

THE RADICAL WORD

by Ray C. Stedman

We will look this morning, in Acts 13, at the first recorded sermon of the Apostle Paul. This man has changed the course of world history by the power of his ministry in the Spirit of Christ. He did so by the preaching of the word of truth, and here we have a good example of how he did it. Paul had preached many messages before, but this is the first of which we have a record. It was a very powerful and shattering message. It was preached in a synagogue on a Sabbath morning and it shook a whole city -- so much so that in Verse 44 of this account we read, "The next sabbath almost the whole city gathered together to hear the word of God."

That must have been a powerful message. We want to examine it in some detail to see what made it of such impact then, and what elements make it so radical and revolutionary yet today. If you do not think that it is significant today, you probably have never really heard it. This message is not preached as widely as it needs to be today. It is often somewhat difficult for people to hear the gospel presented as it is given in the Scriptures.

Last week we left Paul, Barnabas, and young John Mark on the island of Cyprus at Paphos, the capital city. They were about to take passage across the arm of the Mediterranean to Asia Minor.

Luke now resumes the account for us at Verse 13:

Now Paul and his company set sail from Paphos, and came to Perga in Pamphylia. And John left them and returned to Jerusalem; but they passed on from Perga and came to Antioch of Pisidia. And on the sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down. After the reading of the law and the prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent to them, saying, "Brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say it." {Acts 13:13-15}

Notice the subtle shift from "Barnabas and Saul," which has been used previously in this book in referring to these two men, to the phrase "Paul and his company." That marks the beginning of the apostleship of Paul, and of his leadership of this missionary journey. It also may suggest at least one reason why, as Dr. Luke records in the next sentence, young John Mark left them and went back to Jerusalem.

You remember that Mark was the cousin of Barnabas, and so he may well have resented this change in leadership. There is some indication in the Scriptures that he and Paul did not get along too well -- at least at first. Later on Paul will write from prison in Rome and ask that Mark be sent to him, as he is of great profit to him by then. But now there is a great deal of friction. Remember, too, that John Mark was the son of a wealthy widow, raised in luxury, and some scholars feel that he was afraid of the hardships that were developing on this journey. Now they were coming into the rugged mainland where paganism was rampant, where robbers and other dangers were on every hand, and they were facing increasing opposition from religious leaders. Mark may well have weakened at this point and, resenting the leadership of Paul, returned to Jerusalem. At any rate, all this was to cause a division later on between Barnabas and Paul, when friction arose over the question of taking Mark with them again on another journey.

So they came to Antioch. This is not the Antioch in Syria, which they left to go to Cyprus. This is another Antioch in the region of Pisidia, which was part of the ancient Roman province of Galatia. So when you read Paul's letter to the Galatians, you are reading a letter written to the Christians in these cities which were reached on this first missionary journey. There were Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe.

They came into the synagogue according to the custom which Paul had adopted because God had said that the gospel was to go to the Jew first, then to the Greek. And, according to the custom of the synagogue, as strangers they were invited to speak. Paul's speech was of very great importance. This is the message which

shook that whole city. It falls into three simple divisions which we will look at very carefully so that we might understand the power of this mighty word.

So Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand said:

"Men of Israel, and you that fear God, listen. The God of this people Israel chose our fathers and made the people great during their stay in the land of Egypt, and with uplifted arm he led them out of it. And for about forty years he bore with them in the wilderness. And when he had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, he gave them their land as an inheritance, for about four hundred and fifty years. And after that 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. And when he had removed him, he raised up David to be their king; of whom he testified and said, 'I have found in David the son of Jesse a man after my heart, who will do all my will.' Of this man's posterity God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, as he promised. Before his coming John had preached a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. And as John was finishing his course, he said, 'What do you suppose that I am? I am not he. No, but after me one is coming, the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to untie.'" {Acts 13:16-25 RSV}

Perhaps you have noticed that the introduction is of the same style as Stephen's great message, recorded in the seventh chapter of Acts. Stephen had stood before the Sanhedrin, of which Saul of Tarsus was a member, and had recounted the history of Israel in order to try to awaken these stubborn Jews to an understanding of God's love and concern, and of his sovereign direction of their nation. Paul never forgot the power of that message. It had reached to his own heart, had cut through all the bigotry and egotism, and had planted a seed of faith in his heart which was ultimately to result in his conversion. So here he is following the same tactics as Stephen.

