

ACTS

Unstoppable Gospel

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Have you ever been to the Grand Canyon? My family and I are going to visit it this coming spring break. It's amazing to think that something so impressive was carved by the flow of water. That such a vast mark could be carved and shaped into the earth by water - my kids least favorite drink. What starts as ice melt in the mountains, creates streams, creeks, rivers and it flows all the way to the oceans. Nothing can stop it. It is unstoppable. It has a destination. It will do what it will do and it will go where it will go and will literally change everything around it.

The spread of the Gospel is a lot like this. What starts in Jerusalem in drips and drops has been flowing outward since the day of Pentecost. It cannot be contained. It cannot be stopped, and it's going to change everything. The message of the good news of Salvation in Jesus started with the Jewish people but is now flowing to the Gentiles, watering lands previously untouched by God's message. Just as a river finds its way despite obstacles, the gospel reaches hearts hungry for truth, breaking through cultural, racial, and religious barriers as God opens eyes to the problem of sin and the need for a Savior.

In our passage today we'll catch up with Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey and see the joy and hardships that come with their faithfulness to go and tell. But more than the faithfulness of these missionaries, this passage deals very clearly with the faithfulness of God. His plans, his promises, his sovereignty over salvation and his sustaining joy.

So what we want to know today, the thesis, our big idea of this message is that:

God is Faithful to Keep his Promises, Save his People, and Advance his Gospel Despite Persecution

- 1) The Gospel that Fulfills God's Promises
- 2) The Gospel that Saves God's People
- 3) The Gospel that Spreads Despite Persecution

While this first missionary journey was many years ago, in a lot of ways it is a blueprint for what we in the church today can expect when we are faithful to share the gospel. Whether we are involved in cross-cultural missions or sharing what Christ has done with a friend or a family member, not much has changed since Paul and Barnabas. Some will hear the message of salvation in Christ and receive it with joy and others will hear it and harden their hearts against it, considering it foolish at best or dangerous at worst. My prayer today is that all of us would receive God's word with Joy. This is why it has come to you today. God's promised salvation from sin and death is for you today.

And this is where we'll begin.

The Gospel that Fulfills God's Promises

Last week we saw Paul and Barnabas commissioned on this first journey and at the beginning of this passage we see what they did as they entered a new land in needs of Christ's message.

Acts 13:13-15

13 Now Paul and his companions set sail from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia. And John left them and returned to Jerusalem (you'll hear more about that in another sermon, it was kind of a big deal), 14 but they went on from Perga and came to Antioch in Pisidia. And on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down. 15 After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the

synagogue sent a message to them, saying, “Brothers, if you have any word of encouragement for the people, say it.”

So these missionaries found an outpost of Jews meeting in a local synagogue. Now this would have been the hub of this community and Paul and Barnabas were invited in as friends. When they came to this new place, on their journey to the nations, it appears that they had a plan: start with the Jews and, according to verse 26, those who fear God. By beginning here, Paul didn't have to learn a new language or culture and an opportunity opens up for him to preach for the first time in a new land - not on a random street corner, but within a company of people who know God's word and are desiring to be encouraged. They ask him, “do you have any word of encouragement for us?” Paul must be thinking to himself, “Have I got some good news for you”.

We must be prepared to seize opportunities to proclaim Christ when given an open door. Are your eyes open to these doors? When you are asked for a word of encouragement, do you have it ready on your lips? Believers, I want to encourage you, we may not all be put in situations where we have to evangelize to an audience that is against us or is antagonistic, but do you even know what you would say to someone who **wanted** to hear about the difference that Jesus has made in your life?

1 Peter 3:15b says it this way

always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect

Paul was ready, he was prepared, and as this group of Jews living in exile had just read from the law and the prophets about their promise keeping God, Paul preaches a message that shows that the promises of God find their fulfillment in Jesus.

Acts 13:16–25

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

“Men of Israel and you who fear God, listen. 17 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. 18 And for about forty years he put up with them in the wilderness. 19 And after destroying seven nations in the land of Canaan, he gave them their land as an inheritance. 20 All this took about 450 years. And after that he gave them judges until Samuel the prophet. 21 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. 22 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.’ 23 Of this man’s offspring God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, as he promised. 24 Before his coming, John had proclaimed a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. 25 And as John was finishing his course, he said, ‘What do you suppose that I am? I am not he. No, but behold, after me one is coming, the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to untie.’

As Paul recounts Israel's history from the patriarchs to its last prophet, if we pay attention, we really see that he's recounting God's Sovereign hand in redemptive history. In almost every sentence, God is the main character and what God has planned is what happens.

