

## In Pisidian Antioch

<sup>13</sup> From Paphos, Paul and his companions sailed to Perga in Pamphylia, where John left them to return to Jerusalem. <sup>14</sup> From Perga they went on to Pisidian Antioch. On the Sabbath they entered the synagogue and sat down. <sup>15</sup> After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the leaders of the synagogue sent word to them, saying, 'Brothers, if you have a word of exhortation for the people, please speak.' <sup>16</sup> Standing up, Paul motioned with his hand and said: 'Fellow Israelites and you Gentiles who worship God, listen to me! <sup>17</sup> The God of the people of Israel chose our ancestors; he made the people prosper during their stay in Egypt; with mighty power he led them out of that country; <sup>18</sup> for about forty years he endured their conduct<sup>[a]</sup> in the wilderness; <sup>19</sup> and he overthrew seven nations in Canaan, giving their land to his people as their inheritance. <sup>20</sup> All this took about 450 years. 'After this, God gave them judges until the time of Samuel the prophet. <sup>21</sup> Then the people asked for a king, and he gave them Saul son of Kish, of the tribe of Benjamin, who ruled for forty years. <sup>22</sup> After removing Saul, he made David their king. God testified concerning him: "I have found David son of Jesse, a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do." <sup>23</sup> 'From this man's descendants God has brought to Israel the Saviour Jesus, as he promised. <sup>24</sup> Before the coming of Jesus, John preached repentance and baptism to all the people of Israel. <sup>25</sup> As John was completing his work, he said: "Who do you suppose I am? I am not the one you are looking for. But there is one coming after me whose sandals I am not worthy to untie." <sup>26</sup> 'Fellow children of Abraham and you God-fearing Gentiles, it is to us that this message of salvation has been sent. <sup>27</sup> The people of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognise Jesus, yet in condemning him they fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath. <sup>28</sup> Though they found no proper ground for a death sentence, they asked Pilate to have him executed. <sup>29</sup> When they had carried out all that was written about him, they took him down from the cross and laid him in a tomb. <sup>30</sup> But God raised him from the dead, <sup>31</sup> and for many days he was seen by those who had travelled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. They are now his witnesses to our people. <sup>32</sup> 'We tell you the good news: what God promised our ancestors <sup>33</sup> he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus. As it is written in the second Psalm: "'You are my son; today I have become your father.'" <sup>34</sup> God raised him from the dead so that he will never be subject to decay. As God has said, "'I will give you the holy and sure blessings promised to David.'" <sup>35</sup> So it is also stated elsewhere: "'You will not let your holy one see decay.'" <sup>36</sup> 'Now when David had served God's purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep; he was buried with his ancestors and his body decayed. <sup>37</sup> But the one whom God raised from the dead did not see decay. <sup>38</sup> 'Therefore, my friends, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. <sup>39</sup> Through him everyone who believes is set free from every sin, a justification you were not able to obtain under the law of Moses. <sup>40</sup> Take care that what the prophets have said does not happen to you: <sup>41</sup> "'Look, you scoffers, wonder and perish, for I am going to do something in your days that you would never believe, even if someone told you.'"

<sup>42</sup> As Paul and Barnabas were leaving the synagogue, the people invited them to speak further about these things on the next Sabbath. <sup>43</sup> When the congregation was dismissed, many of the Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who talked with them and urged them to continue in the grace of God. <sup>44</sup> On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord.

Luke continues his narrative of the journey of Saul (now called Paul) and Barnabas. Last week they set out from Syrian Antioch and went to Cyprus, the island where Barnabas had lived. Now they are heading back to Asia Minor, travelling from the west of Cyprus, Paphos, north-westward to Perga and then on north to Pisidian Antioch, which is nearly four hundred miles from Syrian Antioch, and in Galatia. It seems nothing much happened in Perga, other than John Mark left them to go back to Jerusalem. John Mark was Barnabas's cousin. In Acts 15:36-39 Luke writes that there was a disagreement between Paul and Barnabas <sup>36</sup> Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, 'Let us go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.' <sup>37</sup> Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, <sup>38</sup> but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. <sup>39</sup> They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus.

This disagreement took place in Jerusalem. Mark going home seemed to have upset Paul, and furthermore Barnabas decided he had enough of Paul, and went home to Cyprus with his cousin Mark. And that's the last we hear of Barnabas in Acts. However he is mentioned in 1 Corinthians 9:6 where Paul is explaining that it seems it is only himself and Barnabas who have to work for a living while others are supported by the churches they planted,

despite Paul working hard for the Gospel. In Galatians 2:1 and 2:9, Paul mentions Barnabas again as being part of the team with the apostles in Jerusalem. There is a Gospel of Barnabas (a fake and written by a medieval Spanish Islamic convert), Acts of Barnabas (allegedly written by John Mark and relates what happened after Barnabas left Paul), and the Epistle of Barnabas (which has some sloppy references to Scripture and is in two parts: first to explain that the Mosaic Law was misinterpreted as practical advice instead of spiritual advice and secondly a guide to the Christian life – the second half was only found in St Catherine’s monastery in Sinai in the late nineteenth century, while the first was well known in medieval times). The Acts of Barnabas have little spiritual content as they mostly describe journeys. The Epistle was rejected by the Church Fathers who decided what to put in the New Testament as there is doubt it was actually written by this Barnabas and theologically it had quite a few errors.