But notice that, though this introduction is history, it is not history as we usually read it. Most of the history books that I have read center upon certain men -- men who have done certain deeds, either great or foul. Men like Hitler, or George Washington, or Winston Churchill, outstanding personalities, men with what the world calls "charisma" -- they leave their mark upon an age. History, as we usually read it, is a study of the deeds and influence of men, but not this history. You will notice that this history centers on God. It is God who is working. Now, this is history as it ought to be written! If we could read history as it really was, it would read something like this.

The apostle points out eleven different instances of what God did: "God... chose our fathers, and made the people great, ... he led them out of Egypt." "God bore with them in the wilderness." "God destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, and gave them their land as an inheritance." "God gave them Judges..." "Then they asked for a king; and God gave them Saul." "And when he [God] had removed him, he raised up David." And finally, "God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, as he promised." It all culminates in the coming of the Lord Jesus himself.

And then he cites John's testimony to the greatness of Jesus. This was a telling blow because, out in the provinces away from Jerusalem, John the Baptist was regarded as a great prophet. But here Paul quotes his testimony to the fact that the One who was coming after him was so great that John himself said he was not worthy to untie His shoe. That is the introduction.

The second division is in Verses 26-31. Here you have the timeless facts of the gospel: the ministry, the crucifixion, and the resurrection of Jesus.

"Brethren, sons of the family of Abraham, and those among you that fear God, to us has been sent the message of this salvation. For those who live in Jerusalem and their rulers, because they did not recognize him nor understand the utterances of the prophets which are read every sabbath, fulfilled these by condemning him. Though they could charge him with nothing deserving death, yet they asked Pilate to have him killed. And when they had fulfilled all that was written of him, they took him down from the tree, 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, who are now his witnesses to

the people." {Acts 13:26-31 RSV}

Just this last week I read an article written by a very prominent liberal theologian of our day, along with several surveys of religious developments in the country. In every one of them it was pointed out that the gospel was rather hard to define. The liberal theologian said it was almost impossible to define the gospel clearly.

Paul did not have any such trouble. To him the gospel was very clear. It consisted of the great acts of God in history -- the coming of the Lord Jesus, his ministry among men, his crucifixion because of the sins of men, and his resurrection as the Scriptures had promised.

Remember how he puts it in First Corinthians 15?

Now I would remind you, brethren, in what terms I preached to you the gospel, {1 Cor 15:1a RSV}

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, {1 Cor 15:3-4 RSV}

That is the Good News. That is the basis for everything that God does, and here he makes that very, very clear indeed. Paul gives us here the answer to a question that many people are asking.

Just last week a man said to me, "How is it, if Jesus was the Messiah predicted by the Old Testament Scriptures, and if he fulfilled these when he came, that the Jews did not recognize him when he came?" Paul gives the answer. There were two reasons, he says:

First, they did not recognize him, i.e., they did not pay attention to him. They did not really see Jesus. They were misled by superficialities about him. They looked at his trade, his background, and saw that he was but a carpenter's son. They saw that he had no money and no influence or standing in society. They saw that he had no prestige. He had never been to school, had been taught at no great scholar's feet, and so they wrote him off and paid no attention to him. They did not hear his words, and they did not see his miracles -- or, if they did, they immediately forgot them. They put no stock in them. And thus he lived the most magnificent life that had ever been lived before men, but his contemporaries never saw it. They did not recognize him.

A lot of people are blind in that way today, like the Jews, because of the second reason: They did not understand the Scriptures. Here were people who had heard the utterances of the prophets every Saturday, read to them in the synagogue. They knew many of them by heart, but they did not understand them. The reason they did not understand is that they never asked any questions. They did not take them seriously. The reading of the Scriptures had become just a religious rite, a perfunctory performance gone through automatically every Sabbath. People went and did their thing in synagogue, and then went home again. That was all there was to it. And there are people like that in church today. But, you see, that was the reason why they missed the coming of the Son of God and did not recognize him as the Messiah: They did not understand their own Scriptures. And so, as Paul says, they fulfilled the prophecies by condemning him and turning him over to Pilate.

Now, in the third division, Paul takes these two great truths, the ministry of Jesus, and his resurrection, and he nails them down with these Jews by quoting the Scriptures to them:

"And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus;" {Acts 13:32-33a RSV}

(That does not mean "by raising him from the dead." It is an expression very much like the one in Verse 22, "he raised up David," which does not mean that David was resurrected, but that he was brought into office. He raised up Jesus, i.e., brought him into humanity.)

