



Catalog No. 1263

Acts 13:42-52

21st message

Gary Vanderet

February 13th, 2005

MIXED AROMA

SERIES: THE SPREADING FLAME

In our series in the book of Acts we are looking at the first missions trip in the history of the church, the first time that one particular church sent a group of men on an overseas mission. From Paphos in Cypress, Paul and his companions sailed north to Perga in Pamphylia. They then traveled inland and north to the city of Antioch in Pisidia, a journey of more than 100 miles. On the Sabbath day they entered the synagogue and sat down, waiting for God to open up an opportunity for them to speak. At the appropriate time, Paul, dressed in his rabbinical garb, was asked to give a word of exhortation to the people—and he just happened to have one prepared.

The apostle went on to preach a powerful sermon. It is a model of apostolic preaching. Actually, if you observe the sermons recorded in the Acts, you will see great similarities between them. Paul reviews the salvation history of Israel, emphasizing God's sovereignty and grace. God had been working on behalf of the nation right from the very beginning. When Adam and Eve made that fateful choice that threw the world into sin, right then, God made the promise that there was coming One who would set everything right.

That theme of promise ties the whole Old Testament together. C.S. Lewis said that throughout the OT, "The leaves rustle with hope": A man is coming. A savior is coming. He will be a Semite. He will be an Israelite. He will be of the tribe of Judah. He will be one of David's descendants. He will be born in Bethlehem. He will live in Nazareth. He will sojourn in Egypt. He will suffer and die. He will rise again. All of that is in the OT. Every Jew was looking forward to the One who was coming, the Promised One.

In his sermon, Paul informs his hearers that Jesus was that one. The age to come has come. The Messianic era has begun. The kingdom for which everyone has been waiting is here. But when Jesus came, he wasn't recognized. He was rejected. They put to death the Lord of glory. They put to death the only good man who ever lived. But God reversed the sentence of death, and raised him from the dead.

Paul goes on to say that God himself was involved in the events of that final, fateful week. Everything that happened was planned and predetermined by God. It did not catch God by surprise. When the trial began, he did not say, "Plan A didn't work. We'll have to go to Plan B and the resurrection." No, from the very beginning it was determined that the Lord should suffer and die. It was all part of the plan. Jesus' death, burial and resurrection were not an afterthought. Paul quotes

from the OT to show that all these events were anticipated in Scripture. They were always part of God's redemptive plan to set things right in the world.

Because of Jesus' death and resurrection, Paul makes a powerful appeal, in 13:38-39: "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."

Paul makes two great pronouncements that go to the core of every person's need: forgiveness and freedom. 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 was speaking to Jews immersed in a pagan environment. They knew they weren't living up to the demands of the law. They thought that the way to God's acceptance was found in trying their best to be good, striving to do what God commands and refraining from what he forbids. They were trying to love God with all their heart and soul and mind, to reverence his name and reverence his day, to keep the Ten Commandments. But now they hear for the first time that they will never find acceptance with God by attempting to do these things. What good news it is to learn that we don't have to measure up! Christ measured up for us, and we gain our righteousness from him.

This brings us to the congregation's response:

As Paul and Barnabas were going out, the people kept begging that these things might be spoken to them the next Sabbath. Now when the meeting of the synagogue had broken up, many of the Jews and of the God-fearing proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas, who, speaking to them, were urging them to continue in the grace of God. The next Sabbath nearly the whole city assembled to hear the word of the Lord. (Acts 13:42-44 NASB)

The people had never heard anything like this before. They followed the visitors down the street, begging to hear more. Many of them believed and received God's grace right there in the synagogue while Paul was preaching. Luke says that Paul urged them to "continue in the grace of God." They should not go back to a performance-based righteousness. They should never return to trying harder to be godly.

We are not told about all the conversations that occurred during the week between the two Sabbaths, but we know from verse 44 that the gospel circulated through the city. All week

long, in homes, offices and schools, people heard the good news of a God who is gracious to undeserving sinners. He came to earth and became the sin-bearer. He bore our sins in his own body on the cross. By believing in Jesus we are delivered from our sins. We are declared “Not guilty!” and given the gift of righteousness.

It is all of God. It doesn't depend on us. We don't have to have more spit and polish to be acceptable to him. It is all of grace. Nothing is due to our efforts. Everything in our salvation is due to the grace of God. And the glory of the gospel of the grace of God is that it changes lives. It is the only thing that changes lives. That is the message that flooded that city all week. Trying harder doesn't work. Salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, without any mixture of human works or merits.

