

# Salvation is a work of God alone

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**Littlebourne - 29th April 2023 - Acts 13:44-14:7**

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*44 The next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. 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. 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.*

*1 Now at Iconium they entered together into the Jewish synagogue and spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed. 2 But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. 3 So they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord, who bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands. 4 But the people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews and some with the apostles. 5 When an attempt was made by both Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to mistreat them and to stone them, 6 they learned of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding country, 7 and there they continued to preach the gospel.*

## Introduction

We pick up the story in Pisidian Antioch, where Paul and Barnabas have travelled to after they visited Cyprus.

Last week we saw Paul's first recorded sermon, and it was much like the others we've seen in Acts. He gives a potted history of Israel, John the Baptists and Jesus, then ends with a warning against rejecting Christ. Many Jews and gentiles were interested.

So the stories in Acts are getting a little samey aren't they. There are of course differences, but on the whole, there are apostles that go somewhere, preach, some are converted, some aren't. Then there's the threat or actuality of violence and they move on. And this week is no different. In fact this week, we've got this pattern of things twice.

## Two attitudes

We see it everywhere the apostles go - everywhere the gospel is proclaimed in Acts, there are those that react positively, and those that react negatively. We've seen lots of people transformed from being enemies of Christ to friends of Christ. We also see people that reject Christ and are hardened in their rejection. It seems that there are no neutral reactions to the gospel.

## Welcome and unwelcome

In this passage we see those two reactions starkly.

One set of people wish to welcome Paul and Barnabas, to hear everything they have to say. v42, 44:

*42 As they went out, the people begged that these things might be told them the next Sabbath.*

*44 The next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord.*

The other set of people - maybe unhelpfully just called the Jews, though we know it's those Jews that haven't converted, probably especially those that were in authority in the synagogue - these people are not welcoming at all, but rather attempt to remove them. v50:

*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.*

## Jealousy and Joy

Luke also tells us something about the attitudes and motivations of these two sets of people.

On the one hand, we have those that begged to hear Paul and Barnabas next sabbath. Then, upon hearing this news, they are affected greatly. v48:

*48 And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord...*

They are joyful about what they are hearing.

Contrast the apostle's opposition. v45:

*45 But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began to contradict what was spoken by Paul, reviling him.*

They were filled with jealousy. These may have been the religious leaders at the synagogue, who are losing their congregation to these foreigners. They may be jealous of the ability of Paul to speak on the scriptures, to understand and explain them more clearly than them. They are jealous of the great crowds attracted, that they themselves could not attract. They could be jealous that they, the chosen people, are no longer the only ones chosen. No longer do the gentile converts to Judaism that we read of in verse 43, that wish to be part of God's people, no longer do they have to become Jewish in some way, but can be full members as gentiles.

And jealousy leads to opposition. "If we can't have it, neither can you".

When eventually they do get their way, as Paul and Barnabas leave, there's no indication their attitude changes. Those believers that remain in the city however are joyful. v52:

*52 And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.*

## Responsibility

Paul and Barnabas take the opportunity to express their disapproval too. v51:

*51 But they shook off the dust from their feet against them and went to Iconium.*

Jesus says to his disciples, as he sends them out, in Mark 6 (v11):

*11 And if any place will not receive you and they will not listen to you, when you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them."*

The shaking off of dust is a visible sign to the people of the city that they have by their actions condemned themselves. It's as if to say that even the dust from such a city would not be allowed to cling to the feet of God's messengers.

Paul and Barnabas had done what they could, had fulfilled their responsibilities to the city. They figuratively wash their hands of it, they say to Pisidian Antioch that they have done all they were sent to do. Paul and Barnabas are not responsible for the response to the gospel they preach, but are responsible for their own obedience to God who sent them there to preach.

## Response to God's word

As we've seen here and before in Acts, there are no neutral reactions to the gospel.

1 Corinthians 1:18:

*For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.*

These are the different responses to the gospel that Paul preached - that he concludes in v38-39:

*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.*

The reaction of the unbelievers was that of "contradicting what was spoken by Paul" (v45) and thrusting it aside" (v46), whereas the gentile believers "rejoiced" and were "glorifying the word of the Lord" (v48).

You can just imagine that there were those highly religious Jews there that felt the gospel was the antithesis to their way of doing things. "What do you mean I can be saved apart from my works?" The gospel is, to one committed to their own self-sufficiency, offensive. The gospel says you can't do well enough and you don't need to do well enough.

To the unbeliever, the gospel is offensive. Pride is said to be heart of all sins - from the first sin that said "I know better than God", all down the millennia to today, all sin is traceable to pride. Boil off the meat of sin and the bones of pride remain. Yet the gospel, properly understood is the antidote to pride, the gospel says you have nothing to be proud of and everything to be humble about.

God either humbles us to the point of acceptance of His word, or allows us in our pride to reject Him.

## **Election**

### **Unconditional Election**

This little phrase in verse 38 is something that can easily be skipped over:

■ *and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.*

Luke drops the phrase in there like it's the most normal thing in the world. It's a phrase that has caused not a small amount of argument. Once you notice it, it demands explanation. Simply search online for this verse and you'll find a huge amount of content written that tries to tell you, in different ways, why this verse doesn't mean what it sounds like it means. But I'm convinced that the plain reading of it is the right one. If we read with our eyes open, I think this sort of thing is all over the Bible.

