

## Chapter 31: Jesus, God’s Savior for Israel

*Acts 13:13–41*

As the missionaries continue into the unreached world, Luke gives a detailed account of the mixed results of their ministry in Acts 13. Here, we see Paul exercising the ministry to which Christ had called him, by preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ to Jews and Gentiles. In a synagogue of Jews and God-fearers, Paul preaches Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of all God’s Old Testament promises, and he calls sinners to the salvation of the forgiveness of sins that is extended through faith in Jesus Christ. In this sermon, we hear a compressed account of Israel’s history with a very clear purpose: to prove that *Jesus is God’s Savior for Israel*.

### Faithful Promises (Acts 13:13–25)

After the first leg of the mission in Cyprus, the mission continues to the region of Pamphylia, which is “northwest to the coast of present-day Turkey.”<sup>1</sup> Yet, although “Barnabas and Saul” had been sent on this mission (the primacy of Barnabas’s name suggesting his leadership), the leadership seems to have changed: “Now Paul and his companions set sail...” (v. 13a).<sup>2</sup> Although there are many questions about how this shift in leadership may have come about, or what the shift might entail, our bigger questions arise from the matter-of-fact statement that Luke states only briefly in v. 13b: “And John left them and returned to Jerusalem.” It will not be until Acts 15:37–39 when we will realize the severity of this action, learning that “Paul...regarded [John Mark’s] departure as desertion.”<sup>3</sup> Here, the word translating Mark as having “left” the others is an appropriate, “milder” sense of the word; however, the word may also connote a “more negative sense of ‘betrayed’ or ‘abandoned’” which Luke brings out in the later narrative.<sup>4</sup>

Luke is skillful at sowing seeds in his narrative that he will harvest at later points. Having begun the narrative of Mark indirectly, with a statement about the home of Mark’s mother in Acts 12:12, and then giving a simple statement of Mark’s accompanying Barnabas and Saul on their service to Jerusalem (Acts 12:25), Luke

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<sup>1</sup> “Leaving Cyprus, Paul and his party sailed from Paphos northwest to the coast of present-day Turkey. Their stopping place was Perga, some twelve miles inland. Perga was located in Pamphylia, the land that lay between the Taurus mountains and the Mediterranean Sea. The area of Lycia lay to the west and Cilicia to the east. Pamphylia was under Roman jurisdiction, having been a separate province from 25 B.C. to A.D. 43 and then being merged with Lycia into the province of Pamphylia-Lycia from A.D. 43–68. Perga could be reached by traveling seven miles up the Cestrus River from the Mediterranean port of Attalia and then going about five miles west by foot to Perga. The Cestrus is not navigable in this area today, and it may not have been in Paul’s day. If not, the missionaries would have landed at Attalia and traveled by foot to Perga. At this point Perga seems to have been only a stopping place on their journey. On their return trip they would preach there (14:25).” (Polhill, *Acts*, 296.)

<sup>2</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 510.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 266.

<sup>4</sup> Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 384.

had not even told us that Mark had gone on this missionary journey at all (see Acts 13:2–3). Even now, Luke tells us that Mark has left “Paul and his companions,” but he waits to convey the magnitude of this decision until much later. At no point does Luke or any New Testament writer inform us the reason for Mark’s departure at this juncture.

### The Leadership of Paul (Acts 13:13–15)

Instead, the narrative moves forward with the arrival of “Paul and his companions” at “Antioch in Pisidia,” and directly to a scene at the synagogue there on the Sabbath day (v. 14). As Polhill notes, “The Diaspora synagogue was more than a house of worship. It was the hub of the Jewish community—house of worship, center of education, judicial center, social gathering place, general ‘civic center’ for the Jewish community. If one wished to make contact with the Jewish community in a town, the synagogue was the natural place to begin.”<sup>5</sup> Here, we have a glimpse into the ordinary worship service of a Jewish synagogue, with a “reading from the Law and the Prophets,” along with an invitation to provide a “word of encouragement” (v. 15). As Calvin notes, “The law and the prophets had the first place; because there must nothing be set before the Church which was not drawn out of that fountain.”<sup>6</sup>

Further, we have a glimpse into the leadership exercised by the “rulers of the synagogue” to extend this invitation to Paul and his companions. We should not pass too quickly over these details, since they are important to demonstrate the continuity of Christian worship and Christian church government with the worship and government of the Jewish synagogues. The leadership of ruling elders commanded in the New Testament for the Christian church was in perfect continuity with the form of government in the Old Testament church (the synagogue).<sup>7</sup> Even the worship in this synagogue demonstrates a basic pattern that establishes continuity with Christian worship, structured primarily by the reading and preaching of the Scriptures.

