

GOD'S SAVING PURPOSES PREVAIL THROUGH THE LIGHT OF GOD'S WORD

Acts 13:44-52

INTRODUCTION

John Stott, the revered Anglican pastor and theologian, writes in his book, "Between Two Worlds," "Preaching is indispensable to Christianity. Without preaching a necessary part of its authenticity has been lost. For Christianity is ... a religion of the Word of God. No attempt to understand Christianity can succeed which overlooks or denies the truth that the living God has taken the initiative to reveal himself ... to fallen humanity ... by the most straightforward means of communication known to us, namely by ... words; or that he calls upon those who have heard his word to speak it to others." He quotes P.T. Forsythe who wrote in his book on preaching, "... I will venture to say that with its preaching Christianity stands or falls." At the end of his first chapter summarizing the history of preaching Stott concludes, "The Christian consensus down the centuries has been to magnify the importance of preaching..."

The reason preaching has always been central to the Christian faith is because it is central to the teaching of the Bible. The NT begins with the preaching of John the Baptist. When Jesus begins his public ministry, his work is described in this way: "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the good news of the kingdom of God..." The last words of Jesus to his disciples as recorded by Mark were, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation." Paul says that God has manifested his promise of eternal life in Christ "through the preaching entrusted to me by the command of God our Savior." Paul commands his young protégé Timothy, "Preach the Word. Be prepared in season and out of season. Correct, rebuke and encourage with great patience and careful instruction..." It is not saying too much to say that the church of Jesus exists and advances by the word of God publicly preached.

Our text today is an excellent example of the central place that God places upon the preaching of his word. Four times in our text today the phrase, "the word of the Lord (or God)" appears. Each time it is referring to the preaching of the apostle Paul to the people in Antioch of Pisidia. In other words, the word of God in this text is the word of God as it was publicly spoken by Paul and then by others. What we discover in our passage today is the effect that the preaching of the word of God has upon people. What we observe here is what we should expect to happen in our lives as a result of the preaching of God's word each Sunday. These are the things you should ask God to do every Sunday morning before you come to church. I can assure you that these are the things I aim for and ask God to do for us each week.

MAIN POINT

God's word is powerful because it...

I. Awakens interest in the true God (v. 44)

Verse 44 tells us that in one week's time the entire city of Antioch was so stirred by the reports of what Paul had said in the synagogue to the Jews and God-fearing Greeks who heard him that almost the entire city showed up at the synagogue to hear what he had to say. Antioch was not some little rural village with only a handful of people. It was a major Roman city situated at a crossroad of two major Roman roads. The crowd would have numbered in the thousands. The people Paul had addressed the previous Saturday were very familiar with the OT and Yahweh, the God of the Jews. However, this crowd of people was comprised of mainly Gentile people. In other words, the people who gathered to hear Paul were idol-worshipping pagans. Prior to their showing up at the synagogue on this day they would have known little about the God of the Jews. Their lives were governed by appeasing the "gods" and the "fates" through various sacrifices and rituals. So what was it that brought such a large crowd of idol worshipping pagans to the Jewish synagogue for the first time in their life on this Saturday?

Clearly, the people who had heard Paul speak on the previous Saturday must have been deeply moved by what they heard. They must have spent the week talking with their friends and families and neighbors about this message regarding Jesus, the ancestor of Israel's king David who had been crucified according to God's will and in fulfillment of prophecies made thousands of years ago by Israel's prophets and who had been raised from the dead, again in accord with what the Jewish prophets had been saying throughout the centuries of Jewish history. They must have talked about how this Jesus by his death and resurrection had obtained forgiveness of sins and justification before the God of all the earth. As a result of all of this discussion regarding the word of the Lord which Paul had preached in the synagogue almost the entire city showed up to listen to him preach the word of the Lord again.

What I desperately want you to see and to wonder at is that it was simply a recounting of the good news about Jesus as the one God sent into the world, in fulfillment of the OT Scriptures, in order to make a way for sinners to be reconciled to God that was the cause of the whole town gathering at the synagogue. Jesus living and dying to bring us to God was the message they came to hear. These people were not here because they had been told that they would be rich through this message or they would be have healthy children through Jesus or they wouldn't be depressed anymore or they would have a fulfilling life through Jesus. They came because they understood this message about Jesus to be the means through which a sinful human could be accepted by God and come to know God. The only benefit Paul had mentioned in his sermon was that through Jesus sins are forgiven and justification is obtained. Why would anyone care if their sins were forgiven or they were justified in God's eyes? Let me answer that question by asking another: why do I care that my wife forgives me but I don't care if the checkout clerk at Woodmans forgives me? I care that my wife forgives me because I care about being in a relationship with my wife and not with the clerk. Why do I care if my wife is happy with my behavior but I don't care if the stranger driving in the other car is happy with my behavior? I care that my wife is happy with me because I want her to love me and I want to love her. The only reason a person will care if their sins are forgiven or if they are acceptable to God is because they believe that knowing God is the greatest thing in the universe.

Men and women do not naturally believe that knowing God is the best thing that could happen to them. One week prior to this gathering at the synagogue in Antioch only a handful of people in Antioch cared about Yahweh, the Creator of the universe. The only reason this crowd has come together is because this is one of the effects of the preaching of God's word, to arouse and awaken the interest of dead sinners in the great and glorious Triune God. This means that every preacher, every parent, every small group leader must have as the great object of his work to take the written word of God and to so teach it that the greatness and glory of God himself is set forth. "The Scottish preacher James Stewart said the aims of all genuine preaching are 'to quicken the conscience with the holiness of God, to feed the mind with the truth of God, to purge the imagination by the beauty of God, to open the heart to the love of God, to devote the will to the purpose of God.'" John Piper states in his book, "The Supremacy of God in Preaching," "It is not the job of the Christian preacher to give people moral or psychological pep talks about how to along in the world, someone else can do that... the dominant note of preaching (must) be the freedom of God's sovereign grace, the unifying theme (must) be the zeal that God has for his own glory, the grand object of preaching (must) be the infinite and inexhaustible being of God and the pervasive atmosphere of preaching (must) be the holiness of God."

Are these the things you are looking for and praying for when you come to church on Sunday mornings or when you go to your small group Bible study or when you engage in family worship? Are these the things you talk about in your home or with your friends and neighbors? Is this why you invite your neighbors and co-workers to join you at church, so they can see and admire the glory of God as he is revealed in and by his word? As John Piper says, "God is the gospel" and this gospel preached and taught is his instrument to awaken us to his glory and to the fact that we can only be happy when we are taken up with him.

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- *Awakens interest in the true God*

- *And because it...*

II. Exposes the rebellious (vv. 45-47, 50-51)

While there is much interest in this gospel and the God who is revealed in it and through it, there is also immediate and ferocious opposition to this gospel. The opposition arises from the Jewish community. When they observe the thousands of Gentiles crowding into and around their synagogue in order to hear Paul preach, we are told that they were filled with jealousy. Of what were they jealous? The word that is translated jealousy can also be translated “zeal.” I think this would be a better translation. What we are witnessing here is what Paul says about the Jewish people in Romans 10:2, “For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God but their zeal is not based on knowledge. Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God but sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness.” They are not jealous that the Gentiles like Paul better than they like them but rather they are zealous for the law of God and are furious that Paul is telling Gentiles that they can become a part of God’s people and recipients of all the promises God made to them not by submitting to the Law of Moses but simply by placing their faith in the crucified and resurrected Jesus. They do not agree with Paul’s assessment that they are not able to be made right with God by keeping the law (v. 39). They believe that the only way anyone can be made right with God is by becoming Jewish, which means being circumcised and obeying all the cleanliness laws, etc. So their opposition is for the same reason that Paul himself persecuted the church: they believe Paul to be a heretic, a false teacher, a destroyer of God’s ways.

