

Introduction

Two early missionaries of the modern era are William Carey and Adoniram Judson. Carey was from England; Judson from the United States. Carey went to India; Judson first to India to be mentored by Carey, then on to nearby Burma. Both faced incredible hardships with their health and the deaths of their children and wives. Judson spent nearly two years in prison. Both engaged in painstaking effort to learn new languages and translate the Bible into them. Both spent years and years in these conditions. Judson was in Burma for seven years before seeing the first person converted to Christ. These men like all others definitely had their imperfections. But they spent their lives as missionaries, enduring severe affliction in order to bring the gospel to those who would never hear it without their witness.

This morning we will turn our attention to history's first church-planting missionaries, and we will find that they endured much affliction as well. Paul and Barnabas were ministering to the growing group of believers in the town of Antioch in Syria. And the Spirit of God led the church to set Barnabas and Paul apart to mission service and send them off. Off they went. And after a time on Barnabas's home island of Cyprus, they returned to the mainland and ventured to another city by the name of Antioch. There were about 16 cities in the ancient Roman empire named Antioch. This Antioch was in the district of Pisidia, a part of the Roman province of Galatia, which is located in the southern part of modern day Turkey. Thus, the gospel came to Galatia. Acts 13 and 14 recount the major events of the mission of Paul and Barnabas there. We are going to confine our reading this morning to Acts 13:13-41 which contains an account of Paul's first sermon in Galatia.

[Read Acts 13:13-41 and Pray]

Next week we will begin a series on Paul's epistle to the Galatians. It is one of the earliest of Paul's epistles. We will see that it was a letter to churches which had been challenged by false teachers and had begun to give ground to them. It will help us to understand something of the predicament they were in and what was at stake if we have a grasp of the circumstances in which those churches were planted. So we are turning today to the account in the book of Acts of Paul and Barnabas's missionary efforts in the Galatian cities of Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. We will see the gospel that they preached and the reaction of people to that gospel. Some responded with envy and hostility while others were overjoyed.

The central truth I want you to take away is the gospel is a one-of-a-kind precious jewel given by God. It is a glorious message of grace. The beauty and glory of the gospel are such that some will love it and some will hate it. Either way, it must be shared.

Covering two chapters in the book of Acts is an ambitious goal for one sermon. I am going to have to focus on three specific aspects which highlight the gospel going forth in Galatia. We will look at the heart of the gospel, the hostility of those who reject that gospel, and the joy of those who embrace that gospel.

I. The Heart of the Gospel.

The heart of the gospel is expressed in Paul's synagogue sermon that we have just read. When Paul and Barnabas arrived in the Pisidian city of Antioch, on the Sabbath day, they went into the synagogue. They were given the invitation to speak a word of encouragement, and so Paul stood up

and gave them exactly what they asked for. There is no word for the weary soul so encouraging as the gospel message. This is what he preached.

Paul had four points.

1. The older history of Israel from the patriarchs to David (17-22).
2. The recent history of Israel from John the Baptist to Jesus (23-29).
3. The recent work of God's power in raising Jesus from the dead (30-37).
4. The present message of salvation and warning for unbelievers (38-41).

In these four points we have highlights of the heart of the gospel. The good news of the gospel is that God has done for human beings what they would not and could not do for themselves. One day we will come back to this sermon and dive deeply into the details. This morning I am only able to draw your attention to 4 fundamental and core aspects of the good news as Paul preached it in Antioch—God's promise, God's work, the people's sin, and God's grace.

The gospel all started with God's promise. God chose the father of the nation Israel, Abraham, and he made him promises. He promised an inheritance of land and he promised a descendant through whom all the families of the earth would be blessed. God also made promises to David. One of his descendants would sit on his throne forever as king. God fulfilled the promises he made by providing a savior in Jesus. God is a promise maker and a promise keeper. He promised hope and help for his people and he has delivered.