### Promises for Israel (Acts 13:16–25)

The specific exhortation that Paul gives here establishes a “programmatic” message for the missionary preaching of the gospel to the Jews first that will inform the rest of the Book of Acts, “just as Acts 2 is programmatic for the first half [of the book].”<sup>8</sup> Paul begins by addressing the “men of Israel and you who fear God” (v. 16). That is, Paul was addressing a room filled with “Jews by birth or by proselytization” as well as “Gentile God-fearers.” Bruce, who gives these definitions, continues with the observation that “In this as in many another synagogue where Paul preached, it was the latter group that proved readier to accept the good news which he proclaimed.”<sup>9</sup> Yet, to understand the nature of the sermon Paul preaches, it is essential to understand the composition of his audience. In this sermon, Paul will preach Jesus as the fulfillment of God’s promises to provide a Savior for his people, Israel.<sup>10</sup>

Paul begins, then, by a quick survey of the Old Testament’s proclamation of God’s promises for his

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<sup>5</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 297.

<sup>6</sup> Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:513.

<sup>7</sup> Samuel Miller, *An Essay on the Warrant, Nature, and Duties of the Office of the Ruling Elder in the Presbyterian Church* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1832), 31–48. See also Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 513.

<sup>8</sup> Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 383.

<sup>9</sup> Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 271.

<sup>10</sup> Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:516.

people.<sup>11</sup> Stephen had also appealed to the history of the Old Testament, although his “tone and the object” were “different,” since Stephen’s narrative established “the note of Israel’s disobedience in rejecting Christ; Paul’s account of the history shows God’s grace blessing Israel.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, Paul begins (in a few phrases contained in a single verse!) with the story of God’s gracious election of Israel, their sojourn in Egypt, and the exodus out of Egypt (v. 17). Next, after a brief mention of the forty years in the wilderness (v. 18), he gives an equally brief statement of the conquest under Joshua (v. 19). Noting that this history encompassed “450 years,” Paul mentioned that next God “gave them judges until Samuel the prophet” (v. 20). Although Paul’s movement through Israel’s history is quick, his retelling of the story is filled richly with allusions to the language of Scripture from these stories.<sup>13</sup> No specific “point is dwelt upon” here, so that “all the stress is on God’s mercy—his election of Israel, his exaltation of his people, his gift of an inheritance in the promised land, his gift of rulers and kings.”<sup>14</sup>

In the next section, Paul focuses in on the reign of David. From the outset of his discussion of David, Paul offers a big clue to the direction of his historical exposition. Although he had said that God “gave” Saul as king in v. 22, now he says that God “raised up” David as king (v. 22). On the use of this word, Polhill makes a critical observation: the term “raised up” is a regular way to describe “bringing forth a prophet or ruler to serve his people,” it is “also an expression for Jesus’ resurrection. The parallel may not be accidental, for in a real sense David and the promises to him foreshadow the promise fulfilled in Christ....The promise to David...would continue to be the main subject of Paul’s sermon as he showed how Christ fulfilled the promise.”<sup>15</sup> Yet, before getting to the resurrection, he makes only two points connected with David. First, Paul reminds his hearers that the Lord had raised up David because he was “a man after my own heart, who will do all my will” (v. 22). Second, Paul explains that Jesus has arisen as a “Savior” from the offspring of David: “Of this man’s offspring God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, as he promised” (v. 23). Lenski writes, “‘Savior’ puts the whole office

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<sup>11</sup> “These events, in fact, constitute an OT *kerygma* [‘message/preaching/proclamation’] which Paul here summarizes as a prelude to the NT *kerygma*, showing how inevitably the events proclaimed in the apostolic preaching took place as the sequel to God’s dealings with His people in ancient days.” (Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 272.)

<sup>12</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 516–17.

<sup>13</sup> “The language in which Paul outlines the history of Israel from patriarchal times to the rise of David is strongly reminiscent of the very wording of the OT narration. The ‘high arm’ with which God led His people out of Egypt is an allusion to Ex. 6:1, 6 and Ps. 136:11f.; it expresses the mighty power manifested by God at the Exodus. God’s carrying them as a nursing-father (or, as the ARV margin puts it, suffering their manners) through the wilderness is taken from Deut. 1:31. The seven nations destroyed in the land of Canaan are enumerated in Deut. 7:1, the wording of which is reflected here; they are there described as ‘the Hittite, and the Girgashite, and the Amorite, and the Canaanite, and the Perizzite, and the Hivite, and the Jebusite, seven nations greater and mightier than thou.’ The dispossession of these nations and occupation of their territory were spread over a long term of years; it was not until the seventh year of David’s reign that the Jebusites, the last mentioned, were reduced. (They were the Canaanite occupants of Jerusalem.) The four hundred and fifty years of v. 19 may be intended to cover the period of David’s reign; more probably they cover the four hundred years of sojourning (v. 17; cf. Ch. 7:6), along with the forty years of wandering in the wilderness and the period that elapsed between the crossing of the Jordan and the distribution of the land in Josh. 14:1ff. (The wording of Josh. 14:1f. has also left its mark on Paul’s language in v. 19.)” (Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 272.)