Their response is a verbal attack on Paul’s message. They speak against and blaspheme what Paul says. They are doing what Paul warned them the previous week to make sure they did not do: they are mocking God by opposing Paul and blaspheming Jesus. The word that is used here to describe their opposition is used in the Greek translation of the OT in Isaiah 65:2 where the Lord says, “All day long I have held out my hands to a people who are disobedient and in opposition to or speaking against me.” Paul quotes this passage at the end of Romans 10 to show how God described in the OT the situation that Paul discovered as he preached the gospel. While many Gentiles embraced the gospel, the Jewish people for the most part disobeyed and resisted and spoke against that same gospel, even though it was their Scriptures that foretold the coming of Christ and prepared the way for him to come into the world. Look at v. 46. Paul says that it was necessary that they preach the gospel to the Jews first. Why was it necessary? This is the pattern that God determined to follow beginning with Abram back in Genesis 12. He announced the gospel first to Abram and then to his descendants. All day long, through thousands of years, God held out his hands through the gospel contained in the Law and the Prophets to the people of Israel. He sent Christ to the Jews first. He sent the HS to the church in Jerusalem first so the Jewish people there would hear it first.

What was the result of God’s preaching the gospel to Israel through all those centuries and now in Pisidian Antioch? Throughout all of Israel’s history the people rejected the word of God, thus showing that they did not consider themselves worthy of eternal life. The reaction of the Jews to Jesus and now to those who proclaim the gospel of Jesus is not surprising because this has been how most of them always responded to God’s word. So these outwardly religious people, these people who proudly declare their loyalty to God and his word, when they hear the gospel are exposed for the frauds they actually are. They prove that while professing to believe the word of God they are actually in opposition to it. They are hypocrites.

This is what the gospel always does in the lives of religious and moral people. The gospel announces that all human beings are sinful and unwilling and unable to obey God’s law. The gospel announces God’s judgment upon all sinners without exception. The gospel makes clear that no one has ever obeyed the law of God and thus there are none who will be declared right with God because of their performance. The gospel declares that God only accepts people based upon their faith in Christ. People’s true spiritual condition is always revealed by the gospel. People who are outwardly religious and moral are exposed as the hypocrites they truly are when they reject the gospel because they are unwilling, like these Jews, to acknowledge that they are unworthy of God’s love and deserve to go to hell. The gospel is not friendly to human pride. The gospel is a man humbling

message. The gospel condemns every other religious claim as false. Thus the gospel always reveals the true state of human souls. No matter what people say, if they do not embrace Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord they hate God and are living rebellious, wicked lives. No matter what religious people say, if they do not trust and love Jesus they really do not want to live forever with God.

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III. Saves the elect (vv. 47-48)

Paul declares at the end of v. 46 that he and Barnabas are now going to preach to the Gentiles in town. They are turning their back on the Jewish people because they do not consider themselves worthy of eternal life. Then they tell the Jewish people that their OT Scriptures command that they do this. They quote a verse from Isaiah 49. Isaiah 49 is addressed to an individual who is called "the LORD's servant." This servant's task is to restore Israel to God. However, in v. 6 God says to his servant, "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth." This OT metaphor is used repeatedly of Jesus in the NT. Jesus is the light of the world. He is the light of revelation for the nations. Yet Paul and Barnabas claim that the command given to the LORD's servant, Jesus, is given to them and is the ground for their preaching the gospel to Gentiles. Do you see that at the beginning of v. 47? They say, "God commanded us..." How can they do this? Here again we see the identification of Jesus with his church. What we do, he does and what he does, we do. Paul and Barnabas are simply recognizing that the fact they are Christians and they are preaching the gospel is because Jesus himself has called, equipped and empowered them so that Jesus himself is preaching through them to fulfill the commission God gave him in Isaiah 49:6 to bring God's salvation to the ends of the earth. As you live as a Christian in all the details of your life and as you talk about Christ with your children and your spouse and your relatives and your neighbors and co-workers, it is Jesus who is shining his light through you to bring his salvation to the ends of the earth.