**"as also it is written in the second psalm,
'Thou art my Son,
today I have begotten thee.'" {Acts 13:33b RSV}**

The promise in the psalm was that the Son of God would be begotten as a man and would come into humanity.

Then the second fact:

"And as for the fact that he raised him from the dead, no more to return to corruption, he spoke in this way,

'I will give you the holy and sure blessings of David.'

Therefore he says also in another psalm,

'Thou wilt not let thy Holy One see corruption.'" {Acts 13:34-35 RSV}

Psalm 16 clearly predicted that there would come a man who would not ever see corruption, i.e., whose body would not decay, would not disintegrate in the grave.

Usually when you read psalms of this type there are certain skeptics who say, "Why, these psalms don't refer to Jesus; they are just referring to experiences in David's life. David wrote this psalm; therefore it pertains to him. We just don't have the record of it, but he is talking about some unknown experience of his own." Many of the prophetic psalms are discounted on that basis. The Twenty-second Psalm, which so beautifully describes the crucifixion, and which even opens with the words of Jesus on the cross, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" is often minimized as being but an experience of David. But Paul answers that type of argument here before it can even be raised. He says,

"For David, after he had served the counsel of God in his own generation, fell asleep, and was laid with his fathers, and saw corruption; but he whom God raised up saw no corruption." {Acts 13:36-37 RSV}

In other words, you cannot apply that psalm to David. It is pointing on to some one who would come later, of the lineage of David, who would never see corruption when he died. Witnesses saw him alive after he died; he saw no corruption. And with that telling blow he nails down the fact of the resurrection.

Now we come to the heart of the message. This is where he drives it home, the hammer blow of this word:

"Let it be known to you therefore, brethren, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him every one that believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses." {Acts 13:38-39 RSV}

That was a shattering statement. Here were men who honored the Law of Moses, who thought the Ten Commandments were the greatest word that God had ever given to men. They were trying their best to live up to them, in one way or another, and many of them realized that they were failing. But they still thought that the way to God was to obey the Ten Commandments -- to do good, in other words, to try their best to be good. But now Paul comes to declare to them that they will never make it on those terms. They will never find acceptance by God in that way. You cannot be accepted by God on the basis of trying to be good. The Ten Commandments will not help you a bit; they will condemn you, because you will not fulfill them -- no matter how hard you try!

Rather, Paul tells them, God has found a way to accept mankind even though man cannot be good enough in himself, and that way is through this man, Jesus Christ. Now, we are accustomed to hearing that. That does not shake us. But you can imagine how it shook these people. They had never heard anything like this before -- this amazing news that God would accept them! Unfortunately our version somewhat diminishes its impact because it uses the term "freed" where Paul said "justified"; he really says, "Every one that believes is justified from everything from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses." This is the first occasion that we have recorded of Paul's using that great word which is so frequent in the book of Romans, "justification by faith."

What does it mean to be justified?

Most people think it means to have your sins forgiven. It does mean that, but it means a great deal more than

that. Justification means to have your sins forgiven in such a way that God's honor and integrity are preserved by it.

Let me use a term which explains this very well and yet is not theological. I served in the Navy for two years and then was honorably discharged. When I was discharged it meant that I was separated from the Navy. They were through with me, and I was through with them. They had no further claim on me, nor I any relationship to them. But what I liked about it was the word "honorable." It was an honorable discharge. I could freely show my discharge papers to anyone. There was no blot on my discharge, no stain. As far as the Navy was concerned I had behaved well (there were some things they didn't know) and was honorably discharged. But I knew certain men in the Navy, because I worked in the legal office, who were dishonorably discharged. They were just as separate from the Navy as I. The Navy was just as through with them as it was with me. But, there was a blot on their discharge, a stain on it. They did not like to show their discharge papers to anyone. In fact, it could even affect their employment to have others see that they were dishonorably discharged.

So what Paul is really saying here is that -- if you merely had your sins forgiven, if God forgave in the way that most people think he does: i.e., you just come to him, and he is such a great, loving God that he says, "Oh, forget about it, that's all right, don't worry about it; you're such a great fellow and I love you so much that I'm just going to ignore it" -- if that were the case, then God's honor would be impugned. His character would be defiled by that kind of forgiveness. He could no longer be regarded as the God of justice and truth; he would be a partaker in my sins and yours. But God has found a way, through Jesus, to lay the guilt of our life and heart upon his own Son. Thus he can preserve his honor and character and integrity while at the same time he is rendered free to show his whole love to us. That is justification. You see, because of the cross, nobody will ever be able to point to God and say, "Oh, you let people off who are guilty!" In the cross of Jesus, God poured out all his justice upon him. And in that cross, in the agony and the anguish of it, the world can see a picture of how faithfully God does obey his own laws, and does carry out justice to the ⁿth degree. And yet, the wonder of it is that, because of it, God's love is freed to be poured out to us.

