

Acts 13:13-52, No. 29**“Salvation is of the Lord”****April 17, 2016****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

The missionary travels of Paul and Barnabas had begun in Cyprus. But now they crossed the sea between that island and the Asia Minor mainland.

- v.13 Nothing is said of this here, but we learn later that John’s leaving was actually desertion or dereliction of duty. This is the John Mark who wrote the Gospel of Mark! We’re left in the dark as to precisely why he left for home. Was it the rigors of the work or the danger to which they were exposed? Could it have been the reversal of the order of the two men? Did you notice? It was Barnabas and Saul through v. 7; for the rest of this history Paul is mentioned first. There had been, it appears, a reversal of leadership, no doubt due to Paul’s commanding intellect and presence. Mark was Barnabas’ relative. Could he have regarded what was happening as a demotion for both Barnabas and himself? “It takes more grace than I can tell, to play the second fiddle well.” We simply don’t know, but learn later in the New Testament that the breach was repaired and this John Mark is among the most trusted assistants of Paul at the time of his death.

- v.14 Again Luke tantalizes us without providing details. We know from Galatians that when Paul arrived there he was sick. William Ramsay, the great historian of Paul’s life and work, suggested that he had malaria and had left Perga sooner than he otherwise would have to escape the hot low-lying coastal plain to reach the bracing cooler temperatures of the south Galatian plateau.

Antioch was a hundred miles north of Perga across the Taurus Mountains. Antioch in Pisidia distinguishes this city from the far larger Antioch in Syria, from which Paul and Barnabas had begun their journey. It was a Roman colony, an important status for a town in those days, and sat astride an important road. Was this Paul’s strategy: strategic towns on strategic roads?

- v.15 This was a custom in synagogue worship, to have someone make an address on the scripture that had been read. Visitors were sometimes invited to do so and, all the more, if the visitor, like Paul, was trained as a rabbi. Paul may have been dressed as a rabbi, so would have been immediately identifiable as a theologically trained man. You may remember that Jesus, in Luke 4, was given a similar opportunity at worship in the synagogue in Capernaum. What Paul gave them, like Stephen before him, was a historical overview to prepare them to hear that Israel’s history had been consummated in the life and ministry of Jesus. His argument, you will notice, has many similarities to Peter’s sermon on the day of Pentecost.

- v.25 This is the first precis we have of a sermon of Paul. You’ll notice the emphasis on the gracious initiative of God. God is the subject of almost all the sentences in this first section.

- v.37 After the OT background, Paul focused all his attention on the life and ministry, the death and resurrection of Jesus. This was the burden of all New Testament preaching. Now comes the application or the appeal based on the history that had been reviewed. Notice the change in pronoun. Paul is addressing them directly and saying that all of this is for *you*, everything God has done in Jesus Christ, everything he is offering in the way of forgiveness and eternal life is *for you*. [Bock, 458]
- v.39 There has been a lot of ink spilled recently by New Testament scholars arguing back and forth whether the Judaism of Paul's day was as legalistic as Protestants since Luther have been taught to believe. That there were exceptions to the prevailing Jewish thinking about salvation cannot be doubted. But the evidence of Acts has often been overlooked in this debate. What is made clear here is that Paul defines for his Jewish audience – obviously representing what Paul considered the typical Jewish viewpoint – the absolute contrast of salvific theories between the Christian gospel and rabbinic theology. They thought justification could be had by obedience to the law – if not, why would Paul contrast his own message with that? – while Paul came declaring it impossible. Justification, forgiveness of sins and vindication before God, can be had only through faith in Jesus who died and rose again for that very purpose.
- v.41 Paul reminded them of the prophet's denunciation of Israel's unbelief to warn them against rejecting God's provision for their salvation in the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, as they had so frequently rejected God's provision in the past.
- v.43 Some were already Christians, many others were interested.
- v.44 The success that Paul and Barnabas were having, the number of people deeply interested in what they were saying, and the number of interested Gentiles mixed together with these Jews set some of the Jews to fuming – so human a picture! – and they began to argue against what Paul was saying. Then as still today people would often be curious, even interested, until in one way or another they felt threatened by the message.

By the way, it is important to notice that nothing is said of any miraculous signs being performed in Pisidian Antioch. It was, as it would usually be, the message itself that captivated people and drew them to Christ!