A second aspect of the gospel is God's work. All through Paul's recitation of these gospel-related events, it is God who is at work for the good of the people. Here is a shortened version of Paul's sermon with the focus on who is at work. God chose our fathers. God made the people great. God led them out of Egypt. God put up with them in the wilderness. God destroyed the nations of Canaan and God gave Israel their land. God gave them judges. God gave them Saul. God raised up David. God has brought a savior, Jesus. God raised Jesus from the dead. The gospel is God's gospel. It is a message of the work of GOD to benefit his people.

A third aspect of the gospel is the faithlessness of the people. With all the blessings God poured out, they continually put him to the test by disobedience. Paul mentions how God put up with the people in the wilderness. He mentions the need for judges which was a need because of the waywardness of the people. Then he mentions the forty years of Saul's kingship which largely resembled the forty years of wilderness wandering. Finally, he draws attention to the Jews' rejection of God's son Jesus. Despite finding no guilt in him, they condemned him, put him to death, and buried him. This is the way of all of mankind. It is why we need Jesus. It is why we need the gospel. The commands and directives of God by themselves serve to illustrate our bondage to sin. It is impossible for sinners to make themselves right with God. And without help from him, we are subject to eternal justice. It is the plight of Gentiles as well as Israelites. Apart from Christ, we are alienated from Israel, strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world.

The fourth aspect of the gospel is God's grace. Paul declares that God has overcome the problem of human sin. Because of the work of Christ, the forgiveness of sin has been secured and this forgiveness is to be proclaimed. The way to receive it is not through human work or human effort but simply through the outstretched arms of faith. Verse 39 states, "everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses." The Greek word for freed is justified. Justified means to be declared righteous. It is to meet and fulfill the demands of God's law. This is the relief of the gospel. Believe in Jesus; cast yourself upon him; trust in the sufficiency

of his work. You will receive justification and forgiveness from God as a gift, but you can never earn it. And you must never approach God as though you can.

This is the gospel Paul proclaimed there in the synagogue of Antioch. It certainly was an encouraging word to those who were living under the weight of the law of Moses. Paul concluded with a warning that the listeners not scoff at the message and ultimately perish. Let them heed the warning and repent and put faith in Christ. That is a suitable warning to each person who hears. Let us be clear. The only way to reconciliation with God and receiving his inheritance is by completely throwing off any dependence upon ourselves and our ceremonies and our attempted adherence to God's law. Let us rather put our faith and trust in Jesus Christ who fully kept the law, died for sins, and rose from the dead victorious over death.

The response to the preaching that day was enthusiastic. It certainly wasn't the "encouraging word" they had expected. As they went out, the people begged that these things might be told them the next Sabbath. When the meeting was over many Jews and Jewish converts followed Paul and Barnabas, who, as they spoke with them urged them to continue in the grace of God.

II. The Hostility of Those Who Reject the Gospel.

Not all welcomed the encouraging word. In fact many did not. When the next Sabbath rolled around, nearly the entire city of Antioch showed up. Could you imagine arriving to church on Sunday morning and all of the neighborhood trying to squeeze in? And how would it sit if all the excitement had to do with the visiting speaker who arrived out of nowhere the previous week?

Well, the Jews were jealous. For them this invasion became not so much a matter of what is true, but "what about us?" You are going to split our church! You are robbing sheep from our congregation. You are going to be more popular than we are! This teaching is going to take away from our prestige and place in this city! It was the same way with the Pharisees in Jerusalem concerning Jesus. It did not matter to them what is true. What mattered was their place in the establishment was being threatened. Human beings want to be correct, but they want to be recognized for it. Right or not, we want respect; we want applause; we want recognition. Respect, applause, prestige, and recognition actually become more important than being right and testing your belief against the evidence. These matters feed pride. Really at the heart of the hostility, there was pride. These folks thought highly of themselves. And they despised anything that threatened the top-shelf image they credited to themselves.

Uncommon are the people like the ones in Berea. Later when Paul and Silas went to Berea, they went into the synagogue as they had in Antioch and they encountered a group which was more interested in truth. For when they heard what Paul was teaching, they examined the scriptures to see whether these things were so. You know, truth is truth whether people believe it or not. And if you believe the truth, it need not threaten you if others do not. Their unbelief cannot make untrue the truth that you believe. Assaulting disbelievers won't make them believers, but it might secure your place of power. But is that really what you are worried about? Paul and Barnabas were not threatened by the unbelief of those who rejected, but those who rejected were threatened by Paul and Barnabas. If you are threatened by what others say and you respond with hostility, it is time to evaluate your profession. It could be that it is more about pride than truth, and that could be disastrous.