Look at how Paul recounts how **God** was the active agent in Israel's history:

- He chose the fathers
- He led them out of Egypt
- He endured them in the wilderness
- He gave them the land of Canaan
- He provided judges, the prophet Samuel, and King Saul who he also removed
- He raised up King David
- He brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus

Even from the Old Testament, Paul is preaching that salvation is entirely the work of God; we cannot boast in our own efforts. He chooses, he leads, he endures our faithlessness, our blessings are an inheritance from him, he restrains chaos with order, and raises up and removes leaders. And in the case of David, raises up a leader like no other, from whom the Savior of the world will come.

Acts 13:23

23 Of this man's offspring God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, as he promised.

Look at the promise God gives to David

2 Samuel 7:12–16

12 When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. 13 He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. 14 I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men, 15 but my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. 16 And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever.

Jesus, from the line of David, is the promise of God. And the good news is that Jesus is the fulfillment of all God's promises to his people. God's faithfulness in keeping His promises should strengthen our faith in Christ today.

Do you find yourself sometimes waiting and wondering "where is God?" When will he move in my situation? How long must I wait?

Have the words of the Psalmist in Psalm 13:1 ever been your words?

Psalm 13:1

*13 How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?*

Well, the writer of Psalm 13:1 is King David, the direct recipient of the promises we've been talking about today, and even he felt this way. When we are faithless God is faithful. While the flow of God's redemptive work may to our eyes at times look only like insignificant drips, it has never stopped and it will never stop flowing to thirsty souls in need of saving grace.

My encouragement to you today, is that if your hope for salvation in this life is in anything other than Jesus you are going to live in constant disappointment. If you hope is in your strength, you will one day be weak - if it's in your intelligence/someone is smarter than you - if it's in your wealth/you can't take it with you and it will be someone else's one day - but if Jesus is your life and your hope and you owe it all to him - if he is your refuge and strength and strong tower against the pain of this world and sin and the judgement of God - if he is your peace and your rest and your comfort - than being aware of a drop of his faithfulness goes a long way.

God has kept his promises to his people even when they didn't see it. What makes you think that he is not doing the same for you? God is Faithful to Keep his Promises, Save his People, and Advance his Gospel

And we're going to move on to our second point
The Gospel that Saves God's People

As Paul continues, he turns his message around to the heart of the Gospel, which is the death and resurrection of Jesus. These things are central to our faith and without them there is no salvation. Paul knows this, and so even though this is going to be a hard message to hear for his Jewish brothers, he knows that they need to hear it if any are to be saved.

Acts 13:26-31

26 "Brothers, sons of the family of Abraham, and those among you who fear God, to us has been sent the message of this salvation. 27 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 them by condemning him. 28 And though they found in him no guilt worthy of death, they asked Pilate to have him executed. 29 And when they had carried out all that was written of him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb. 30 But God raised him from the dead, 31 and for many days he appeared to those who had come up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are now his witnesses to the people.

Paul just dives right into the awkward here and explains that Jesus was rejected and sent to death by the very people to whom God's promises were given. Do you remember at the start of this passage when the people in the synagogue said in verse 15, "Brothers, if you have any word of encouragement for the people, say it."

I don't think this is what they had in mind. I'm sure it's not what they had in mind. But if you give the apostle Paul the microphone he's going to say some stuff. My wife has a cousin named Eddie. He's a little brash, a little bold. He will tell you what's on his mind without any kind of filter. Giving the Apostle Paul the room to talk about Jesus to a group of first century Jews is kind of like inviting Cousin Eddie to the FBI headquarters and asking him what he thinks about the deep state. It's going to get uncomfortable.

But, Paul's message is not done, and as awkward as it may be he knows that the power to change lives is not in him or his delivery, but in his message. Paul continues how he started: God's promises are fulfilled in Jesus, specifically, and importantly the promises given to King David.

Acts 13:32-37

32 And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, 33 this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus, as also it is written in the second Psalm,

*" 'You are my Son,
today I have begotten you.'*

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

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

35 Therefore he says also in another psalm,

" 'You will not let your Holy One see corruption.'

36 For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep and was laid with his fathers and saw corruption, 37 but he whom God raised up did not see corruption.

Paul continues, even more strongly, making the case that the Davidic covenant, the promise given to David, finds its fulfillment in Jesus. If the kingdom is forever, and if the Holy One won't see corruption, that is, he will not be buried and decompose, who could fulfill that?

This is why the resurrection is central. It is not only because it shows God's power over death, it's not only that it's the stamp of approval on Jesus and his ministry of reconciliation, that he really was who he said he was and accomplished what he said he did. Jesus also rose from the dead to confirm what God had been doing all along and so that he would keep every promise he ever made. And this includes the promise that he will rule and reign forever.