- v.45 The four Gospels also assert that the Jews were motivated in their rejection of Christ and their persecution of Christians by jealousy. Remember the older brother in the Lord's parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15, jealous of the attention his younger brother was getting, resentful that nothing similar had been done for him. And so he sulked outside and wouldn't go in to the feast that was being held to celebrate his younger brother's return. That older brother, in the context, is clearly a picture of the Pharisees and other Jews who resented the Lord's giving his attention to people they regarded as "sinners" rather than to them. One commentator on that parable writes, "What a mournful commentary is the Book of Acts throughout on the words 'He would not go in...'" [Trench, *Parables*, 422]

- v.48 The first conversions in Antioch were among the Jews and the God-fearers, Gentile converts to Judaism. By the next week Gentiles were coming to Christ in numbers.
- v.51 It was a custom of the Jews to shake off the dust of a pagan town from their feet as a symbol of cleansing themselves from the impurity of sinners who did not worship the true God. For Jews such as Paul and Barnabas to do this to other Jews amounted to a powerful statement that these Jews, for their refusal to receive the Messiah, were no longer a part of the true Israel and were no better than pagan Gentiles. Remember the OT prophets did this in their own way, comparing Israel and Judah unfavorably to Sodom and Gomorrah, notoriously wicked Gentile towns, a galling comparison for a people who were accustomed to take pride in their morality.

One of the great discoveries of biblical study over the last generation is that the biblical *historians* – those who told the story of the progress of faith from the creation of the world to the apostolic period – were just as surely *theologians*. To be sure, Christians have always derived theological truth from the biblical narratives – we always knew that in the biblical history we learned a great deal about God and man and salvation – but no one fully appreciated how intentionally theological was the massive amount of history or narrative contained in the Bible. But now we have learned to see *how* the biblical writers taught the faith in their accounts of its history in the world. They wrote their history so as to teach and to emphasize theological truth. We have learned, as no previous generation of biblical scholarship really knew how to do, to detect their theological themes *from the way they wrote their history*. The history is no less reliable *as history*; but it has become in this way something more: another way the Word of God teaches the faith, expounds doctrine, and applies that doctrine to ordinary life.

For example, throughout this narrative Luke has defined for us the good news. We often read in the New Testament about *the gospel*. But what is the gospel? You might be surprised to know - maybe not - that scholars argue about what the gospel actually is: what was the Good News proclaimed by the apostles. Well Luke has made that clear here in what he chose to report of Paul's preaching in Pisidian Antioch. He has told us in this way what the foundation or the center or the nub of the Christian message actually is. It is, more than anything else, a message, a proclamation, an announcement of the way of salvation from sin and death.

Luke makes it clear that Paul's message, first in the synagogue of the Jews and then in the public squares of the city, was about Jesus as the savior (v. 23), about salvation (v. 26), about the forgiveness of sins (v. 38), about freedom from the guilt of sin and bondage to it (v. 39), about the grace of God (v. 43), about salvation to the world (v. 47), and about eternal life (v.48). No doubt he spoke in far greater detail about all of this and about precisely how Christ's life, death and resurrection secured all these gifts and benefits. But the message was that God had acted to bring forgiveness of sins and eternal life to the world. *That* is the good news. Luke has made that very clear. In fact, we have here in this first account of a Pauline sermon, the themes and the terms that will dominate Paul's exposition of salvation in Galatians and in Romans: sin, the law and its condemnation of sin, Christ's death on the cross, his resurrection, and the grace of God leading to the justification of sinners. It is all here before it appears in Paul's great letters. [Stott, 225]

One technique of the biblical historians that the school of literary interpreters has drawn to our attention is the way a biblical narrator will often signal the theological significance of the history he has been reporting with a statement of his own or with a statement of one of the figures in his historical narrative. Sometimes more overt, often quite subtle, the biblical author in this way tells his readers what to make of the history they are reading. Such a statement is called the author's *evaluative viewpoint*. We are given in this way, in other words, the biblical author's own *evaluation* or assessment of this particular piece of history.

We have such a statement, such an *evaluative viewpoint* in v. 48.

“And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.”

There are actually several very important statements being made in that sentence, but I'm most interested in the last phrase. No miracles had been performed. A message had been preached and, no doubt, explained at length. To be sure it was a message unlikely to prove popular to Gentiles, indeed highly unlikely to prove popular. It cut across the grain of the ruling philosophies of the day, it featured Jews and one particular Jew, a Jew most of them would never have heard of, and it was the story of events of almost mythical proportions that happened far away and, again, events of which they had never heard. Imagine yourself in such a situation, hearing such a message for the first time. Somebody comes to you here in Tacoma, Washington from, say, Afghanistan or Timbuktu, and he tells you something like what the apostle Paul told the citizens of Antioch. How likely would it be that you would drop everything, believe all the strange things that he was saying, and rearrange your life root and branch on the basis of this information?

