

SALVATION HAS COME TO |THE GENTILES

SERIES: PAUL, AN INSTRUMENT OF THE RISEN CHRIST

by Ron Ritchie

"If we walk in the light as He Himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another," says the apostle John in the opening chapter of 1 John. When I taught that passage at a singles' Bible study a few years ago I changed the location of the study that evening to a different apartment than the one we usually used. I turned off all the lights and asked each person attending to enter into the darkened living room and take his or her place. I began by asking everyone to guess what the room looked like; to describe the apartment, the chairs or cushions they were sitting on, etc. They all did so, saying what they thought the decor was like, where they were sitting and what they were sitting on. When at last I turned on the light, it was painfully obvious that their efforts at describing the various furnishings were at best only partially correct, and at worst, woefully inaccurate. Those who were sitting on chairs had failed to identify the type of chair; those sitting on cushions had the color of the fabric wrong; those sitting on couches failed to identify the type of covering, the length of the couch, etc. The reason, of course, was that the room was totally dark when they entered: there was no light whatsoever. Thus, their guesses at what the room looked like were severely limited and inaccurate.

What I was trying to do in this exercise was to demonstrate that the world looked like before we came to Christ. We were living in the dark, without spiritual discernment, groping for truth. John continues in the first chapter of his gospel,

In Him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it . . . There was the true light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man. He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name . . .

Before we came to Christ, we were lost in the darkness of the world. And people who are living in the dark cannot accurately or adequately interpret what is going on around them. They lack definition and clarity because in the absence of light they cannot possibly see what is really going on in the world. For instance, non-Christians do not know what is the real significance of the AIDS epidemic. They do not know why the Marine Guards at the United States Embassy in Moscow compromised both themselves and their country for their own selfish ends. People who are living without light cannot interpret what is really behind child pornography, child abuse, or drug abuse. How can they learn? They need compassionate Christians to help them see that they are indeed living in darkness, remembering that we too once shared that darkness with them before the "Light of men" came to illuminate our lives. When we came to Jesus, things that were closed and in darkness to us were suddenly illuminated by him. We began to understand what life was all about: how to live, how to relate to others, how to love them. But Christians must always remember that, having left the darkness behind them, they are now privileged to shine their light back into the darkness, not walk away from it, and thus help others come to the light.

That is what we want to talk about this morning in our study of the life of the apostle Paul. We will discuss salvation and light; the Light of men coming to the Gentiles. Here in this passage from Acts 13 we will see that Paul's preaching of the gospel divided the city of Antioch. Once again the good news was rejected by the Jews but embraced by the Gentiles.

Last week we studied Paul's first recorded sermon which he delivered in a synagogue in Antioch. In it he traced the history of the Jewish nation from the time of their deliverance from Egypt, through the family of David, from whose loins came Jesus, the Messiah. The apostle spoke of the rejection of Jesus by the chief

priests, his crucifixion and resurrection, and the forgiveness of sin that God offers through faith in him. Verses 42 and 43 of Acts 13 gives the response of those who heard the apostle's sermon:

And 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 the God-fearing proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas, who, speaking to them, were urging them to continue in the grace of God.

There was, apparently, an excellent response to Paul's message. It's probably fair to say that the apostle and Barnabas could hardly wait for the next opportunity to speak again of the things of Christ to people who seemed to be open to hearing. The missionaries' hearts must have been filled with joy at their reception, but at the same time they probably were fearful lest they not present the gospel clearly and forthrightly. They must have prayed and asked others to pray also, that many would respond to their message. Yet I am sure they realized that it was quite possible their plans and God's plans might very well not coincide. God's word in Isaiah is, "My ways are not your ways, and your ways are not My ways." As things turned out, God did have a different plan, as is obvious from what happened the following Sabbath.

I. The Gospel is Rejected by The Jews, Acts 13:44-46

And the next Sabbath nearly the whole city assembled to hear the word of God. But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy, and began contradicting the things spoken by Paul, and were blaspheming. And Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and said, "It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; since you repudiate it, and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles.