Moving on to Pisidian Antioch, Luke gives us an account of Paul’s teaching in the synagogue. Like Stephen and Peter, Paul refers to Scripture to back up who Jesus is. Telling Jews their own history may seem a bit strange for us, because surely they all knew this already. But Paul begins: *Fellow Israelites and you Gentiles who worship God, listen to me.* He adds the history for the benefit of the Gentiles who worship God. That had an impact because the last verse we’re looking at today says in verse 44 *On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord.*

We’ve all heard the Gospel before, but none of these Jews or Gentiles who worshipped God had heard it explained to them. Some may have heard about “The Way” before Paul spoke to them as this is about 10 years after the crucifixion. Some may have already heard about the miracles of Jesus and the apostles, including what Paul had done. News in the Roman world travelled quite fast as it did before the advent of newspapers all over the world. This was probably the first time someone explained who Jesus was properly rather than having heard snippets from various sources. Paul assumes everyone knew about John the Baptist, as he quotes what he said about Jesus. I won’t run through the passage as it is the same story Peter and Stephen used to speak about Jesus. But I will repeat the last part from verse 38

**<sup>38</sup> ‘Therefore, my friends, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. <sup>39</sup>Through him everyone who believes is set free from every sin, a justification you were not able to obtain under the law of Moses. <sup>40</sup>Take care that what the prophets have said does not happen to you: <sup>41</sup>“Look, you scoffers, wonder and perish, for I am going to do something in your days that you would never believe, even if someone told you.”’ (Hab 1:5)**

The key Gospel message is that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to all those who were listening – Jew and Gentile alike. Freedom from sin was a new concept – it doesn’t mean we are free of sin, but that our sins are able to be forgiven so that we can come before the throne of grace unable to be punished for our sins. Throwing in a quote from Habbakuk, however, is a bit odd, out of context, because verse 6 speaks about the coming Babylonians. However single verses of Scripture are often used in the New Testament as if they stand alone and have no regard for surrounding verses. It is a question of faith as to whether it is believed that the Word of God can be looked at in this way. The Hebrew tradition is to take each verse as it stands alone, and compare it to other verses on the same matter, and whether there are seemingly contradictory verses. Much Hebrew interpretation of Scripture was looking for loopholes to minimise the obligations towards God set out in the Law of Moses, and looking for passages that would prophesy the restoration of Israel as an independent kingdom... practical issues rather than spiritual ones. What Jesus and the apostles were doing was supernatural and spiritual – the miracles, the promises of salvation and eternal life. Paul quotes Habbakuk as a warning to those who would scoff at his words and deny that something new had happened. Paul wasn’t pointing to the rest of Habbakuk, who was accepted as a true prophet because he prophesied that the Babylonians would come... and they did some 15 years later. The word of God is not just for the day it was written, but is eternal. We use Isaiah 43:18-19 today as an encouragement without having to say it is 2,600 years old and possibly inapplicable given the context – it begins with freeing Israel from Babylon in verse 14, but then verse 18 begins: *Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. <sup>19</sup>See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.*

What the Old Testament prophets said was the word of the Lord stands today, as then, as the word of the Lord which can speak for itself.

The listeners to Paul took his warning to heart and came back the following week to hear more. News spread and everyone wanted to hear what he had to say.

### **If this story happened today, what would it look like?**

Great evangelists have attracted large crowds. George Whitefield and John Wesley drew large crowds. Jonathan Edwards in New England drew large crowds. William Booth and Billy Graham drew large crowds. Reinhard Bonnke drew huge crowds in Africa. There are times when men of God arrive somewhere and the people are drawn to the Gospel. What happened in Pisidian Antioch happened in much of Paul's missionary journeys. We'll see next week how they were expelled from the city after the scoffers began scoffing. Wesley sometimes had to flee the scene and Billy Graham has had his mission scoffed at by many. There is often a reaction to the Gospel.

### **What is this story saying to us today?**

It tells us that the apostles had their human weaknesses. Jonathan mentioned last week how Paul's sharp rebuke of the Jewish sorcerer Elymas appears at odds with his gentle rebukes countered by encouragement in his letters. Elymas was told by the Holy Spirit what he needed to hear and was blinded for a while. "God gives his grace to the humble but resists the proud" and "those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent". Paul didn't appreciate Mark leaving him, but seen from Barnabas's perspective Paul was being unreasonable to expect of others the same as he expected from himself... 100% commitment regardless of circumstances. Mark wrote a Gospel which we treasure today... that is his legacy which endures for ever, just as much as Paul's letters endure for ever. The passage says to us that God can use us in different ways and that a leader who expects much from others is going to be disappointed sometimes because God may have other plans. Many for example were praying for Kate Forbes to be leader of the SNP as she had bravely proclaimed her faith in the unchanging Word of God. Had she won, she would now be trying to sort out a mess in the SNP not of her making and finding that a task which will probably be the undoing of the Muslim who won. God works for the good of those who love Him (Romans 8:28), and frustrates the plans of the crafty, so that their hands achieve no success (Job 5:12).

### **Could the story make a difference to my life, and if so, how?**

Doubtless the passage may say something different to you compared with what it says to me. For me, it reveals the importance of having relevant verses from the Word of God to hand to support what is being said about God to others. Even if quoted out of context, the words God says to mankind have power when used not to manipulate people but to point to Jesus. Paul's message in Antioch pointed to Jesus and he used Scriptures to back up his claim because the Jews couldn't argue about Scripture. Scripture can be used out of context to condemn, to judge, to win an argument. But it can also be used to encourage, to reveal God's love, to reveal the grace and mercy of God and the forgiveness available from Jesus for those who accept him as Lord and Saviour. Paul's talk in the synagogue under the power of the Holy Spirit used Scriptures to support his message, pointed to Jesus as well as warning against scoffing at the Gospel. Using Scripture under the guidance of the Holy Spirit in prayer, in conversations, in teaching, usually achieves what it is meant to. Isaiah 55:11 *"so is my word that goes out from my mouth: it will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it"*. This is why in times of trouble, illness, conflict, finding a verse that reveals what God says about a situation, and asking God to honour His Word is a great help and encouragement.