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Acts 13:13-39

Twentieth Message

Gary Vanderet

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THE TRUTH THAT WILL SET YOU FREE

SERIES: THE SPREADING FLAME

We have already noted that in chapter 13 of Acts we come to a pivotal point in the book. This is where the church begins its westward expansion. It marks the first time that one particular church sent a group of men on an overseas mission—the beginning of the missionary movement as we know it. Up to this point, Christians had been scattered because of persecution. Now for the first time comes the decision to send people out to areas where churches had never been planted in order to introduce the pagan world to the Christian faith.

The group's first contact is with the residents of Cyprus. Paul, Barnabas and Mark make their way across the island from east to west, preaching the gospel in the synagogues as they go. We continue reading in 13:13,

Now Paul and his companions put out to sea from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia; but John left them and returned to Jerusalem. But going on from Perga, they arrived at Pisidian Antioch, and on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down. (Acts 13:13-14 NASB)

From Paphos, Paul and his companions sailed north to Perga in Pamphylia. Notice that the text says, "Paul and his companions." The roles have been reversed. Paul, not Barnabas, now takes the leadership role. Here in Perga, the mission suffers a setback, however. Luke writes, "but John left them and returned to Jerusalem." No reason is given for his departure, but later in chapter 15, it becomes clear that Paul sees Mark as having deserted them.

We are left to speculate why this separation came about. Mark may have resented the fact that Paul was taking over the leadership. Barnabas was John Mark's uncle; that may have had some bearing on what occurred. Some commentators think that Mark may simply have become homesick. He had been raised in a wealthy home; maybe he had second thoughts. Others wonder if the decision to travel north over the dangerous Tarsus Mountains scared him. For whatever reason, Mark left, and Paul and Barnabas continued without him.

This must have been difficult for the gracious and peace-loving Barnabas. But Paul had a hard time with Mark's decision. Later, when Barnabas and Paul were about to leave on their second missionary journey, Barnabas suggested that they take Mark with them. Paul replied, in effect, that he wasn't going to take that quitter with him. Disagreement became so sharp that Barnabas and Paul went their separate ways. Paul could not see how Mark could be of any use to him on this journey.

But Barnabas could. He took Mark with him to Cyprus, and Paul took Silas instead. Later they were reconciled and served together in ministry. This same young man wrote the gospel of Mark and went on to be a leader in the church in North Africa.

From Perga, Paul and Barnabas travel inland and north to higher altitudes. Luke tersely describes what was a difficult and dangerous 100-mile journey. They had to make their way across the Tarsus Mountains, in the southern part of what today is Turkey. The rivers were high and swift and the mountains swarming with robbers. Pisidian Antioch, in Galatia, was 3600 feet above sea level. In Galatians 4, Paul wrote that it was because of an illness that he first preached the gospel there. Historian Sir William Ramsey speculated that Paul had caught malaria in the low-lying territory and needed to recuperate in the higher altitudes.

They arrive in Pisidian Antioch, which is simply Antioch in Pisidia. Remember they started this journey in Antioch of Syria. This is Antioch in Pisidia, another city with the same name, called after the same man, Antiochus. Entering the synagogue on the Sabbath, they "sat down." This was Paul's custom. He probably wore a distinctive rabbinical garb, because he was a member of the Supreme Court in Jerusalem. The worshipers may not have recognized him, because it had been many years since he had been in Jerusalem.

So Paul sat down, waiting for God to open a door of opportunity. He didn't make a scene or act brashly. He anticipated the Lord opening up opportunities to share the gospel.

After the reading of the Law and the Prophets the synagogue officials sent to them, saying, "Brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say it." Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand said, "Men of Israel, and you who fear God, listen:" (13:15-16)

It was customary to read Scripture in the synagogue. Believers didn't have copies of the Bible in that day. The Scriptures were divided into sections, and on the Sabbath the scrolls were brought out. The service began with a recitation of the *Shema*: "The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" (Deut 6:4-5). Prayers were recited, and then there were two readings, one from the law (the Pentateuch) and the other from the prophets, followed by an expository sermon.