When this large crowd of Gentiles heard that God had intended their salvation for thousands of years, that they were not simply an afterthought, and that he had sent his only Son into the world to accomplish their salvation, they rejoiced and glorified this word from God. They began to cheer and to cry out with joy and to slap high fives and hug each other. They excitedly told one another what a great and glorious thing this was that this God whom they had so deeply offended by their many sins was willing to forgive them and count them righteous simply because they trusted in Jesus. Then Luke adds that last clause in v. 48: "...and all who were appointed for eternal life believed." The word translated "were appointed" is often used of the commands given by military officers and kings and others in authority. God gave an order that certain of these Gentiles gain eternal life. He appointed some of them to obtain eternal life and those whom he appointed, believed. God's command that they be given eternal life precedes their faith. Was God unjust to not appoint these Jewish people to eternal life so that they believed? Was it unjust that God did not appoint any of those God-fearing women and leading men of the city to eternal life? Absolutely not. All those whom God rejected deserved to be rejected because they were sinners who refused to believe in Christ. They want to sin. They do not want to believe in Christ. It is perfectly fair and just for God to condemn sinners who refuse to believe in Christ to hell. It is unjust, that is, it is an act of grace for God to appoint any sinner to eternal life.

Remember, one week prior to this event none of these now believing Gentiles had any idea that they were elect. They were going about their pagan lives, worshipping idols, working and eating and sleeping and relating to their friends and families without any interest in the God who made the world and everything in it. However, they heard the gospel and when they heard that gospel they believed the promise made in the gospel. Thus they discovered, by believing the gospel that they were among those whom God had determined to save before he

made the universe. The only reason I show up every Sunday to stand before you and preach this word is because I know that God has appointed people to eternal life. The only reason any missionary can have confidence that their labors are not going to be in vain is because God has appointed sinners to eternal life. The only reason you parents can have any hope that your preaching the gospel to your children will have any effect is because God appoints people to eternal life. As the church proclaims the gospel in all the various ways we do it, God is using that gospel to save all those whom he has appointed to eternal life. Listen to me: the way you know you are among the elect is by believing. Therefore, I command you and urge you to believe. Do not refuse this offer but turn from your sins and give yourself wholly to Christ. Yield to him, trust in him, love him, rejoice in him for he has promised that he will receive everyone who comes to him. When you believe then rejoice that God, before he made the world, contrary to what you deserve, appointed you to eternal life.

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IV. Creates Spirit empowered, courageous, joyful, fruitful communities (vv. 49-52)

These unbelieving religious people do not simply content themselves with verbal attacks upon Paul but they enlist the help of the Greek women who attend synagogue each week to influence their husbands, the political leaders of the city to kick Paul and Barnabas out of the city. They stir up persecution against Paul and Barnabas among the unbelieving Gentile population. So Paul and Barnabas are forced out of Antioch but on their way out of town they shake the dust of the town from their feet as a sign of God's judgment upon these obstinate and hostile to God people. Jesus commanded his disciples to do this when they were rejected and thus it is a mark of God's opposition to those who refuse to believe the gospel of Jesus as it is preached. But notice that in the midst of this hostility and conflict with the rulers of this town the word of the Lord spreads throughout the entire region (v. 49) and those who have believed and therefore are the disciples of Jesus in the town of Antioch are full of joy and of the Holy Spirit (v.52).

The preaching of the word of God has created a church, a community of joyful, Spirit-empowered, courageous Christians through whom the gospel continues to spread and do its work. More people who God appointed to eternal life believe throughout the region as that word is spread because this is the effect of that word. More churches are established as the word creates more believing communities. Do not miss this simple fact: this community of joyful, fruitful Christians came into existence and is sustained in its existence by the preaching of the word of the Lord.

Every church has to make a host of decisions about how it will function. What kind of music will we play? What time will be our worship services? What kind of social activities will we do, if any? What sorts of programs will we have? But I can tell you this with absolute confidence, while all those decisions are important to varying degrees, the only necessary thing is the proclamation of God's word. That doesn't just mean what I do on Sundays. Rather, the center of all that we do must be the teaching and preaching of this divine word because it is this word alone that awakens interest in God, exposes the rebellious, saves the elect and creates HS empowered communities. Parents, what your children need from you most of all, is for you to preach this word to them. If you want to be a true friend to both your Christian and non-Christian friends, then learn to talk about the glory of Christ in this word. Come to church, go to a Bible Study, seek out relationships with other Christians, attend Family Worship that you might learn and glory in and believe this word. Without this word you will perish and it is only by this word that you can live. Therefore you must pray for its success in your life and in the lives of your children and in our community and among your friends and relatives and you must pay attention to it.

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