"Nearly the whole city assembled to hear the word of God . . ." When men of God preach the word of God by the power of God, life begets life in a community. Good news travels fast. People came to hear the word of God, not hear about taxes, slavery, or women's rights. All of these subjects should, of course, be addressed at certain times, but these men and women who assembled in Antioch on this Sabbath came because they needed to learn of their sin, guilt and shame. They came to hear what Paul and Barnabas had to say about Jesus, whom they claimed was the Messiah to the Jews. They came because they were living in a dark and sinful society and they wanted to hear what life was really about. Word had gotten around that these men from Jerusalem were offering something which would deal with their deepest needs. Thus they came with hope in their hearts, seeking answers to their problems.

As Christians, we know that only in a relationship with God through Jesus Christ can we find the answers to life's problems. Once the basic spiritual issues have been dealt with, then the Holy Spirit can proceed to deal with the various emotional, intellectual and social issues which need to be addressed. Notice how the world, however, is always occupied in dealing with peripheral issues. The central problem, the issue of sin, is never addressed. People talk for hours about their problems, about various emotional and social issues, while they ignore the fundamental problem which is spiritual in nature. The spiritual issues are what affect everything else.

Thus the Jews came to the synagogue in Antioch, ready to hear the word of God spoken by Paul and Barnabas. They would hear that life was to be found only in the Son, in Jesus Christ. The author of Hebrews says in his letter:

God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son (1:1)

They came to hear the powerful word of God, so wonderfully described later in the same letter in these words,

For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing

as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. (2:14)

When God speaks, whether in his word, or through a prophet, an apostle, a pastor-teacher, no matter whom, his word cuts right through to the very heart of things. That is why these people came to the synagogue-to hear the word of God spoken.

As I studied for this message I remembered one evening a few years ago watching a Billy Graham Crusade televised from Czechoslovakia. The announcer said that the crusade was forbidden to meet in a building or any public arena, and that no advertising of the meetings would be allowed. They were forced to meet in a forest setting in wintertime, with several feet of snow on the ground. The camera showed the scene. and there appeared to be no people present. But then, as the camera panned, the trees seemed to be moving. I watched fascinated as people came walking through the snow and the trees to the meeting place. Next the camera focused on a little road nearby and it too appeared black with people coming out to hear the word of God. Before too long there were people everywhere, standing in the snow, ready to receive the word of God. They came hoping to hear words of encouragement, so that their souls might be refreshed by the light of Christ in the midst of the darkness of their society.

The arrival of "the whole city" to hear the word of God in Antioch. however, had a negative effect on the Jews: it made them jealous, according to the text. It seems that their message and the message of these visitors from Jerusalem had a quite different content. The size of the crowd was proof of that. The Jews didn't care about what was happening to their people or what they were coming to hear; they were green with envy because so many people came out to listen to Paul and Barnabas. A spirit of rivalry and mistrust had arisen. The Jews never had this kind of a response to their services before. They feared they were going to lose their flock to these two strangers. Paul may have been thinking of this very occasion when he wrote years later in his letter to the Romans,

I say then, they did not stumble as to fall, did they? May it never be! But by their transgression salvation has come to the Gentiles, to make them jealous. Now if their transgression be riches for the world and their failure be riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be! (Rom. 11:11)

God turned to the Gentiles because the Jews rejected the truth. That made the Jews jealous. But the Gentiles will bring the gospel to Israel so as to lead them back again to God. During the millenium, and certainly during the time of the tribulation, many Jews will turn and confess Jesus Christ as Savior.

When large crowds come out in response to a ministry of the word, jealousy sometimes surfaces. I ministered in Walnut Creek as a young pastor and the Lord began to develop a vital high school ministry so that the gymnasium where we met was almost filled for each meeting. When word got around about this. a pastor from another church said to me, "I notice that your church has begun to attract a very large number of teenagers. Since we are in the same presbytery, it seems only fair that you bus half of them to my church." I pointed out to him that he was jealous of what was happening in our church, that he was fostering a spirit of rivalry and mistrust. Needless to say, I didn't order any buses.