After this, Luke says, “the synagogue officials sent to them” (perhaps recognizing from his dress that Paul was a rabbi), and said, “Brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say it.” Here was Paul’s opportunity, based on the passages that were read. Examining his message, some conclude that the readings were from Deuteronomy 1 and Isaiah 1.

“Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand, said, ‘Men of Israel, and you who fear God, listen.’” He went on to review for them the history of Israel. This was similar to what Stephen had done in the speech that had such a powerful influence in Paul’s own conversion. The apostle began by recalling the great saving acts of God:

“The God of this people Israel chose our fathers and made the people great during their stay in the land of Egypt, and with an uplifted arm He led them out from it. For a period of about forty years He put up with them in the wilderness. When He had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, He distributed their land as an inheritance—all of which took about four hundred and fifty years. After these things He gave them judges until Samuel the prophet. Then they asked for a king, and God gave them Saul the son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, for forty years. After He had removed him, He raised up David to be their king, concerning whom He also testified and said, ‘I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after My heart, who will do all My will.’ From the descendants of this man, according to promise, God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, after John had proclaimed before His coming a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. And while John was completing his course, he kept saying, ‘What do you suppose that I am? I am not He. But behold, one is coming after me the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to untie.’” (13:17-25)

Paul recounts their history as a nation, from the patriarchs to the monarchy. Notice how he does this. Our review of history usually centers around the deeds of men and their influence. Paul’s review centers on God, his sovereignty, and his initiating acts of grace. It is God who is working. God is the subject of almost every verb: “God chose our fathers...God made the people great...He led them out...He put up with them...He gave them judges...He raised up David to be their king.”

Next Paul moves straight from David to the promised Savior: “From the descendants of this man, according to promise, God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus.” He was speaking to Jews who were well aware of the promise. That phrase doesn’t mean very much to Gentiles, but every Jew knew exactly what Paul had in mind. The promise is the theme that ties the entire Old Testament together.

It begins back in Genesis 3, following the story of the fall. Satan, the serpent, was told that the seed of the woman would one day crush his head, but in doing so he would bruise his heel. In other words, some man, one of her progeny, would

stomp on the head of the serpent, dealing a mortal blow, but in doing so he would bruise his heel, inflicting pain upon himself. That became known as the first declaration of the gospel, the good news that one day, some man would set things right. And that promise was stated again to Shem, to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and one of Jacob’s sons, Judah. Every Jew knew that one day, a man was coming who would fix everything.

Then came David, and the promise was given again to him. One of his descendants would be a king who would rule with righteousness and peace. Israel clung to that promise for hundreds of years after David died. They waited and waited and waited. This hope went unfulfilled until Jesus came. Here was the son of David, the one they had been waiting for all those years, the promised Savior.

Having summarized the story of Israel, Paul now tells the story of Jesus:

“Brethren, sons of Abraham’s family, and those among you who fear God, to us the message of this salvation has been sent. For those who live in Jerusalem, and their rulers, recognizing neither Him nor the utterances of the prophets which are read every Sabbath, fulfilled these by condemning Him. And though they found no ground for putting Him to death, they asked Pilate that He be executed. When they had carried out all that was written concerning Him, they took Him down from the cross and laid Him in a tomb. But God raised Him from the dead; and for many days He appeared to those who came up with Him from Galilee to Jerusalem, the very ones who are now His witnesses to the people. And we preach to you the good news of the promise made to the fathers, that God has fulfilled this promise to our children in that He raised up Jesus, as it is also written in the second Psalm, ‘You are My Son; today I have begotten you.’ As for the fact that He raised Him up from the dead, no longer to return to decay, He has spoken in this way: ‘I will give you the holy and sure blessings of David.’ Therefore He also says in another Psalm, ‘You will not allow your Holy One to undergo decay.’ For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep, and was laid among his fathers and underwent decay; but He whom God raised did not undergo decay.” (13:26-37)

Summarizing Jesus’ life and ministry, Paul concentrates on the two great saving events, his death and his resurrection, demonstrating that both were fulfillments of what God had foretold in Scripture. Though Jesus was the Messiah predicted by the OT Scriptures, neither the people nor the rulers in Jerusalem recognized him. He was only a carpenter’s son. He had no money, and no influence or standing in society. They wrote him off. Jesus lived the most magnificent life that had ever been lived, but they didn’t recognize him. Though he was innocent, they turned him over to Pilate for execution. Nevertheless, Paul adds that in condemning him, without realizing

it they fulfilled the words of the prophets, which they knew well, since they were read every Sabbath in the synagogue.