I don't want to go into the original Greek, because I'm not qualified. But from my research, suffice it to say, I don't think this is a matter of translation making things difficult. I don't think you can reasonably reverse the causation in this verse, or say that the appointment/election is something people did themselves, as some argue. The appointment verb here is in the passive voice - it's done to those who believe, not by them.

The belief is not something that leads to appointment or election. Rather the appointment to eternal life comes first, then comes belief or faith. Neither does God look into the future to see who will believe and then 'elect' them on that basis. Belief happens because of election.

I should be clear that this is a debate within Christianity - we don't all agree on the exact details of how this works. There are different positions on the matter of how much we have a part to play in our own salvation, how much choice we make vs. how much God chooses. And most (though not all!) of these positions are within orthodoxy. You don't have to totally agree with me here. But I do think this doctrine, that is known as "unconditional election", is not just correct, but a great weapon against pride as well.

The idea is that God did not foresee any action or condition on our part that would induce Him to save us rather than others. It's not that we who are saved are better. It's not that we who are saved made the right choice and those who aren't made the wrong choice. It's God who saves.

Theologians make the distinction between monergism, that is mono/one erg/work (think energy) - one working, and synergism, that is syn/with/together working, that's more than one working or co-operating. If ultimately salvation is monergistic, that is that there is only one party working, only God working, then salvation is truly something we can't twist into being proud about.

Put it this way - unbelief is a sin. I've said pride is beneath all sin, and I think it is. But unbelief is another way of looking at the root of sin. The first sin was pride "I know better than God" and unbelief "God must be wrong". To take the synergistic position, to say that "I believed, when others didn't", is to say that when it comes to the sin that *really* matters, the sin that divides the wheat from the chaff, the sheep from the goats, on that sin, on the matter of unbelief in the gospel, I did good. I'm not a sinner on that count. It's to say that ultimately salvation is dependent on your actions. It's merit, not grace, so I reject it.

Ephesians 2:8-9

*8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast.*

So that no one may boast. This idea that our salvation is a gift of God, nothing we have earned, nothing we have done ourselves. It's appointed to us, by God alone.

We all have this prideful nature in us that recoils at the idea that we play no part in salvation. Our sinful hearts cry out for some credit. But the gospel is the antidote to pride and shows us that our election is 'unconditional'. No condition needs be fulfilled by us, and none has.

This idea gives us humility, it gives us thankfulness and rejoicing, as we see the believers in verse 48 rejoice, and it gives us hope, that even the most hardened sinner might be saved. No obstacle in this life can stand against God's will and election. No heart is too hard for God to soften, none of us ought worry that we have been too sinful, because it's not our actions that are the defining factor. Be done with the idea that you are the decisive part of the equation.

## Man's natural state

Often it's complained that it's unfair that God elects some and not others. Be careful what you wish for, for if total fairness were employed, we'd all destined to hell.

Those that opposed the gospel of Paul and Barnabas heard the same things as those that believed. They may even have been listening more intently, wishing to catch Paul out on some technical error or scripture misquote. Yet they did not believe.

Jesus tells us a bit about what is going on as he is questioned by Jewish authorities in John chapter 10:

*22 At that time the Feast of Dedication took place at Jerusalem. It was winter, 23 and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the colonnade of Solomon. 24 So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly." 25 Jesus answered them, "I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name bear witness about me, 26 but you do not believe because you are not among my sheep. 27 My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. 28 I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. 29 My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. 30 I and the Father are one."*

Jesus tells them that they've heard already that He is the Christ. They have the evidence, they have the testimony of scripture and Jesus Himself. Yet they did not believe. Why not? Because they are not His sheep.

The ability to follow Christ, to repent and believe is something we are not capable of doing in our natural sinful state. Humanity is corrupted, we are radically corrupt - down to the root, the radix, the core, of who we are. We are, of ourselves, incapable of choosing God, of turning from sin - it has a hold over us. We are slaves to sin. Our hearts are infected with sin, and we need nothing less than renovation from the inside out to fix this. We must be reborn. And such a rebirth is the gift of God, it's a work of the Holy Spirit.

Put another way, given the free choice to believe whilst in our natural sinful state, we would not choose God. We would choose sin. Those that opposed Paul and Barnabas were acting as we all would if we were left to our own devices. Their pride and unbelief, their sinful nature they inherited from Adam, was ruling them. Only the transformation brought about by the Holy Spirit's work in our hearts can move us to the disposition that allows the rejoicing and glorification of the gospel that those who believed Paul's message had.

## Conclusion

Initial salvation - that is being reborn, justified, adopted, is a work of God. The Holy Spirit regenerates us, applies to us the atoning work of Christ, and being so transformed, we are welcomed into God's family. It's monergistic.

But there are aspects of Christian life that do require our co-operation. Sanctification, that is the ongoing improvement and transformation of ourselves, the lifelong mission to become more Christlike and to do battle against sin. That's synergistic, we co-operate with the Holy Spirit.

And there's another way that salvation is somewhat synergistic. The way God saves people is typically through the actions of others - He uses the gospel, the good news, as the way to save people. Paul says in Romans 10 (v14):

*14 How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?*

God uses Paul and Barnabas, and us, to spread the gospel and this is His means of salvation for those He has chosen.



So be thankful and humble that we are in Paul's words from Ephesians 1 "chosen in Him before the foundation of the world", saved by His grace alone. And also take that thankfulness and humility and apply it to the ongoing work we do as Christians - our sanctification, our improvement, and the spreading of the gospel to those around us.