Not only were the Jews in the synagogue jealous of the crowds that came out to hear Paul and Barnabas, they began to contradict and revile the message that was preached. I will list three of the possible contradictions they felt the apostle was guilty of. First, his word in verse 23 of chapter 13, where, referring to David, he says, "From the offspring of this man, according to promise, God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus . . ." The problem the Jews had with this passage was that they were looking for a triumphant Messiah, not a suffering Savior. They wanted a conquering son of David who would break the yoke of Rome, subdue all nations, and reign in glory on the throne in Jerusalem, bringing peace, prosperity and righteousness to all nations who worshiped God. It is important to remember that that concept is valid and Biblical. But Jesus disappointed them. The Jews expected him to declare his kingly authority, expel the hated Romans in spectacular display of invincible power, and assume the throne. His teaching was all well and good, but they wanted actions, not

words. When that didn't happen, the best they would grant him was that he was a prophet, like Elijah, but certainly not the Messiah they had hoped for. Despite the fact that Paul had already demonstrated from Psalms 2 and 16 that Jesus was the Messiah, they refused to believe what the apostle had said. Even today Jewish scholars reject the New Testament affirmation that Jesus is the Messiah. Liberal Judaism has abandoned belief in the coming of a personal Messiah. They anticipate only the coming of a Messianic age, an era of world justice, peace and prosperity. This they believe will be achieved by human effort and progress, with Israel in the forefront, leading the way to the great era of understanding and accord among the nations.

A second possible contradiction the Jews may have found with Paul's sermon was his emphasis upon the cross, as set out in verses 28 and 29 of chapter 13: "And though they found no ground for putting him to death, they asked Pilate that He be executed. And when they had carried out all that was written concerning Him, they took Him down from the cross and laid Him in a tomb . . ." They had the same problem Saul had before his conversion, in light of the words of Deuteronomy 21:22-23, ". . . anyone who is hanged on a tree is under God's curse." Jesus could not possibly be the Messiah, they felt, because when he was crucified he was placed under the curse of God. Any claim that he was the Messiah, therefore, was blasphemous. Furthermore, those who chose to follow Christ must also be blasphemers, they held, and so deserved to suffer the fate of revilers. Christians were deluded fools, deceivers and impostors who went about deceiving others, they charged. The story that Jesus rose from the dead was ridiculous because the divine curse could not be reversed, they said.

Paul answers these objections in wonderful fashion in Galatians:

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us for it is written, "Cursed is every one who hangs on a tree" in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. (Gal. 3:13, 14)

The apostle would have agreed with them that anyone who is hanged on a tree is cursed of God. The difference with Jesus, however, was that when he was crucified he was taking our place, incurring the curse that we justly deserved. As a result of his sacrifice, the door of salvation was opened to us.

A third contradiction the Jews would have found in Paul's sermon was his position on the law of Moses, which is given in verse 38 and 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." That was the teaching that confounded them. They resented its implication that forgiveness for sins is not found in doing works of law, but through faith in Christ. Paul answers these objections also in his letter to the Galatians:

We are Jews by nature, and not sinners from among the Gentiles; nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we may be justified by faith in Christ, and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law shall no flesh be justified . . . for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly . . . (Gal. 2:15, 16; 21)

These may have been some of the contradictions which the Jews found in Paul's teaching in the synagogue in Antioch. Thus when the apostle and Barnabas returned to find a packed house on the following Sabbath, the Jews, as the text says, "began contradicting the things spoken by Paul, and were blaspheming." Their actions demonstrated that they had rejected Jesus as their Messiah. This rejection was nothing new to Paul and Barnabas. They had already experienced a similar response by the Jews in Damascus and Jerusalem.

Paul was ready with his answer in the face of their rejection: "It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first," he said. "Salvation is of the Jews," Jesus said to the woman at the well of Samaria. The Messiah would come from the Jews. The gospel was first preached to the Jews, so that they in turn could bring it to the Gentiles. The gospel is the power of God to both Jews and Gentiles, but it was the Jews who

were given the law, the temple and the prophets. They had first claim to the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34). Had they believed the word of God that Jesus was the Messiah, they would have had the privilege of evangelizing the Gentiles. But Paul had to witness, as had Jesus before him, the tragic rejection of the gospel. We remember the heartrending words of our Lord as he gazed over the city of Jerusalem,

