of this, he offers them some OT support for what God has accomplished through the person and work of Jesus Christ. The 1st passage quoted is **Ps 2:7**. This text actually refers to the resurrection of Jesus, not His birth. The virgin tomb was like a womb that gave birth to Jesus Christ in resurrected glory. The 2nd text is **Isa 55:3** and is used to show that the promises made to David are fulfilled in Jesus.

The 3rd text is **Ps 16:10**. It's clear that the promise in this passage did not apply to David who was dead, buried and decayed. It did apply to Jesus, who died, was buried but rose again! This made Jesus the only viable candidate for the fulfillment of this divine covenant promise.

4) Finally, Paul comes to the heart of his sermon: an announcement of the Gospel and a call for personal response.

He declared to them that through faith in Jesus Christ, they could have 2 blessings that the Law could never provide: forgiveness of their sins and justification before God. Justification = just as if I had never sinned! It's not that we've never sinned, because we have. It's because of the work of Jesus Christ, who bore the punishment of our sin in our place, we can now stand before God *as if* we had never sinned. Like Adam or Eve before the fall. The law could never do that. He mentions this because he's speaking in a synagogue to those who loved the law and based their hopes of salvation upon keeping it. Paul knows this is impossible because the law can only condemn, not save or justify. If they were to be saved it would be by Jesus doing for them what the law could not do. Through Jesus, God atoned for the sins we have committed and provided a basis by which we could be justified in His eyes. That's the good news Paul came there to proclaim. It's exactly what swept through Europe and transformed the world.

Paul concludes his sermon, not with an uplifting poem but with a stern and sobering warning. Here, he quotes from **Hab 1:5**. This passage deals with the fall of Jerusalem and is seen as an expression of God's judgment on Israel. In that day, the "unbelievable work" God was doing was raising up the Chaldeans to chastise His people, a scenario so remarkable, so unlikely, nobody would believe it. Paul's point is that, although we live in an age of great grace, God is still a God of great judgment and sin must be judged if it is not atoned for by Jesus Christ. If God judged His OT people who rejected Him will He not also judge those living in NT times who reject His offer of

forgiveness in Christ?

The OT God and the NT God are one and the same. If you will not have the forgiveness of sins through the work of Jesus Christ then the wrath of God will come upon you.

42-43 – The results of Paul's presentation of the Gospel were encouraging. There was great interest on the part of some of the Jews but even more so from the Gentile proselytes. They wanted to hear more and begged Paul and Barnabas to come back the next Sabbath and share the Word of God with them again. Of course, their ministry wasn't confined to synagogue services on the Sabbath. Vs43 says many people followed them and were taught by them so it appears that ministry continued all through that 1st week. Notice how the tables had turned: in Habakkuk's day, God was using Gentiles to punish the Jews but in Paul's day, God was using Jews to save the Gentiles! What a wonderful, loving God we have: One who's not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.

44-52 – It appears that most of those who heard Paul's sermon went home and shared the basic contents with everyone they could find because the very next Sabbath, just about the entire city showed up at the synagogue to hear for themselves. What was it that brought them in? Was it the novelty of foreigners coming to town with info from other areas? Was it because Paul was such an eloquent orator? Was it because they didn't have anything better to do? All of those things may have been true to some limited extent but the real reason, the big draw is clearly stated in the text – they came to hear the word of God! This is what provoked the curiosity of this mostly Gentile audience.

Why were the Jews so angry at Paul's preaching that day? There could be several contributing factors: 1) The religious leaders in Jerusalem had rejected Jesus. This would make them wary of his teaching. 2) The Jews were committed to the Law. Their life consisted of learning the Law, trying to figure out what it meant, obeying it. Paul's message the previous Sabbath was that the law could never justify anyone. While that's exactly true and is foundational to the Gospel but they would have seen that as preaching against the Law of Moses. All that aside, what seems to have bothered the Jews the most was the sheer number of Gentiles who responded to the Gospel.