When Paul and Barnabas came to the synagogue on the second Sabbath to preach again, the place was packed with Gentiles, people who had never before set foot in a synagogue. But along with excitement and anticipation there was tension also.

But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began contradicting the things spoken by Paul, and were blaspheming. Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and said, “It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you first; since you repudiate it and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us, ‘I have placed you as a light for the gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the end of the earth.’” (13:45-47)

Not everyone was thrilled with this message of grace. Luke records that the Jewish leaders were filled with jealousy over these gentiles flooding into the synagogue service. They didn't expect to see the whole city there. They didn't mind if some gentiles came and sat in the back, and in time became good Jews through circumcision. But they didn't want them coming in as gentiles, being accepted by God exactly the same way as Jews. They started heckling Paul's message and abusing him while he was speaking.

Paul responds with confidence and boldness. He reminds them that God chose the Jews so that they could be a source of light. But, Paul says, “You have repudiated the light; you have turned away from it. You could have had the inestimable joy of taking the good news of God's love to the Gentile world, but since you have rejected it, we are going directly to the gentiles.” He quotes Isaiah 49 to support his point that it was always God's intention to include gentiles.

For 2000 years, Israel was the missionary force to proclaim the good news that God loves the world. The ancient world believed that God was to be feared, that he was to be propitiated through child sacrifice, even. People were scared out of their wits. God wanted people to know that he loved them, so he called into being one nation. These were his missionar-

ies, to make proclamation to the world that God loved people very much.

It all began with one man. God called Abraham and promised him that through his seed the whole world would be blessed. He gave Abraham a missionary job—to preach to the Canaanites. Abraham had a son, Isaac, who was a typical second-generation believer. He didn't quite have Abraham's grip on God. He was a little less evangelistic. Then came Jacob, who really didn't do business with God's Lordship until the end of his life.

Jacob's descendants, the 12 tribes of Israel, were taken into Egypt so that God could regenerate them. Suffering will do that for you. It hurts, but in the end it gets you going again. So they got a better grip on God in Egypt, and they came out trusting him. God's plan again was that they be planted in Canaan and fulfill their missionary call to make proclamation to the people of that land. Things went downhill from there. There was a little resurgence under David, but everything fell apart under Solomon.

Under Rehoboam, Solomon's son, the nation divided into two parts: Israel to the north and Judah to the south. The northern kingdom quickly went into spiritual decline. They were taken into exile, and scattered. God began to work through the two tribes in the south, Judah and Benjamin. But that nation went down spiritually. In the sixth century BC, God took them off into exile in Babylon so that they could get their idol cure. A very few came back into the land as missionaries. Isaiah refers to them prophetically as a remnant.

The prophets called upon Israel to return to God and take their place as a missionary force in the world. Then the whole thing began to degenerate again into the study of Talmud. Instead of looking through the Word to see the Lord, and making proclamation to the world of God's goodness and grace, Bible study became the main thing. They just studied the Bible for themselves. And the end of the law, instead of being the Messiah, became the Talmud.

Then the most amazing thing happened. God himself became a Jew and lived among his people. He made the same announcement: that God loved them and wanted to use them in his plan to save the world. But, as John put it, “though he came to his own his own received him not.” His own people rejected him. One of the most pathetic statements in the entire New Testament came from our Lord himself as he sat on the slopes of the Mount of Olives. Looking down over Jerusalem, he said, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! Look, your house is left to you desolate” (Luke 13:34-35a NIV). And they killed him.

When the gospel was handed off to the apostle Paul, he went right to the Jews, because the gospel is for the Jew first. As he did here in Antioch, he went from synagogue to synagogue, but they threw him out. So he went to the gentiles and

discovered among them a hunger for truth and a longing for God that his own people didn't have. The pagan Roman world was dead. Their mystery religions had failed to satisfy them. Judaism was bankrupt. Most people were atheistic or agnostic. Paul began to preach Christ, and just like here in Antioch, gentiles came to faith in enormous numbers. Paul would move on, wondering why his own people would not respond but the gentiles would.

He had to rethink all of his theology on the basis of the OT. In fact, I believe that is what Paul does in Romans 9-11 to explain this phenomenon. In many ways, Romans 9-11 is an exegesis of Acts 13:47. Paul explains that God was moving the Jews off the center stage of world history and moving another group on, a new Israel. He was forming a new set of missionaries to announce the gospel.

Luke continues:

When the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed. And the word of the Lord was being spread through the whole region. (13:48-49)

The Jewish rejection does not defeat the advance of the gospel. The Gentiles rejoice that the good news is indeed for them, and respond wholeheartedly and immediately. God is glorified by their reception of his word.