Therefore the result of justification is full acceptance. If you accept the death of the Lord Jesus on your behalf, and his life is given to you, you are justified from all things. Is that not a great word? It means that God's unqualified love is poured out toward you. There is no rejection whatsoever, for any cause. And that love begins to heal all your scars and hurt and anguish, and you start becoming a whole person -- on the basis of being justified by faith.

You know, that is incredible to people! Again and again I run across people who shake their heads and say, "That *can't be*, I've got to *do something*. The only way God can find me acceptable is that I must make myself acceptable." But it will never be that way. No one can ever make themselves acceptable to God by trying to live a good life.

I said that this morning (in the 8:30 a.m. service), just as I am saying it now. At the end of the service a young man came up to the platform and said to me, "You know, I don't quite understand what you're saying. I find it incredible that God could accept me on the basis of some one else. As one who is trying to live a good life himself, I find it very difficult to understand." Many people find it difficult. But that is the radical character of this great word!

And it shook this city when they heard it. Paul evidently saw some frowns as he spoke, because he immediately adds these words:

**"Beware, therefore, lest there come upon you what is said in the prophets,
'Behold, you scoffers, and wonder, and perish;
for I do a deed in your days,
a deed you will never believe, if one declares it to you.'" {Acts 13:40-41 RSV}**

That is the incredibility of the gospel. I do not think those words were spoken in sharpness; I think they were spoken in sadness. The apostle is saying here that when you hear this incredible word of grace -- that God has found a way to love you, and love you unqualifiedly, by virtue of nothing that you have done, but by what Christ has done for you -- that is a moment of crisis in your life. You can either accept it and live in the glory

of that love, or you can reject it and turn away. But, if you reject it and turn away, you will find yourself tremendously in danger: You are in danger of destroying yourself, and of being destroyed, because only God's love can rescue man!

This was sharply underlined for me a few years ago. Sitting in my study one weekday morning I suddenly heard, out here in the auditorium, a woman's voice shouting and crying out. I came out to see what was wrong. I found a young married woman whom I recognized, for she had been in my study just a week before, walking up and down in front of our cross here. She was looking up at the cross and crying, "Yes, there is a God; yes, there is a God, and he will forgive me -- I know he will! I know he will!" She was in torment of spirit.

I did not know what to make of it for a moment. I listened to her, and then I moved to speak to her. When she saw me she just crumpled and fell on her face to the floor. I picked her up and helped her to a pew, and we talked together. She told me what had happened. The previous week she had told me that, though she was married and though she professed to be a Christian, she was having an affair with an older man. She had justified it, thinking it was something that would contribute to her happiness. I had tried to help her gently and patiently and lovingly. I did not condemn her, but I tried to help her see what she was doing to herself.

Then, this day, the man had called her and told her he was through. It shattered her, and she came, crushed with guilt, trying to find release. Suddenly it dawned on her what she had done to her family, what she had done to her husband, what she had done to herself, how she had hurt everyone. She came trying to find forgiveness, crying out to God. But I could see as I talked with her that she did not really believe the forgiveness that was offered. I went through the Scriptures with her, but she refused to accept it. She felt that somehow she must do something, she must atone. She would not believe what God had said -- that there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, that he would freely forgive and wash it all away, and that then, in the strength of his healing, wholeness would follow.

Finally she calmed down a bit. She called her husband and he came over. I talked with them, then he took her home. But she was still distressed, so her husband took her to the hospital. Two days later I got a phone call -- in her distress of mind she had thrown herself from the tenth floor of the hospital and her body was crushed on the pavement below.

That is the awful pressure of guilt. If you do not find a way to relieve it, it will destroy you! And that is why this message hit with such power in this city. Paul laid out before them the fact that the only way, the *only* way, there is to be freed from guilt is by the acceptance of the work of Another on your behalf. God's love is unqualifiedly poured out on that basis, and that alone. Look at the results of this message:

As they went out, the people begged that these things might be told them the next sabbath. And when the meeting of the synagogue broke up, many Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who spoke to them and urged them to continue in the grace of God.

The next sabbath almost the whole city gathered together to hear the word of God. But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with jealousy, and contradicted what was spoken by Paul, and reviled him. And Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, "It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us, saying,

**'I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles,
that you may bring salvation to the uttermost parts of the earth.'**"

And when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified the word of God; and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed. {Acts 13:42-48 RSV}

Jesus had said to his disciples, "If they have received me, they will receive you; and if they have rejected me, they will reject you," {cf, John 13:20}. Everywhere Paul went he found this to be true. The gospel is like a knife cutting its way through society, through men's hearts. It awakens, it hits with impact, and it divides --

men have to decide one way or another. Some decide for, some against. Some want God and cry out to him, and are relieved and delivered; others refuse, turn away and harden their hearts, and destroy themselves. This is what we see here. Certain Jews and devout converts (i.e., Gentile converts to Judaism) followed Paul and Barnabas who spoke to them and urged them to continue in the grace of God.

But there were also those who were filled with jealousy and hostility, who contradicted and reviled, and, to them, Paul proves, from the Scriptures, that the Scriptures authorize them to turn from the Jews and go to the Gentiles if the Jews refuse this message. He quotes Isaiah:

**"I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles,
that you may bring salvation to the uttermost parts of the earth." {Acts 13:47b RSV}**

Then we are told,

And when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified the word of God; and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed. {Acts 13:48 RSV}

Now do not turn that around. That does not say, "and as many as believed were ordained to eternal life." You see, Paul began this message by showing them that God was active, trying to reach out to men. It is not men who are trying to find God; it is God who is trying to find men. And when men believe, they are simply responding to the activity of God who is already reaching out to them. Here were many who were ordained of God, and when they were thus ordained, they believed, they responded to God. You can never get away from this wonderful, mysterious combination of divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

This, by the way, is the same word that Paul uses in Romans 13 when he says, "The powers that be are ordained of God," {Rom 13:1 KJV}. This is an election year. Soon we will vote for men to be our governmental officials. Certain men, by their human will, decide to run for office. Others decide to vote for them. The people put them into office. Yet the Scripture says it is God who puts them there. I do not know how it works. He does not cancel out human responsibility, but underneath and above and all around is the sovereignty of God, working his wonderful purposes in human life.

The final result is given in the closing verses:

And the word of the Lord spread throughout all the region. But the Jews incited the devout women of high standing and the leading men of the city and stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district. But they shook off the dust from their feet against them, and went to Iconium. And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit. {Acts 13:49-52 RSV}

This indicates that Paul and Barnabas were there for an extended time, probably several weeks, during which the word of God went out into all the region around. This marvelous, powerful word, which relieves the awful sense of human guilt, reached out. But many of the Jews were disturbed by this, and, as they could not prevail openly, they went around behind scenes and stirred up a Women's Liberation Front. They went to devout women of high standing and through them they reached the Roman authorities (the leading men of the city) and thus drove them out of their district.

Dr. Luke, with his ability to deliver quick, precise summaries does not give us all the details. Paul tells us that there were three times in his life when he was beaten by rods, an official action of the Romans. Once was later in Philippi, and many scholars feel that here was another occasion. Paul and Barnabas may have been brought before the Roman authorities and beaten with rods and thus driven out of the district. Luke does not say so, but this could well be the time when that first happened to Paul. In any event, they shook off the dust of their feet against them, and went to Iconium.

The last sentence is beautiful. The disciples who remained in this area "were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit." There is no mention of the gift of tongues in connection with the filling of the Holy Spirit, but there is mention of the fruit of the Spirit. They were filled with the joy of the Lord and the love of God. This is the great sign of the Spirit of God in the human heart -- it floods the heart with love and joy. If we are Christians

our hearts cannot help but be moved at the mercy of God toward us, who deserve nothing at his hands. Yet how much he has given!

It would be fitting if we would join together in a prayer of thanksgiving.

Prayer:

Our Heavenly Father, our hearts are stirred as we think again of the mercy that you show to us, this marvelous justification by which all that has lain heavily upon our hearts and our consciences has been washed away in the blood of Jesus Christ our Lord. And his life is given to us so that by it we may live on a totally different basis than we ever lived before. How wonderful this is, Lord; teach us never to forget that we have been justified, and that whenever we fail or falter, that justification is there again, ready to wash us and cleanse us, to free us and restore us. How thankful we are for this. If any here have not yet entered into the glory of this relationship we pray that, right now, they will say, "Lord, I want to be justified. Thank you for doing so in the death of Jesus. I believe it. I receive him as my Lord and Savior." We ask in his name, Amen.

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