Our hope is in the living Christ, not in earthly leaders who will perish, and because our savior lives, we can have hope until the end. If God did this, then we can trust him with everything else. If the plans of God are so complete, thorough, and good - then you can trust his plans for you. What are God's plans for you? I don't know, I'm not God.

But what would God have you do today in order that you might faithfully walk in all the plans he has for you? Repent and Believe. For the longtime christian: repent and believe. For the brothers who were just baptized last week: repent and believe. For the unbeliever in the room: repent and believe.

This is how Paul closes his message. He closes it with the forgiveness of sins that is available in Christ and a warning to those who reject him.

Acts 13:38-41

38 Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, 39 and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses. 40 Beware, therefore, lest what is said in the Prophets should come about:

41 “Look, you scoffers,
be astounded and perish;
for I am doing a work in your days,
a work that you will not believe, even if one tells it to you.’”

We have the two response to the gospel on display here. Those who receive forgiveness, and those who scoff at it as though it is not needed. Those who are freed and those who are bound. Those who believe, and those will not, even if one tells it to them.

Paul's words are a bombshell here, especially verses 38-39.

Acts 13:38-39

38 through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, 39 and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses.

Paul declares a once-and-for-all forgiveness of sins through Christ, something the Law of Moses could not provide and that this justification, a cosmic and forever “not guilty”, comes by faith in Jesus, not by works of the Law.

This is a transformative idea. It still is. The choosing love of God that we first saw in verse 17 is now moving from being located around a specific people and a law they've been given to being granted in v39 to everyone who believes. At the same time, the law that they were once bound to has now been fulfilled by Jesus. So where the law could only point out how short we fell from hitting the target, Jesus says “I've hit all the targets take the prize!”

If you're in here today and you're an unbeliever, I want to urge you again to repent and believe. We don't always have a scripture in our message that is talking directly to you and warning you, but today we do. To not believe is to be the scoffer in verse 41. It's to be the person who will not believe, even as they see all of the people in this room whose lives have been ransomed and redeemed by Christ, which is his work in our day. To not believe is to be the person, who on the last day will be astounded and who will perish.

No one here wants to see that happen and all of us in here were on that road. Praise God for his mercy to us and his great work in Christ that changes unbelieving hearts into believing hearts as the Gospel is proclaimed. This is the hope of missions but it is also the hope of every local church.

At Antioch in Pisidia, this message provoked strong responses because the Gospel saves God's people, but now the idea of who God's people are is changing and expanding. There are some who greatly rejoice in this, and there are others who do not.

Our final point for today, as we discuss the faithfulness to God to advance his Gospel, is that this is

The Gospel that Spreads Despite Persecution

Before we get into though, let's start with some good news. Look at what the immediate response was to Paul's message.

Acts 13:42–44

42 As they went out, the people begged that these things might be told them the next Sabbath. 43 And after the meeting of the synagogue broke up, many Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who, as they spoke with them, urged them to continue in the grace of God. 44 The next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord.

Many in the synagogue are intrigued and want to hear more. . The people understood that the Christian gospel is not just for Jews but for the Gentiles as well. The gospel is for all people—no one is beyond the reach of God's grace. By the following week, almost the whole city gathers to hear this good news again.

Not bad for Paul's first message. Mine was a lot worse. I'm thankful you all are still here. But it's not all good news.

Acts 13:45–48

45 But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began to contradict what was spoken by Paul, reviling him. 46 And Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, "It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. 47 For so the Lord has commanded us, saying,

*" 'I have made you a light for the Gentiles,
that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth. ' "*

48 And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.

In this passage we see both rejection and election. "As many as were appointed to eternal life believed." God's sovereignty in salvation is on display in this passage. God has always had a choosing love. This is not new. This is the story of the children of Israel and it is why Paul preaches his message the way that he does, recounting the history of God's redemptive love. It is why Luke records this for us today, so that we might know that we don't need to be born into the right family to receive God's grace, we don't need to perform rituals or make ourselves perfect before we come to Jesus, we simply need to hear the message of reconciliation and respond with faith. And anyone who responds in faith will be saved. And anyone who responds in faith will be saved because God saved them. I want to take a few minutes to address a few concerns about this idea.

How do you know if God has chosen you? How do you know if you are appointed to eternal life? Do you have faith? Do you believe? Then he has.

But what if I am still stuck in a pattern of fighting sin in my life?

First, stop the pattern. Have you tried? Have you talked with someone? Do you need help?

Me and all of the rest of the elders and all the rest of this church body want to help.

But also, unbelievers don't fight sin. They don't desire to honor God with obedience. If you're fighting sin because you want to honor Jesus for what he's done for you, we call that person a Christian.