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling." (Matt. 23:37)

Since the Jews in Antioch had repudiated God's word, Paul said, and had judged themselves unworthy of eternal life, both he and Barnabas were turning to the Gentiles. Furthermore, since they had taken such a violent stand against the truth of the word, Paul is saying, they had judged themselves unworthy of eternal life. The Jews, of course, felt that the apostle was referring to the hereafter, but we know that he was referring to the here and now, to a relationship with Jesus Christ. You don't want eternal life, he says, so we will offer it to the Gentiles. Had the Jews accepted God's word, they would have had the joy of bringing the good news to the Gentiles, in fulfillment of Isaiah's world mission, as outlined by the prophet. That is why, Paul says, they were now turning to the Gentiles.

A Jewish friend asked me at lunch last week what I thought was the purpose of the nation Israel. I felt I should have asked him why did God choose Israel? He did so, of course, because he wanted to bring salvation to you and me and other Gentiles like us. If we placed our faith in Jesus as Savior, we too could enter into the joy Israel experienced as a nation. My friend is in the dark, unable to interpret life. He asked me a lot of questions: What did I think about pornography? What did I think of TV evangelists? etc. His own thinking was very fuzzy on many subjects because he did not know the One who could shed light on all the affairs of men.

Thus was the gospel rejected by the Jewish leaders in the synagogue at Antioch. Paul and Barnabas therefore decided to turn to the Gentiles and the God-fearers present.

II. The Gospel is Embraced by the Gentiles Acts 13:47-19

"For thus the Lord has commanded us, "I have placed you as a light for the Gentiles, that you should bring salvation to the end of the earth." And 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.

Here we see how clearly Paul understood his commission. The Lord had said of him, "He is a chosen instrument of Mine to bear My name before the Gentiles." These were the God-fearers and the pagan worshipers who lived in Antioch. They were the uncircumcised who were excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers to the covenants of promise, without God and without hope. "For thus the Lord has commanded us," says Paul. Here he quotes Isaiah 49:6: "I have placed you as a light for the Gentiles, that you should bring salvation to the end of the earth." The Lord God had commissioned Israel to this task, but they refused. God then commissioned his Messiah to be the Light to the Gentiles, and now the torch is picked up by Paul and Barnabas. In time, God's plan of redemption would be shared with the Jews by the Gentiles and they would receive salvation. But now the Gentiles have the light. They have been carrying it in every generation and will continue to do so until our Lord comes again. Then, the Jews will pick up the light and once more offer it to the world.

Christians, through the power of the Holy Spirit, are the light that dispels the darkness. If we do not grasp that we have no idea why we're here. In Philippians Paul says.

Do all things without grumbling or questioning, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world . . .

That, in effect, is what Paul and Barnabas are saying to the Gentiles and God-fearers in the synagogue in Antioch. It was now up to them to believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ so that they would become the light that would dispel darkness and bring truth by the Spirit of God to others.

All this was good news to the Gentiles present, in contrast to the angry response of the Jews. The Gentiles rejoiced because they could have the gift of eternal life and could be justified by faith rather than works of law. They glorified the word of the Lord, being thankful for the truth which they had heard. As many as had been appointed to eternal life believed. They were enrolled by the Spirit of God in the book of eternal life. God was choosing men and women who were dead in their trespasses and sins, enabling them to see who he really was, and they were left with the responsibility to choose him or reject him. That is a mystery that I don't understand. When people come to know Jesus they are appointed to eternal life. I have often said in my spirit, "I don't know how I got in, I don't know how it happened, but I'm not going to mess with it. I'm in. And God promises in the book of Revelation that if I'm in I can't get out."

As a result of what had occurred in the synagogue, the news spread beyond the city. People's hearts were opened by the Spirit of God and they turned to Jesus in faith. The rest is history. Life begets life. Wives told husbands, husbands told children, masters told slaves, families told friends and neighbors. The good news spread throughout the region, and soon the first church in Turkey would be established in the city of Antioch.