After expressing considerable emphasis on the human response to the gospel, both positive and negative, Luke restores the balance by highlighting God's primary role in salvation. Those who believed were appointed for eternal life. It's never merely people's choices alone that save them; it's always because of God's love and mercy. When we believe we're always responding to the activity of God, who is already reaching out to us. We can never get away from that wonderful mysterious combination of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Our faith always involves both a personal, human decision and a divine gift. And the good news continued to spread even outside the city to the surrounding countryside.

All of this becomes too much for these unbelieving Jews.

But the Jews incited the devout women of prominence and the leading men of the city, and instigated a persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district. But they shook off the dust of their feet in protest against them and went to Iconium. And the disciples were continually filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit. (13:50-52)

The final rejection occurs when the Jews, who can't prevail openly with the preaching of Paul and Barnabas, go behind the scenes and stir up some influential women, probably Gentile women who were attracted to the Jewish way of life because of their high moral standards. They were tired of the disintegrating family life and the moral corruption of that day, so they attached themselves to the synagogue. These wives of

prominent Roman officials in the city of Antioch persuaded their husbands to persecute Paul and Barnabas and drive them out of their district. It was probably violent; they might have been beaten with rods. In response, Paul and Barnabas "shook the dust off their feet"—a public protest against those who reject the gospel, as Jesus had taught them.

The last sentence is beautiful. Despite the persecution, the disciples who remained were filled with the Spirit and with the fruit of the Spirit, which is joy. This is not the silliness or even the happiness that we feel when things are going well. It's a deep-down sense of wellbeing that comes from our new relationship with God and his mercy towards us, and the certain hope that one day we will be everything that God wants us to be.

As I reflect on this text I am struck by a couple of things. The first is our marvelous calling. We have been given the responsibility, as the Jews were given, to represent God on earth; to receive his word, his love, his grace, and in turn to be a channel of that grace to others. We become the vehicle through which God can bless the rest of the world. I pray that we will never get over the wonder of that grace that we have been given. If we get to a place where we believe we are privileged, we have lost an understanding of grace. A sense of privilege is antithetical to grace. It's dangerous to think that we deserve God's care. Grace is always undeserved, free, and surprising.

And the whole point is to give it away. The reason we are chosen is for God to display his character in our lives for the benefit of those who don't yet know that he loves them. May we never end up hoarding what has been so freely given to us. Churches can lose their place as surely as that generation of the Jews did. Jesus warned in Revelation 2:5 that lampstands can get taken away. We could end up hearing God say to us that we are no longer serving the purpose for which we are called. I don't want that to happen to me, nor do I want that to happen to us as a church.

The second thing that strikes me from this text is that the gospel is spread through people. Ministry begins with befriending people. There is nothing hard about that. As relationships develop, you simply impart truth, sharing what you know. In order to love people you have to be with them, which means we have to mingle more. That is the whole point of the incarnation. God came to earth and mingled with us. He was Immanuel, "God with us."

We need to be with non-Christians. How many non-Christian friends do you have? That is a good question to ask ourselves from time to time. Many Christians tend to withdraw from their non-Christian friends. We must do that to some extent, of course. If you have come out of the drug scene, it would be foolish to spend a lot of time with friends who are drug users, because of temptation. But Christians are inclined to spend all their time with Christian friends because it's safe. We are like rabbits which pop out of our hole from time to time to run through the scary world and then pop back down

another hole. But you can't love people and care about them if you are not with people. When God wanted to impart truth to us, he became one of us. If we want to impart truth to our friends, we have to be one with them.

I get a little weary of evangelistic techniques and programs, impersonal methods of imparting truth to others, such as billboards, T-shirts and bumper stickers. Most of the time I think these things alienate more than they communicate. We can't mechanize and trivialize the gospel by getting our lines down pat, learning when to smile and how to work on certain techniques. We need to know people and attempt to understand them, and we have to care about them. Our Lord spent a great deal of time "hanging out" with people.

I will close with a quote from Mother Teresa. In her book *A Simple Path*, she quotes a Brother Jeff, who said:

In the West, we have a tendency to be profit oriented, where everything is measured according to the results. And we get caught up in being more and more active to generate results. In the East, especially in India, I find that people are more content to just be, to just sit around under a Banyan tree for half a day just chatting to each other. We Westerners would probably call that wasting time, but there is value to it. Being with someone, listening without a clock, and without anticipation of results, teaches us about love. The success of love is in the loving, not in the result of loving.¹

What a marvelous privilege it is to be God's representatives here on this planet, revealing his heart and character to a hurting world.

1. Mother Teresa, *A Simple Path* (New York: Ballantine), 1995.

© 2005 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino