

Paul and Barnabas in Psidian Antioch

As you have been exploring Acts together I'm sure you've been challenged and encouraged in seeing God at work growing his church and in the persistence of the early Christians in bearing witness to what Jesus did for us, even in the face of persecution. My hope is that through today's message you'll be encouraged again to see God at work and to see that He calls us to bear witness to the hope He's given us.

Now, last week you would have heard of the beginning of what is known as Paul's first missionary journey, and we're still fairly early on in that journey in this passage. Paul and Barnabas have set out and are seeking to take the gospel to the Gentiles, as God has called them. They've already been through a number of towns and we hear a little in the first 13 verses of their journey so far but here we have a fairly extensive account of some of the teaching in Psidian Antioch.

Last week Michael talked about Acts being the story of the kingdom “mustard seed” growing at a phenomenal rate at God's hand and that story is going to continue. He also said that God even used persecution in Jerusalem to spread his followers and with them the gospel to new towns and regions. And again we see in our reading today God in control. And though there is persecution it stands to show not the weakness of the apostles message but is recorded as evidence of both the Jews rejection of the gospel and of God's ability to bring people to faith and hope and joy, even while persecution is happening. The story of Acts is the story of God at work in human history, it is the story of God using his obedient servants to build and grow his church.

The first thing I'd like to draw out of this chapter is God at work and Christians in obedience.

In this chapter we see Paul and Barnabas set aside to be sent out because God called them (v2) and we see the leaders in Antioch obediently commissioning and sending them. In the passage we read (from v13) we see both God's call and His work through the Holy Spirit. We also see clearly the results of Christians walking in obedience, namely that they have a part in what God is doing. God is at work in calling Paul and Barnabas, he's at work in equipping and gifting them for their calling, he's at work in making the gospel clear in the hearts of the listeners, even in the message Paul preaches he highlights how God called Israel for a purpose, gave them leaders, judges, kings, prophets, that Jesus life and death was a fulfillment of both the law and the prophets. Paul preaches a message about God at work in human history bringing about his great plan for the forgiveness of sins. There's also human obedience happening here: when God calls them to do so, the church in Antioch **do** set aside Barnabas and Paul, those two men obey and go out and preach the gospel, that proclamation is met with faith and the result is that many experience the forgiveness of sin. The text says in verse 48 “as many as were appointed for eternal life believed.” Here we see again God's will and action, and human obedience. Somehow, in that moment where we will to believe, god meets us and our will

meshes with His and He enables and grows faith in us.

The second thing I'd like to draw out here is that God has always been the God of grace.

The message Paul preaches here is that the Exodus from Egypt, the conquest of the land of Canaan, the giving of judges, kings, prophets, all lead to Jesus. Jesus was the climax of the history of God interacting with humanity up until that point. It was all leading to him. And the law and the prophets all pointed to Him and were fulfilled in Him. The Old Testament characters who are accounted righteous before God are given that title because they put their faith in Him. It's the ones like David who realise their sinfulness and throw themselves on the mercy of God who receive his blessing. Those who recognised they needed redeeming for their sins in the OT find that their hope is made complete in Jesus. As the Psalmist wrote in Psalm 130

Psalm 130

A song of ascents.

1 Out of the depths I cry to you, LORD;

2 Lord, hear my voice.

Let your ears be attentive
to my cry for mercy.

3 If you, LORD, kept a record of sins,
Lord, who could stand?

4 But with you there is forgiveness,
so that we can, with reverence, serve you.

5 I wait for the LORD, my whole being waits,
and in his word I put my hope.

6 I wait for the Lord
more than watchmen wait for the morning,
more than watchmen wait for the morning.

7 Israel, put your hope in the LORD,
for with the LORD is unfailing love
and with him is full redemption.

8 He himself will redeem Israel
from all their sins.

The message of the Bible, Old and New Testament has always been that we are a sinful people in need of God's mercy and that He freely gives it and forgives sin. Jesus' sacrifice on the cross is the act of love and mercy that makes God's forgiveness complete.