<sup>14</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 300.

<sup>15</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 300–01.

and work of Jesus into one word, and that word signifies not only what Jesus did but what he still does—he is and remains the one who saves. All that the Scripture say about salvation lies in this one term.”<sup>16</sup>

Before we move to another section of the sermon, we should first note how the sermon has been structured. As with Peter’s sermon on the day of Pentecost, the major divisions between Paul’s sermon are signaled by renewed addresses to the people, “Men, brothers” (Acts 2:14 [“Men of Judea“], 22 [“Men of Israel“], 29 [ESV omits “men”, but lit., “men, brothers”]; here, v. 15, 26, 38 [again, ESV omits “men” in every instance]). It is interesting, then, that Paul speaks of John the Baptist as a part of the *Old Testament* history, even though we find his story in the *New Testament* of our Bibles. Polhill points to this issue, noting that John the Baptist appears *between* the Old and New Testament histories as a transitional figure, but properly appearing at the end of the *Old Testament* period: “John was the eschatological messenger, the last in the line of Old Testament prophets, who heralded the coming of the Messiah.”<sup>17</sup> John’s words in v. 25 are stark in the Greek: οὐκ εἰμι ἐγώ (*ouk eimi egō*), or literally, “not am I.” Polhill adds that believers in this synagogue may likely have heard about John the Baptist, since later on “Paul encountered a group of the Baptist’s disciples even further to the west in Ephesus (Acts 19:1–7).”<sup>18</sup> Yet, John’s ministry consisted only in a “baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel.” Though he prepared the way for the Messiah, he himself was *not* that Messiah (“not am I”).

## Fulfillment in Jesus (Acts 13:26–37)

As noted above, this next section begins with a transitional address, “[men,] brothers, sons of the family of Abraham, and those among you who fear God” (v. 26a). As at the beginning of his speech, Paul is addressing the God-fearers alongside the descendants of Abraham (v. 16). To both of these groups, Paul declares, “to us has been sent the message of this salvation” (v. 26b). Having mentioned that *Jesus* is the “Savior” whom God had brought to Israel (v. 23), Paul proceeds to talk about the “salvation” without mentioning his name again until v. 32. Instead, Paul dives directly into the story of Jesus; however, he talks about Jesus primarily from the perspective of the Jews who had encountered him. Lenski notes a great contrast in this section: whereas Paul had spoken of what *God* had done in vv. 17–25, now Paul talks about what the *people* and the *rulers* did in vv. 26–29.<sup>19</sup> First, “they did not recognize him nor understand the utterances of the prophets, which are read every Sabbath, fulfilled them by condemning him” (v. 27). By this statement, Paul dramatizes the response that he will soon ask for from his audience, since they too have just heard “the reading from the Law and the Prophets” (v. 15). Will *these* people also fail to recognize Jesus, or understand the utterances of the prophets, which have been read *this* Sabbath, as always? Or, will they fulfill those prophets by rejecting Jesus, as the Jews had done in Jerusalem?

Second, the people living in Jerusalem and the rulers sought Jesus’ execution, “though they found in him no guilt worthy of death” (v. 28). Moving quickly forward past the injustice of the trial and the horrors of Christ’s crucifixion, Paul continues moving ahead until after Jesus’ death: “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” (v. 29). Bruce writes, “Once again the cross is described as ‘the tree,’ in order to emphasize the

<sup>16</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 524.

<sup>17</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 301.

<sup>18</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 301–02.

<sup>19</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 532–33.

connection with Deut. 21:23.”<sup>20</sup> Although Paul does not spend too much time focusing on the sin of the people in this regard, he spends a great deal of time talking about God’s response to this. On this point, “the contrast is tremendous: the people and the rulers made away with Jesus as one who was accursed, God did the absolutely opposite. God reversed and nullified what they did, yea, by raising him from the dead whom they had killed as one who was accursed God set his seal upon him as being the Savior.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, “God raised him from the dead,” and then Jesus appeared to many witnesses (v. 31). Here, Paul characterizes his own ministry as bringing the people “the good news that what God promised to the fathers, 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” (vv. 32–33).

