

A Light for the Gentiles (Acts 13:42–52)

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Throughout the Book of Acts, we will repeatedly encounter a similar story. God’s appointed missionaries come bringing the gospel in some place. In response, some will reject Christ, while others will rejoice in Christ as he is offered in the gospel. The ultimate explanation of the difference between the two responses is not racial, for both Jews and Gentiles believe in Jerusalem and in Judea, and then in Samaria, and then to the ends of the earth. Indeed, the difference cannot be explained by any factor within the people themselves, but only by God’s grace: “as many as were appointed to eternal life believed” (v. 48). Although the counsels of God are unsearchable, we nevertheless see the effects of those counsels in the two different responses every time the gospel is preached: *the world divides around Christ*.

Rejecting Christ (Acts 13:42–46)

In the previous passage, Paul’s sermon ended on a dramatic cliff-hanger, in which he warned his hearers about failing to believe the message about Jesus that he preached (Acts 13:40–41). That conclusion made an effect on the hearers, so that, while going out, “the people begged that these things might be told them the next Sabbath” (v. 42). This was not merely a polite thing to say to the guest preacher, for the people “begged” to hear about these things at the next Sabbath. Further, many people, including both “Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas” (v. 43a). These people (Jews and Gentiles alike) were so hungry for the gospel that they did not passively wait until the next Sabbath but begged for more preaching and clung to Paul and Barnabas to hear more.¹

The missionaries, for their part, “urged them to continue in the grace of God” (v. 43b). Indeed, when someone comes under conviction from the Word of God and under a growing awareness of the goodness of the gospel, the most practical thing to do is to avoid quenching the Spirit. Continue reading the Scriptures. Continue in prayer. Continue to follow up by making an appointment with a pastor or elder, eager to hear more about what God is graciously revealing to you. Do not allow the seeds that have been scattered on the soil of your heart to be snatched up, untended and unused, by the birds of the air. Rather, continue forward in the grace of God.

While we do not have the details of what took place that week, Luke tells us that, “The next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord” (v. 44). Much of this must have been due to the diligent gospel ministry of Paul and Barnabas.² Much of the interest also likely took place as word spread from those who were at the first sermon, especially among the Gentiles: “What interested all these Gentiles was the

¹ To expand upon this point, Calvin argues (not altogether implausibly, but not followed by the majority of interpreters) that “next Sabbath” should rather be translated as “between the Sabbaths.” If so, then there is greater urgency on learning immediately from Paul and Barnabas before the next Sabbath came (Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:547.).

² Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:548–49.

fact that without becoming Jews and adopting the Jewish separative laws they could be received into the full communion of faith.”³

The Jews, however, were irritated by the influx of Gentiles in their synagogue service and voiced their displeasure: “But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began to contradict what was spoken by Paul, reviling him” (v. 45). It is likely that there were two reasons to fuel their displeasure. Most immediately, the great numbers of Gentiles in attendance may have crowded their service, especially since “Pisidian Antioch was predominantly Gentile.”⁴ Bruce compares the displeasure to the way that “pious Christian pewholders can manifest quite un-Christian indignation when they arrive at church on a Sunday morning to find their places occupied by rank outsiders who have come to hear a popular visiting preacher.”⁵ Yet, there was more to it than a cramped space in the synagogue. More broadly, these Jews came to understand why the Gentiles were so eager to hear this message: “It was one thing to proclaim the coming of the Messiah to the Jews. It was quite another to maintain that in the Messiah God accepted the Gentiles on an equal basis.”⁶

Paul’s response is essential for understanding what we have seen through this book so far, as well as what we will see through the rest of the book.⁷ To begin, we must remember that Christ insisted that the gospel should go first to the Jews in Jerusalem and Judea, before moving into Samaria and ultimately to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).⁸ Thus, Luke tells us that “Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, ‘It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you’” (v. 46a). While the church did experience significant and growing persecution in Jerusalem and Judea, we must also remember that thousands came to faith in Christ in those regions (Acts 2:41, 47; 4:4; 5:14; 6:7; 8:1; 9:31).

Rejoicing in Christ (Acts 13:47–52)

Yet, Christ had never intended the church to remain among the Jews only. He had always intended to expand his gospel among the Gentiles. And indeed, this was not only Christ’s purpose in the New Testament, but the stated purpose of God in the Old Testament, which Paul quotes from Isaiah 49:6 in v. 47. Notably, Paul insists that the Lord had commanded “us” (i.e., Paul and Barnabas) to be that light for the Gentiles in

³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 547.

⁴ Polhill, *Acts*, 307.

⁵ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 281.

⁶ Polhill, *Acts*, 307. Similarly, Lenski: “This was not clerical jealousy between rabbis and Christian ministers which points a warning for professional men but the dislike of established church members who were unwilling to let a large number of outsiders suddenly come to share their religious prerogatives and blessings.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 548.)

⁷ “Verses 46–48 are programmatic for Paul’s mission in Acts, establishing a pattern that would appear again and again. One could view the present statement as definitive: Paul would no longer turn to the Jews; he would now witness only to Gentiles. Such was not the case. In the very next city on his missionary itinerary he would again begin his witness in the synagogue (14:1). Again and again he experienced the rejection of the Jews and turned to the Gentiles of that town. But he never gave up on his fellow Jews. It was very much the problem he wrestled with in Rom 9–11. In spite of the overwhelming rejection of the gospel by his own people, Paul could not bring himself to believe that the rejection was final and that God had deserted him. His great successes in witness were indeed among the Gentiles, but he never abandoned his witness to Jews. The ambiguity of the witness to the Jews persists to the very end of Acts and is never definitively settled (Cf. 28:17–28).” (Polhill, *Acts*, 308.)