But many did. Indeed, over the following years vast multitudes did precisely that and multitudes are doing the same today, day after day, all over the world. Why, for goodness sake? Why should this message not only captivate these Galatian Jews and Gentiles, but fall upon their ears with an authority they could neither deny nor escape. We may be so familiar with the gospel, have thought about so long, have heard it explained and defended so many times, that we find it easy to believe it all true. But why would Gentiles who had an utterly different understanding of the world, of God (or the gods), of sin and guilt, of life after death, and of everything else; I say, why would *they* believe it and believe it at their first hearing of it?

Well, Luke tells us with a single phrase, the final third of v. 48. It isn't his reporting of what Paul said; it is his own comment on the history he has reported. “As many as were appointed to eternal life believed.” The reason they believed, the reason they found a message they had never heard before and that contradicted virtually every principle of their long-held worldview so persuasive was that *God had chosen them to be saved*, for that is what the words “appointed to eternal life” mean. People have tried to make the words mean something else, as you can imagine, but hardly any serious commentator on the text denies that what is being asserted is that those whom God decided to save were the ones who believed. How do we know that these people had been beforehand enrolled in God's book of life? *Because they believed!* [Bruce, Gr. Text, 275] “Just as God was the major active agent in the events of Israel's history [which Paul reported earlier], so he is the active agent in bringing Gentiles to himself.” [Bock, 465] One

value of reading liberal commentaries, written by men who do not believe the Bible to be the Word of God, is that, since they don't have any personal stake in what the Bible says, since they do not think themselves under any obligation to believe what the Bible says, they often are willing to admit that it does in fact say what it says. The standard liberal commentary on Acts - translated into English from German - which has served scholarship for the last 40 years or so, refers to v. 48 simply as a "predestinarian comment."

Luke wants you to know, the Holy Spirit wants you to know, that the influx of converts in Pisidian Antioch *was God's doing*. *He* commands the human heart. *He* can persuade a man or woman to believe things to be true, gloriously true, they would have scoffed at but a few days before. He can convince a proud, vain, stuck-up man that he is a sinner and desperately needs to be forgiven and that only the life and work of another can avail to take away his sins. He can convince a skeptical woman that a man really did rise from the dead. He can convince a polytheist that there is but one God, and a deist that God has entered the world as a man to secure the world's salvation. He can convince a Gnostic in the blink of an eye that the human body has a future in heaven. The conversion of the Greco-Roman world to Christianity may well have been the most unlikely thing that ever happened, humanly speaking, but the probabilities posed no obstacle to God! That is Luke's evaluative comment: God did it; it was the election and the power of God at work in Pisidian Antioch in those days.

Now, as so often in the Bible, the bombshell is dropped and the author quickly moves on. He doesn't pause to explain how or why God has ordained some to eternal life and not others. He doesn't answer the typical objections that men raise to this doctrine: that it is somehow unfair for God to treat one man differently than another, or that it contradicts what we all know to be the exercise of our own free will. Paul will treat those objections once in his letters, but ordinarily the Bible has very little to say about such things. Nor does Luke explain, if God has determined who will respond to the gospel message, if God has appointed those who will be saved, if the salvation of any particular sinner is *God's doing*, why the very same passage lays such obvious emphasis on the responsibility of everyone to believe the message and the accountability of everyone who does not.

There can be no doubt that Luke lays great stress on that truth as well. He reminds the Jews of the long history of their unbelief and rebellion against God. He makes no bones about the complicity of the Jewish authorities in the murder of Jesus. He cites the prophet Habakkuk's condemnation of his contemporaries' unbelief. And when others refused to believe and, indeed, spoke against Paul's message, the apostle condemned them (v. 46) for thrusting the truth aside and proving themselves *unworthy* of eternal life. That is certainly a way of speaking we do not expect! Who, after all, is *worthy* of eternal life? Are we not all sinners needing Christ to save us? And yet, that is what Paul said. They were *unworthy* of salvation *because they did not and would not believe the good news*. That they failed to obtain salvation was not God's fault; it was theirs! And so it always is in the Bible. Men and women are responsible to believe and have no one to blame but themselves if they fail to embrace eternal life when it is offered to them.