This had been the problem all along. They didn't care if the Gentiles sat in the back of the synagogue, paid attention, and maybe eventually became good Jews by circumcision. That was all fine and good and they were glad to have it. What they didn't want was Gentiles coming as Gentiles and being received by God in exactly the same way they saw themselves being received since they were Jews. I'm sure in vs43, as Paul and Barnabas instructed them on how to continue in God's grace, they didn't tell the Gentiles they had to become Jews first before God would receive them. This would have been seen as a betrayal of Jewish religious heritage. Thus, they were compelled to oppose Paul.

Paul's response may have been surprising to his Jewish countrymen but was welcomed news to the Gentiles. Paul felt he should speak to the Jews first because he was a Jew and because when Jesus gave the Great Commission, He specifically said to begin in Jerusalem, meaning, with Jews. Paul was a Jew so, when he went about preaching the gospel, he went to the synagogues first. Yet, here, he announces his intention to focus on the Gentiles. Why? Because the gospel is not exclusively a Jewish gospel. It's a gospel for the whole world as clearly seen in the Great Commission. Paul supports this statement with a quote from [Isa 49:6](#). The Jews were supposed to be the light to the Gentiles. But if they wouldn't believe and then share the Gospel, the Word would not be bound. Paul would carry it.

The response of the Gentiles was in direct contrast to the Jews. When the Gospel was proclaimed to them, they didn't just believe it – they obeyed it! The Word called for faith in Christ so they obeyed God and believed on Jesus. These Gentile believers gave evidence of their new found faith by becoming witnesses of Jesus as soon as they were converted. The Gospel message quickly spread throughout the entire region of Galatia and it was spread by those who came to trust in Jesus during those first few weeks of Paul's preaching.

This is a testament to the power of the Gospel to transform the lives of those who accept it. In little more than a week's time, the Holy Spirit took a group of Gentiles with some knowledge of OT scripture, who were willing to believe and obey God Word and with them, He established a church in this region. It was a good church. It was a strong church that lasted, not just for

the lifetimes of its charter members, but for centuries to come. That's not to say that they wouldn't have their struggles. In fact, Paul will address some of them in his letter to the Galatians. But, even then, they were willing to listen to God's Word, willing to believe – willing to obey. If the Holy Spirit could do that much with a group of formerly pagan Gentiles, how much more could He do with us with all the spiritual advantages we have at our disposal? The key though, is not in the advantages – it's in the trust and obedience.

One last point: In between saying they “glorified the word of the Lord” and implying that they took that Word to others, we read, “and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.” This is the doctrine of election: those who believe are those who are appointed to eternal life by God. It's interesting that this statement of election appears right in the center of this great evangelistic story. Some people can't see how anybody can be an evangelist if God decides who will be saved and then saves them. “If God is going to save them, He'll save them regardless. What I do doesn't matter. Or, if it depends on me, then it depends on me and you must not talk about election.”

That's not the way election works. If God's going to save someone, He will save them. But it's not correct to say He will save them anyway, because that means God will save them apart from any witness (ours or another's), and that isn't true. The God who appoints the ends also appoints the means, and the means He's appointed in evangelizing other people is through our witness. We're to take the Gospel into all the world. But as we go, we know that God will work through our witness to bring to faith those He has appointed. This should encourage our witnessing efforts.

What if it didn't depend on God; what if it depended on you. What if people are saved because you're eloquent, you have the right answers or happen to be in the right place at just the right time—completely apart from God's election. If that's true, it means that if you don't have the right answers, if you aren't in the right place, if you don't present the gospel in just the right way, then these people will perish and it'll be your fault. How could anyone live with that?

But, if you believe God has appointed some for eternal life and as you testify of Jesus God will use that testimony to bring those people to faith, then the

burden is removed and witnessing becomes what it was meant to be: a joy, as it was for Paul and Barnabas. Yes, they experienced persecution. But, in spite of that, a church was established and it did more than just survive, it prevailed and went on to become one of the strongest churches of the ancient world. 😊