I don't understand how all this works. Recently I visited a local restaurant, wearing old jeans, an old baseball hat, and my old beard. A waitress came up to me and said, "I'm new here, but I know who you are. Would you be open to marrying me and my boyfriend?" "I know who you are," she said. But I hadn't told her who I was. Before too long it was obvious that she didn't care so much about a marriage ceremony; she wanted instead to talk about her 12-year-old daughter. Various voices kept telling her to let her daughter go, to treat her as though she's 18. I told her not to do that. She said she had talked to some friend who told her she was all wet, but the more she listened to me the more she thought I was right, she said. What I said seemed to ring true for her. This woman is living in darkness. I gave her a couple of books by Dr. Dobson and she was very grateful for them. She asked if she could come and talk with me again after she had read them. And I just went to the restaurant to read the paper on my day off! I went in disguise! But the word spreads. Life begets life. People know where life is to be found. If you have Jesus Christ living within you, then you are like stars in the universe, shining in a dark, dark sky. You don't have to advertise by putting a sticker on your car. Take all that stuff off. People know who you are.

When the Jews heard the good news in Antioch, they rejected it. The Gentiles, however, received it. The result was that

III. The Gospel Divided the City, Acts 13:50-52

But the Jews aroused 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.

The Jews initiated a persecution against Christians in the city. Their leaders were blinded by tradition, hatred, jealousy and envy. Their eyes were closed to the light of the person and the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Light of men. When they saw the number of people they would lose to the gospel, and the fact that God was at work in their midst, they were concerned for their own theology, power and position. It was simply too much for them. They worked behind the social and political scenes and indirectly stirred up some of the leading women in the city to protest. They also influenced some of the city fathers, asking that charges be brought against these men who worshiped another King, not Caesar. As a result, Paul and Barnabas were forced to flee the city. Later, Paul would write to Timothy about the persecution and suffering he and Barnabas experienced both in Antioch and Iconium. It seems what happened at the synagogue involved more than just a shouting match; they may also have been beaten. In protest, they shook the dust off their feet, following Jesus' instructions in Matthew 10, and left.

While the Jews inherited spiritual death in Antioch, the new Christians who had received the word were filled with the joy of the Holy Spirit. They had come into eternal life. And although Paul and Barnabas left the city, the Holy Spirit, of course, remained on to direct all these new disciples in their new home churches. While the messengers could be beaten and silenced, the message would continue to go forth.

Let us enjoy who we are in Christ! We are the light of the world because he is in us. We will have the joy that was once Israel's---the joy of seeing many saved out of every nation because the Spirit is at work within us. We don't have to manipulate or intimidate people. We just have to show up, like stars, to dispel the darkness. A woman said to my wife in a store the other day, "I love the jacket you're wearing. You look so pretty." She told me her name was Vera Mae. I thanked her for saying that to my wife, and we had a great time talking to her. I think she's coming to live with us!

Everybody has a name! People don't talk to each other because they are living in darkness. When you hear them talking up their philosophy, don't let them get away with it. Tell them they sound fuzzy. Quietly challenge their half-truths. Tell them they have some great ideas but they are lacking the complete message; then fill it in for them. If you are shy and reluctant to do so it is because you are depending on your flesh. Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, depending on the Spirit at work in them. Not rudely, but boldly. Speak without being fearful, within the personality God has given you. You have the answers. You have the life, the truth. The dark world needs just that life, truth, and answers. People are caught in their sin, shame and guilt. They can't interpret what is happening around them. "Are we having fun yet?" asks the bumper sticker. "No, we're not," they are saying, "this can't be fun; it's killing me. Somebody's lying to me." The Christian can say, "Exactly! The world is always lying."

We are living in the Age of the Spirit. God wants to use us as he did Paul and Barnabas to pick up the torch of Isaiah 49:6 and live as the Light of the good news of Jesus Christ to which we have been called so that we can bring salvation. That is our calling. We are the light of the world, the light of Jesus our Savior reflecting his love and forgiveness to the world of darkness we once lived in and they still live in. What a privilege, what a joy, what an opportunity, what a wonderful day to live in! The world is dark, confused, helpless and hopeless. We have the word of God, the truth of God, the word of God that offers the forgiveness of sins and the hope of being justified by placing our faith in Jesus Christ.

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