So the Jews began to repudiate what Paul was saying. They reviled him—again the same tactics of the Jews against Jesus. Since they ignored Paul's warning and thrust aside the word that was

preached, Paul and Barnabas turned to the Gentiles. The Jews retaliated by stirring up the people of influence and drove Paul and Barnabas out of town.

They proceeded to Iconium. It was a similar scene. Their witness of the gospel was bold and God granted that signs and wonders be performed. A great number of both Jews and Gentiles believed. Those that disbelieved stirred up trouble and persecution. They planned to stone the apostles. So they fled to Lystra.

Once in Lystra, the unrelenting apostles went at it again. They preached, and they healed a man crippled from birth. The city went crazy. They believed Paul and Barnabas to be the Greek gods Hermes and Zeus and were ready to sacrifice to them. The welcome was short-lived, however, as Jews arrived from Antioch and Iconium. They turned the crowds against the apostles and stoned Paul. They dragged him out of the city supposing him to be dead.

He was not dead. He went back into the city and the next day went on with Barnabas to the city of Derbe. After preaching and making many disciples there, Paul and Barnabas revisited each city encouraging them in the faith and warning them of inevitable tribulation. Rightly so. The pattern of rejection we observe in the cities of Galatia was repeated over and over against the gospel in the earliest days of the church, and it has been repeated over and over throughout history since. It is evidence that the devil despises the gospel. Whatever he can do in his effort to silence the witness of the message of Christ, he will do. The darkness with which he has blinded the minds of unbelievers results in active antagonism.

Hence carrying the gospel to the world involves risk. There is always personal risk involved in witnessing to the truth. The church has been called to make disciples of all nations. We do it through the proclamation of the gospel. We proclaim human beings to be sinners, to be transgressors of God's law. We proclaim God as holy, who, therefore, must punish sin. But we proclaim Christ, the Savior and king God has provided, who died for sins but whom God has raised from the dead. And we proclaim the message of salvation, that there is forgiveness and justification for all who believe God.

This gospel threatens no one physically. It is an offer of hope. No one can be compelled or manipulated into believing. It is not to be carried with spite or meanness, not with a judgmental spirit. It is to come as one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread. But it is unwelcome to those whose hearts are hard. They are highly defensive of whatever contrary beliefs they already have. They are offended to be thought of as sinners. Their sinfulness shows itself mightily as they respond with hostility. Offer them a candy bar, a gift card, a meal, or a new car and they will gladly accept. Offer them eternal life and they will be offended. Why? It is because the gospel strikes at the heart of human pride. And here is the reason that carrying the gospel and holding fast to the gospel involves risk.

Paul and Barnabas are an inspiration to us because the personal risk for them could not have been greater. Everywhere they went in Galatia, their very lives were threatened. They were contradicted; they were reviled; they were hated. Paul was stoned. But it did not stop them from bringing the word. They just got up again and again and kept on preaching. They stoned Paul, and he just got up and went back into town and went on from there preaching and then preparing the disciples for the persecution and affliction they were sure to face. Nothing could stop the two apostles from preaching the gospel. What keeps you from witnessing? What causes you to hold your tongue? Fear and intimidation, right? It's right. No one is going to stone us, but they might be offended.

They might revile us. They might not like us. We cannot change the gospel to make it more palatable. And we cannot be allowed to keep silent. Praise God for his work through Paul and Barnabas. Let us as Christ's current day disciples take encouragement from these two men. Let us follow in their steps and be bold despite the risk. There is a risk, but the reward is beyond compare.

Part of the reward of faithfulness in gospel witnessing is when the word is received with joy. Certainly there are those who will be hostile, but there will also be those who rejoice. Let's look finally this morning at . . .