Does your salvation from the wrath of God depend on your behavior or on Christ's?

It's Christ's.

Does your salvation from the wrath of God depend on your works or Christ's?

It's Christ's

Does your salvation depend on the amount of your faith or the object of it?

It's Christ. He's the object of our faith. If your faith for salvation is in Jesus - it doesn't matter if you're the Apostle Paul or a doubting Thomas. Who our faith is in matters far more than the greatness of the depth of our faith.

You may say "I don't like that word election".

Well, I don't like the word "lugubrious". And it doesn't matter whether we like a word or not.

What matters, in this case, is what do the scriptures say about it.

The words "appointed" or "elected" and the concept of election is in the bible quite a bit - just the word "elect" appearing 14 times in the new testament and it's almost always in the context of salvation. But the story of God choosing people and setting them apart for his purposes is not just a New Testament idea, it is the story of the nation of Israel in the Old Testament, and election is good news because it means that faith depends a lot more on God than it does on you. God is a lot more trustworthy with my faith than I am. He can hold it for me even when my faith is weak.

We sing a song that says:

"He will hold me fast. He will hold me fast. For my Savior loves me so, he will hold me fast."

I don't know that this is the right time to try and unravel the mystery of what exactly the interaction is between God's Sovereignty and man's responsibility, but I know that I was dead in my sins and trespasses and I heard the gospel, then, I understood my need to be saved and I asked the Lord to forgive me and I live now knowing that he has. The gospel was shared with me, multiple times, and I did not believe and then it was shared with me and I believed. What was the difference? The difference was that God saved me and I worship him because he did.

God saves people. He does it.

Every Sunday it's like we're trying building a fire of faith and belief, but all we who preach can do is put down wood. I have no spark. Only God does. This is why we pray for God to save others.

Have you every prayed for someone, that they might believe in what Jesus has done?

What exactly were you praying for? What were you hoping for?

Were you praying that God would put a friend in their life who could share the gospel well?
Were you praying that God would organize events in the life of that person so that they might walk into a church and hear a great message and realize they needed Jesus?

Or were you praying that God would change their hearts or that God would open their eyes to the truth or that God would cause them to believe? When we pray, we all believe that God can change hearts and minds. We all believe that he is powerful and decisive and that whatever he ordains will come to pass. Sound like election to me. Faith is a gift that depends on God.

But if God is going to save whoever he's going to save, then why even evangelize?
Are you God? Do you know who the elect are? God is sovereign over salvation, AND the way he saves people is through the faithful obedience of his church in preaching and teaching and going and sending. Which is why we want to consider and be a part of sending missionaries, even from this church body. Paul and Barnabas went to Antioch in Pisidia to evangelize people but it was God who saved them. Evangelism may be our duty, but conversion is God's work.

Before I move on to the rest of our passage, I want to finish with this. When we rightly understand God's sovereignty in salvation it does not cause us to lose heart about who will be saved and who will not, instead it produces a confidence in us that allows us to be bold in our sharing of gospel because we can honestly say, "No one is too far from God to be saved."

As the words from the hymn "To God be Glory" say;

"The vilest offender who truly believes, that moment, from Jesus, a pardon receives"

Our passage finishes with this

Acts 13:49-52

49 And the word of the Lord was spreading throughout the whole region.

50 But the Jews incited the devout women of high standing and the leading men of the city, stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district. 51 But they shook off the dust from their feet against them and went to Iconium. 52 And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.

Persecution and opposition cannot stop the advance of the Gospel. We experience more opposition to our faith than persecution for our faith here in the United States, but in many places in the world, Christians are persecuted. The gospel is outlawed and you could be kicked out of a country, imprisoned for your faith in Jesus or even killed for it. This was also the reality at the time of this mission trip. Yet in verse 49, the word of the Lord was spreading throughout the whole region and verse 52 the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit

I think that if we were judging these events under strictly humanistic terms, we might call it a tie. Some people believed and some didn't. But it's not a tie, it's a win. Without the gospel, no one is saved and with it everyone who believes is, all glory to God.

If opposition comes or worse, if persecution comes, we can stand firm the faith given to us by God and even rejoice when we experience even a ounce of the suffering that Christ suffered for our sake. At the cross he was rejected and we were accepted, he was bound and we were set free, he was tortured and were given eternal comfort, he was hated so we might be loved. And this was the plan of God and his plans are still being fulfilled today.

When things are hard we can be faithful in ministry to one another and to others, even when the metrics of success that we have are humble, because we know that God's word is always accomplishing God's will and just like an unstoppable river that melts away the stone of a canyon, God melts unbelieving hearts of stone and gives us hearts of flesh that believe and, now, by God's grace, no one is too far off to be saved.