But often people are veiled from this truth. In the OT many of the people of Israel were. The Pharisees were. The leaders of the Jews who arranged Jesus' crucifixion

thought they were dealing with a dangerous rebel and heretic, not recognising that his death was atoning for their sin, if they would but put their faith in him. Paul, when he was Saul on the road to Damascus was blind to the truth until he met the living Jesus. And there's almost a physical manifestation of his spiritual state. He is struck blind but Jesus heals him, just as he was blind to the truth of the gospel until he met Jesus. And we see it today too. People don't think they need Jesus. They think they know the Christian message but they haven't really grappled with the gospel. I know I've seen it personally all the time at JAFFA. It doesn't matter how clearly the message is, how simply it's stated there will always be some who simply don't hear it. Just weeks ago one of our leaders gave a great talk on whether we live our way or God's way. I don't know how many times she said, "the only way to God is through Jesus, the only way to live God's way is by believing in Jesus, we can't do it ourselves, you've got to believe in Jesus." Then we had small groups where they heard the same message again. Then we quizzed the kids before we played more games and asked, "how do we have relationship with God?" And can you guess the answer we got?

That's right, "um, be good?"

This is what it says in 2 Corinthians 3:12-18

12 Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold. 13 We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to prevent the Israelites from seeing the end of what was passing away. 14 But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. 15 Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. 16 But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. 17 Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. 18 And we all, who with unveiled faces reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

How wonderful to have unveiled faces, to be not only able to see the truth of the gospel but to begin to reflect the image of God as we were made to. We need to pray that God would help us to reveal the truth of His gospel and that when we do people would have the unveiled hearts and be able to receive it.

So we've seen that God is at work and that Christians should walk in obedience.

We've seen that God has always been and remains the God of grace.

The third thing I'd like to draw out is that we need to submit every plan to the Lordship of Christ.

Paul's usual pattern when he visited a new town was to go first to the synagogue and preach to the Jews. Paul clearly has a heart for the Jews, if you want to read a bit more about his heart for his own people to come to faith you can read about it in Romans 9-11. And it seems like it's God's imperative to him as he says in 46
"46 Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: "**We had to** speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal

life, we now turn to the Gentiles.

But it's not as though this is just coming to him on the fly, to suddenly offer salvation to the gentiles. He goes on saying,

47 For this is what the Lord has commanded us:

“I have made you^[f] a light for the Gentiles,
that you^[g] may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.’^[h]”

48 When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.

So, Paul is being obedient to God here both in going first to the Jews and also in making sure the Gentiles hear the gospel. The end result for Barnabas and Paul is that they are driven out of town. But the last word of the chapter is about God filling the disciples (the believers) with joy and with the Holy Spirit. There is a sense as you travel through Acts that God is at work, that's very strong. But sometimes the story goes like this, “we went to this town and the Lord let us work there for 18 months (as happened in Corinth ch18) and establish a church, isn't God amazing!” And other times the story goes like this, “we went to this town and we got to preach there two Saturdays in a row before they kicked us out. Lot's of people believed, isn't God amazing!” Whatever the situation, God is at work and His plan prevails. That is why as Christians we need to be careful not to hold on to our own plans too tightly. Now, it would have made sense for Paul and Barnabas, having received the call to witness to gentiles, to have a good route and schedule planned out. Now, they certainly seem to have plans, but they could have said, “we need to target these 6 cities, spending at least 6 months and a maximum of two years in each in order to maximise the efficiency of our gospel propogation and allowing time to establish viable churches.” Istead their attitude is more like what James describes in James 4:13-15:

13 Now listen, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.” 14 Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. 15 Instead, you ought to say, “If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.”

We too are to live with this attitude as Jesus' church. We are not our own. We have willfully made Jesus the Lord and Master of our lives. We must be resolved to submitting to His will especially submitting the things we've planned to do with and for Him. This is not to say that obedience of God's instructions will guarantee what we would deem success, but we have a chance then to be a part of what God is doing. The prevailing thought of any plan should be that we submit ourselves to the Lordship of Christ.

Just a final word, now.

God is the God of grace. He is “compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth (Ex 34:6).” We've talked a bit about

obedience today, about submitting yourselves to the will of God, but we've also talked about God being the God of grace and those things actually fit together. My intention has not been to make you feel guilty but rather to help you see that as servants of Christ, as people in relationship with him we should of course be seeking to be obedient. The good news is that Jesus is well able to deal with our failings. He's able to forgive again and again. So, if you're feeling any sort of guilt or condemnation today the answer is quite simple: bring it to Jesus, confess that you've failed him, ask him to forgive you and know that He already has.

Let me pray for you.