“But,” Paul declares, “God raised him from the dead.” God reversed the sentence of men. The apostle stresses the resurrection’s historical reality. Credible eyewitnesses had an opportunity to see Jesus over a period of weeks. The same people who had traveled with him throughout his life, who had witnessed his crucifixion, saw him again, and now were witnesses to his resurrection.

Paul then quotes three OT texts to summarize the truth that in bringing Jesus into the arena of human history, God fulfilled what he had promised to the patriarchs. Each of the three texts, Psalm 2:7, Isaiah 55:3 and Psalm 16:10, have their ultimate fulfillment in Jesus. These psalms that refer to the king ultimately refer to the Messiah. Though David wrote Psalm 16, he could not possibly be referring to himself, because he did undergo decay; he died. Therefore this psalm does not merely refer to David, but to its ultimate fulfillment in the person Jesus of Nazareth. He was the Messiah.

So, having brought Scripture and history together, and having shown that what God had foretold in Scripture he had fulfilled in Jesus’ death and resurrection, Paul makes his appeal:

“Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through Him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and through Him everyone who believes is freed from all things, from which you could not be freed through the Law of Moses.” (13:38-39)

Paul concludes that this One who was promised from the very beginning, right after the fall, this One who would come and set things right, had come and he had done just that.

Now most of us here are not Jewish. We have not been looking for a Messiah the way Jews have. That is not a part of our history. But I do believe there is a longing inside every one of us for someone or something to come and make things right. That is the theme of our movies, novels and fairy tales. It explains our obsession with finding the perfect person to marry, or the right political leader to fix everything. There isn’t any human being on this planet who can take on that role.

But Jesus can, and he did. Paul says Jesus made it possible for us to be free from all the things we couldn’t be free from through our own self-effort or the efforts of anyone else. Paul emphasizes the forgiveness of sins. He was speaking to Jews immersed in a pagan environment who knew they weren’t living up to the demands of the law. They couldn’t. Who can? We can’t even live up to our own standards, much less God’s. We are one month into 2005; I would guess that all our New Year resolutions have already gone by the board. And even if we could succeed from this moment on, what do we do about the past? We carry around with us a gigantic weight of guilt that we don’t know what to do with. We spend an enormous

amount of time and energy trying to justify our behavior. But inside we know that what we’ve done is wrong.

The guilt is there and we can’t get away from it. But Paul says that in Jesus Christ we are free. The word he uses is “justified.” That is a legal term, borrowed from the law courts. It is the exact opposite of condemnation. To condemn is to declare someone guilty; to justify is to declare him not guilty, innocent, or righteous. In the Bible it refers to God’s act of unmerited favor by which he puts a sinner right with himself, not only pardoning or acquitting him, but accepting him and treating him as righteous.

You can read the writings of every religious leader who has ever lived and they never will promise you forgiveness of sins. They tell you how to cope with your guilt, or how to pay for your guilt. But none except Jesus can free you from your guilt, because only he can offer you complete forgiveness and pronounce you “Not guilty.”

The promise here is for freedom from “all things.” Maybe you are thinking that can’t be true for you. You’ve gone too far. But that is a lie. Paul says we can be free from all things.

In a few moments we will celebrate the Lord’s Supper, remembering how our redemption was achieved. Jesus’ death on the cross gave us our freedom. His sacrifice redeemed us from the curse of the law. He himself took that curse. He accepted the guilt of our sin. He bore in his righteous person the curse of judgment which our sins deserved. He paid the price for us, so we are no longer cursed.

Remember Jesus’ words:

“Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My load is light” (Matt 11:28-30)

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