III. The Joy of Those Who Embrace the Gospel.

It was apparent especially there in Antioch. When the Jews so strongly resisted the gospel, Paul and Barnabas announced that they were turning to the Gentiles. And the Gentiles went wild! They began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord. It was their search for truth that had brought them to embrace company with the Jews. Now that they had been granted to see how the Jews were God's conduit to bring Messiah, they were ready to embrace him.

There in Acts 13:48 is this explanation added by Luke. "As many as were appointed to eternal life believed." It brings home the grace aspect of the gospel. As Jesus said in John 6:44, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him." The ones who believed the gospel were the ones whom God had appointed unto eternal life. They believed because of God. If you believe, it is not because of you; it is because of God. And when you share the gospel and there are those who believe, it is because of God. Jesus has commissioned his disciples to go everywhere preaching the word. And he has guaranteed that sometimes there will be some who believe. It is rewarding to preach the gospel even when no one believes. Such is the joy of obedience. And yet it is doubly rewarding and joy-inducing when someone believes.

There were many who believed when Paul and Barnabas brought the gospel to Galatia. And they were overjoyed. Chapter 13 verse 49 says that "the word of the Lord was spreading throughout the whole region." Despite the threat and persecution, verse 52 says, "the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit." Don't you know the joy of the new believers fueled the determination of Paul and Barnabas to keep going? In Iconium they remained a long time to establish the believers in the grace of the Lord because the enemies were poisoning their minds against the brothers. They did not allow the stoning in Lystra to stop them. And having then gone to Derbe, they returned to those cities to strengthen the new converts. They appointed elders in every church and with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord.

The joy of those who believe so encourages the hearts of those who preach that their hearts are knit together and they live and die with the perseverance of the faith of those believers. When Paul wrote the first letter to the Thessalonians, he had been gravely concerned that they would have succumbed to persecution and given up the faith. However, he had recently learned from Timothy that they were persevering and this was his reply. "Brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith. For now we really live, if you are standing fast in the Lord. For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God?"

When we preach and when others believe, they are filled with joy. And when they are filled with joy and perseverance, we are filled with joy as well. It should be a joyful reunion every week when we return to this place and see each other come back. Each of us will have weathered another week in the battle. Our return is a testimony that we have kept the faith that God has persevered us through

trials and temptations and afflictions and perhaps persecutions. But by God's grace we are standing firm in the faith. Yes! We have made it another day. It is a testimony of the power of God that each one who was ordained to eternal life believed and has been kept by the power of God for the glory of God. Together let us rejoice before the Lord and in the Lord!

And while you might hesitate to share the gospel because of fear of the risk, think again, be motivated by the fact that to share it is to obey God and glorify Christ, and ... by the prospect that some will believe and will rejoice in sins forgiven and reconciliation with God and an eternal inheritance.

Conclusion

Satan despises the gospel and he operates to destroy it and those who proclaim it. He loves false imitations. And therefore we need to be clear about what the gospel is and is not. We need to be prepared to explain it and defend it with clarity and precision. And what a surpassing joy to be able to do so!

I will close with four points of application. First, treasure the gospel. Treasure its richness. Treasure the past working of God in the nation of Israel and under the law of Moses where the beauty of the gospel of Jesus Christ our savior and king have been foreshadowed and illustrated with richness and depth. Treasure that it is God's gospel. It consists in what God has done for his people despite his people. Treasure that we do not have to be good enough and do enough to have its hope. We simply must believe.

Second, Rejoice in God's grace. God comes to those who do not deserve it. He lifts up the fallen. He provides for the empty-handed. He saves not those who think much of themselves but those who humble themselves and seek the truth and believe in the accomplishments of Jesus.

Third, continue steadfastly in God's grace. Do not give up the faith once for all delivered to the saints. Do not give it up for something that appeals to the world. Hold fast despite the enemy's relentless attacks on the truth and those who believe it.

Fourth, proclaim the gospel faithfully and joyfully to those around you. Do not fear to take the risk and for the joy before you do not hold back from testifying to the work of Jesus. Do it just the way he went to the cross for you. For the joy set before him, he endured the cross, despising the shame, and is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God.