⁸ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:551.

preaching Christ to the ends of the earth.⁹ The Jews in Antioch Pisidia are not only rejecting the ingathering of the Gentiles, but also Christ himself. Thus, Paul explains that, because they have rejected the gospel for themselves, this gospel must go all the more to Gentiles: “Since you thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles” (v. 46b). This is not Paul’s rejection or even his exasperation with the Jews, but their own self-imposed judgment: “the Jews themselves act as judges in their own case. They do not want the Word, their judgment, therefore, is that they are not worthy of the eternal life which that Word brings.”¹⁰

Furthermore, it is essential to read this declaration in light of Paul’s ministry through the rest of the book and the writings of Paul. This is not a categorical rejection of the Jews, for Paul was constantly anxious for the salvation of the Jews and laboring for them to come to know Christ: “in each place Paul goes, he again starts by preaching to Jews (14:1; 18:4–6, 19; 19:8–9; 28:28; explained in Rom. 9–11). Paul repeatedly faced violent resistance in many synagogues (2 Cor. 11:24) but continued to preach to Jews. In this he turned the other cheek, as Jesus had commanded in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:39).”¹¹ So, while Paul resolutely traveled to the ends of the earth to bring the saving message of Christ to Gentiles, he never gave up seeking to preach Christ as the long-awaited Messiah to the Jewish people, even to the very last scene of the book of Acts (Acts 28:17–28). Polhill offers an important observation of what we might learn from Paul’s approach: “The contemporary church can learn from Paul’s persistence. His actions caution against a missionary policy that only targets those who are most receptive to the gospel message.”¹²

In contrast to the Jews who are characterized by rejection of the gospel, the Gentiles are characterized by rejoicing in the gospel: “And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord” (v. 48a). The rejoicing was not only that “the gospel was intended also for them, for them directly without the necessity of first becoming Jews and submitting to all the Jewish regulations.”¹³ Yet, Luke clarifies that even here faith was not universal: “as many as were appointed to eternal life believed” (v. 48b). The phrase here speaks of the Lord’s work to open hearts, eyes, and ears to faith in Jesus Christ. Not all Gentiles believed, but all those whom the Holy Spirit appointed to eternal life believed in Christ for salvation.

As we have seen so many times in the book of Acts, this new event becomes a springboard to spreading the gospel even further: “And the word of the Lord was spreading throughout the whole region” (v. 49). As with the persecution in Jerusalem that scattered the gospel throughout Samaria and beyond (Acts 8:1–8), so the opposition from the Jews here becomes a catalyst for expanding the gospel even further. Yet, the same opposition that prompted the forward progress of the gospel only increases and intensifies the more the gospel spreads: “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” (v. 50). The response, then, is instructive: “they shook off the dust from their feet against them and went to Iconium” (v. 51). These missionaries were tasked with spreading the gospel wherever they went, but without staying longer than they could or needed to. The seed had been scattered. Now that the people to whom they had preached the gospel rejected

⁹ “What is surprising is that Paul and Barnabas are now cast in the role of the servant of Israel. The servant was normally an image tied to Jesus in the NT....So Paul and Barnabas are now seen as an extension of the work of the Servant of the Lord, who was Jesus.” (Bock, *Acts*, 464.)

¹⁰ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 550.

¹¹ Bock, *Acts*, 463.

¹² Polhill, *Acts*, 308.

¹³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 552.

them, they simply moved on. There were plenty of fields that were ready for harvest, hungry for hearing the gospel that they did not yet know existed. So, without despair or discouragement, “the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit” (v. 52).

Discussion Questions

1. What had Paul preached about in the sermon from the previous passage (Acts 13:13–41)? Where did that sermon conclude (Acts 13:40–41)? What was the immediate response of the hearers on the day that he preached it (vv. 42–43)? What do Paul and Barnabas mean when they urged the “Jews and devout converts to Judaism...to continue in the grace of God” (v. 43)? What does it mean for us today to continue in the grace of God when we hear God’s Word preached?
2. What is the reason that the Jews of the synagogue in Antioch Pisidia rise up to oppose Paul’s preaching the next Sabbath (vv. 44–45)? Why did the large crowds cause them to be “filled with jealousy”? Why are we often tempted to become territorial and exclusive in our churches? How does this temptation lead us to forget that we too were undeserving sinners in need of a Savior? Why might an exclusive attitude lead to outright rejection of our gracious Savior (v. 46)?
3. How clearly did Christ command his church to preach the gospel to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8)? How clearly was this mission to reach the Gentiles prophesied in the Old Testament (v. 47; see Isa. 49:6)? Why do the Gentiles rejoice at this word from the Lord (v. 48a)? How many of the Gentiles believed this good news (v. 48b)? Why do you think the conversion of these Gentiles led to a further spreading of the gospel in that region (v. 49)?
4. What kind of persecution arose against Paul and Barnabas because of the spread of the gospel among the Gentiles (v. 50)? What did Paul and Barnabas do when the persecution increased (v. 51)? Why did they shake off the dust of their feet (Matt. 10:14; Mark 6:11; Luke 9:5; 10:11)? How were the disciples able to be filled with joy in spite of their persecution (v. 52)? Where have you experienced the joy of the Lord in the midst of opposition to his gospel?