We are Calvinists here; we believe in the sovereignty of God in the salvation of sinners. We believe that salvation is God's gift and God's doing, from beginning to end, in all the links of the chain. The father sent his Son into the world to save his people from their sins. But he also sent

his Spirit into the hearts of his people to draw them to Christ in living faith. As Calvin put it, “The gift of faith is the principal work of the Holy Spirit.” [*Inst.* III.i,1] We find this taught in the Bible everywhere we look, and taught both positively – that we owe our salvation to God entirely and in every way – and negatively, that God has not appointed everyone to be saved. We too struggle to get our minds around this truth. We too are sometimes troubled by it, explain it as we will. But we know how important it is to believe this to be true, not only because it is taught in the Word of God, taught, explained, emphasized, and illustrated again and again, but because we know very well it is *the truth about our own salvation*. We know it was a gift, God’s gift. We know that it was the grace of God that, as a Puritan once put it, implanted in our souls an instinct for Christ. [Thomas Goodwin] We know we neither deserved it nor contributed to it. We know how important it is that we know to whom we owe our hope of eternal life. Humility before God and man being the very nature of true holiness we know how vital it is to understand that we contributed nothing to our salvation but the sin from which we needed to be saved. It is important that we give all honor to God and that we spend our lives thanking him for his indescribably great gift in thought, word, and deed. We know all of that.

But before we are Calvinists, or predestinarians, we are biblicists. First and foremost we are loyal to the Bible, not to any system of theology. We remain determined to let the Word of God speak for itself, to believe what it teaches and to refuse to go beyond its explanations, as if somehow we would ever be competent to add to the Bible’s explanations of the ways of Almighty God, as if we could plumb the depths of reality without God to teach us what it was we were seeing. The Bible, indeed, the Book of Acts leaves us in no doubt why anyone is saved. As we will read in Acts 16, “the Lord opened Lydia’s heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.” And so here as well: “as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.”

As a Presbyterian, I learned this text long ago and have quoted it countless times in defense of the sovereignty of divine grace. But as a biblicist, I never want this statement to be separated from its place in Luke’s narrative, a narrative that both illustrates and teaches the sovereignty of God in salvation and, at the same time, powerfully illuminates and emphasizes the accountability of the hearer, the arguments by which they ought to be persuaded, the all too human factors that will either convince or repel them.

As I have often said to you, I do not know, no one knows how to reconcile these two emphases about how sinners are saved – the responsibility of people to respond to the gospel, on the one hand, the secret will of God on the other – and the Bible never explains how to reconcile them. It only asserts both, often together, and with equal and unrelenting emphasis. The person who imagines that he can explain reality *as God knows it* is a fool, and I don’t wish to be a fool or for you to be fools either. Our minds are too small, too weak to grasp truths this large, reality this all-encompassing. We know and the Bible teaches us that human beings are possessed of a free will and that they are accountable for the decisions they make, the lives they lead, and their response to the word of God. But we also know and the Bible teaches us that salvation is the gift, the work, and the achievement of God in any human heart and life. That is precisely what Luke teaches us here as the theologian that he is!

In 1522 Martin Luther said in one of his Wittenberg sermons that the Reformation was succeeding, people were embracing the good news of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ,

while he and Melancthon and Amsdorf sat in the pub drinking beer. The Word of God was doing all the work, he said, by which he meant God himself was doing the work of changing the hearts and minds of men and women. [Cited in Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life*, 162]

That kind of hyperbole was pure Martin Luther. As a matter of fact he was working himself to exhaustion on behalf of the gospel, as Paul had done before him. But it was his homely way of saying that the gospel's fortunes are in the hands of God and no opposition of man, no cultural or religious prejudices, no long-held intellectual and spiritual habits, not even the unbeliever's calculation of what Christian faith may cost him or her, can prevent a man or woman's falling at Jesus' feet if God should have appointed that person to eternal life. Such was the case on Pentecost Sunday in Jerusalem some years before, such was the case in faraway Pisidian Antioch, and such is the case today.

So it is that Blaise Pascal, the great French polymath and Christian apologist, as staunch a defender of sovereign grace as Martin Luther or John Calvin, though himself still a Roman Catholic, would say, "To make a man a saint, grace [by which he meant God's sovereign choice and work] is absolutely necessary; and whoever doubts this does not know what a saint is, nor what a man is."

But I like better the homely southern aphorism: when you find a turtle on the top of a fence post, you know it didn't get there by itself! When you find a proud sinner turning to God – vain, self-absorbed as we all are – even though it requires him to acknowledge his desperate need, to humble himself; even though it requires her to submit herself to the rule of Jesus Christ, I say, when you see that, you know the person didn't get to the top of that fence post by himself or herself.

All of that theology in Luke's evaluative viewpoint: truth to humble us, to cause us to look up to God for his grace, and, as Christians, to cause us to spend our days praising God for what he has done for us and given to us, when, had we been left to ourselves, we would have remained -- and happily so – utterly and completely lost, without God, and without hope. God must do it; God has done it!