What, then, does Paul understand as having fulfilled the words of Psalm 2? In what sense has God “begotten” Jesus “today”? Some argue that Paul has in mind a full view of all that Jesus did as the Messiah,<sup>22</sup> beginning from his birth onward,<sup>23</sup> while others point to the baptism of Jesus, where the Father declares that Jesus is his Son, in whom he is well pleased.<sup>24</sup> In my opinion, however, this text is most easily understood in context as a claim about the function of the resurrection. This is not to say that, at the resurrection, we see Jesus “becoming Son or being adopted as Son...but being made evident as Son.”<sup>25</sup> Polhill makes a strong case for this in light of the language from Romans 1:4: “Jesus was indeed the Son of God from all eternity and recognized as such throughout his earthly life (Luke 1:35; 3:22; 9:35). But it was...through the resurrection that he was declared Son of God *with power* (Rom 1:4).”<sup>26</sup> The strongest case, however, is from the context, which begins with the statement “by raising Jesus” (v. 33), and then afterward follows up on the idea of the resurrection by quoting Isaiah 55:3 and then Psalm 16:10: “*Therefore* he says also in another psalm, ‘You will not let your Holy One see corruption’” (v. 35). Peter also had appealed to the impossibility of seeing Psalm 16:10 fulfilled in David in Acts 2:27–31.<sup>27</sup>

## Forgiveness of Sins (Acts 13:38–41)

The application for all of this—ranging from Old Testament promises to New Testament fulfillment in Christ—is the gospel promise of forgiveness of sins:<sup>28</sup> “Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything

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<sup>20</sup> Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 275.

<sup>21</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 533.

<sup>22</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 538.

<sup>23</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, 581.

<sup>24</sup> Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 276.

<sup>25</sup> Bock, *Acts*, 456.

<sup>26</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 304.

<sup>27</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, 583.

<sup>28</sup> “The *kerygma* was regularly rounded off with a direct application to the hearers, calling for repentance and offering the forgiveness of sins to all who believed. So Paul now proclaims through Christ the remission of sins, and goes on to add a word about justification as well. Knowing Paul’s gospel as it is unfolded in the Epistles to the Galatians and to the Romans, we are not surprised to find this reference to justification in the first address ascribed to him in Acts.” (Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 278.)

from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses” (vv. 38–39). In view of the two major sections of the sermon so far, the comparison is at the heart of Paul’s message. What the Old Testament *law* could not accomplish, Christ himself has accomplished as our Savior, in providing the forgiveness of sins.<sup>29</sup>

Then, Paul concludes his sermon on an intriguing allusion to Habakkuk 1:5:

The prophet Habakkuk, on the eve of Nebuchadnezzar’s rise to world-power, had called on the nations, in the name of God, to look with astonishment on the impending invasion...As these words of Habakkuk’s were reminiscent of a warning uttered by Isaiah in the days of the Assyrian peril (*cf.* Isa. 28:21f.; 29:14), so Paul now takes them up—in the LXX version, which lent itself better to his purpose—and applies them to the new situation in which God is offering deliverance through the greatest of all His mighty works. Great as was the disaster that overtook those who ignored the warnings of the prophets, an even greater disaster will fall upon those who refuse the gospel.<sup>30</sup>

The response itself is a major point, not only for this sermon, but for all the rest of Paul’s missionary journeys, up to his final recorded interaction with the Jews while in house arrest in Rome in Acts 28. Will they respond in faith to Jesus, or will they reject him? And, if the Jews reject him, what will the Gentiles do? We will take up the multifaceted response to Paul’s sermon in the next study.

## Discussion Questions

1. Why does the phrase “Paul and his companions” suggest a shift in leadership among the missionaries (v. 13a)? Why is the departure of John (Mark) significant (v. 13b; *cf.* Acts 15:37–39)? What details should we notice about the worship and the government of the synagogues (vv. 14–15)? How do these details compare with our experience in the worship and government of the New Testament church?
2. Whom does Paul address at the outset of his sermon (vv. 16b)? How do we distinguish those two groups of people? Where does Paul begin his sermon (vv. 17ff)? Amidst the quick brushstrokes, what themes does Paul emphasize in vv. 17–21? What comparison does Paul bring out when he begins to speak about David (vv. 22–23)? What does it mean that Jesus is “a Savior” for Israel (v. 23)? How does the ministry of John the Baptist relate to Jesus’ ministry (vv. 24–25)?
3. Why didn’t “those who live in Jerusalem and their rulers” recognize Jesus or “understand the utterances of the prophets” (v. 27)? How does the reading of the Law and the Prophets in this synagogue service create a dramatic connection to this statement (*cf.* v. 15)? How did the people in Jerusalem fulfill the Prophets by condemning Jesus (v. 27)? How is Jesus revealed as the Messiah and the Son of God through his death, and especially his resurrection (vv. 28–37)?

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<sup>29</sup> Bock, *Acts*, 458–59.

<sup>30</sup> Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 279.

4. What is the main message of the salvation that God has provided through Jesus (vv. 38–39)? Why is forgiveness of sins so central to the gospel proclamation? How does justification by faith alone in Christ alone fulfill the promises that God made to Israel in the Old Testament? If this message is true, why must Paul still warn the people not to turn away from the gospel, quoting Habakkuk 1:5 (v. 41)? What does this message demand from you today?