

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (6-7-1997 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

The missionary message

Acts 13:14-48

Introduction

In this chapter we have the first recorded sermon of Paul, and indeed it is the only full-length sermon by him which was recorded. It is very similar to Peter's sermon at Pentecost (Acts 2:14-39), and is a model to every Christian church and preacher and witness ever since.

In every church, the essential things we stand for should be constantly repeated from the pulpit, and should be the background to all that is preached. In witnessing, these essential things are what we are really concerned for people to respond to.

Firstly some background to Paul's sermon. It was preached in the Jewish synagogue in Pisidian Antioch, a town on the plateau 3600 feet above sea level. To get there involved a journey through the Taurus Mountains, one of the hardest and most dangerous roads, full of brigands and robbers. We learn from Galatians that when Paul got there he was suffering from a severe illness that disfigured him and affected his eyesight (Galatians 4:13-5). Sir William Ramsay thinks this was probably chronic malaria fever. It never occurred to Paul to turn back from his journey. Though his body was aching, and his heart saddened by John Mark's desertion, he still went on, and arrived, a sick man, at Pisidian Antioch. This was a Roman colony, and a few arches of the first century aqueduct are still standing. It was the governing and military centre of the southern half of the vast province of Galatia.

Paul went first to the Jewish synagogue, where a large number of people from many backgrounds gathered. The service would have begun with Shema – "The Lord your God is one Lord and you shall love the Lord your God". Then some prayers, followed by a reading from the Law (the Pentateuch) and another from the prophets. Then the synagogue ruler (same job as Jairus) invited visitors to preach. Perhaps Paul was dressed in his Jewish Rabbi clothing. He was invited to give a word of exhortation or a message of encouragement. Paul stood up, motioned with his hands, and began his message.

He acknowledged that there were Jews and Gentiles present. Originally only Jews would have gone to the synagogue, but gradually more and more Gentiles were there, and Paul's message was for everyone. Though there were superficial differences between Jews then and Jews today, there are similarities – Jews are religious and moral, stress God's law, and hope to be saved by it. The essence of Paul's message was that God has raised unto Israel – to religious, moral and respectable men and women – a Saviour, Jesus. The implication is that we cannot save ourselves. Salvation is a divine work from start to finish. He is able to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

A Saviour promised

Paul's message was based on the Word of God (which for Paul would have been our Old Testament). This is the only true basis for Christian Gospel and Christian preaching. Paul traced the history of Israel: deliverance from Egypt, the wilderness wanderings, allotment of the land of Canaan, the judges, Samuel, Saul the first king, then David **a man after my own heart... who served God's purpose in his own generation** (Acts 13:22,36). Then Paul went straight from David to his greater son, the Lord Jesus Christ. **From this man's descendants God has brought to Israel the Saviour Jesus, as he promised** (Acts 13:23). A recurring theme in the sermon is how Jesus was the fulfilment of ancient prophecies (Acts 13:27,29,33,35).

Jesus' coming was the consummation of history. It was no accident, no freak event, but part of a well-ordered whole. It took place in the purposes of God. He planned it, set the stage for it over the centuries, and brought it to pass. History is in God's hands. We are not going round in circles. God's purposes are being worked out. The coming of Jesus was in God's plan, and in His baptism, death and resurrection, He was doing whatever God's hand and counsel fore-ordained should come to pass. The Gospel is not an innovation or afterthought, but God's eternal plan to achieve man's salvation.

A Saviour provided

Then we come to the heart and the core of the sermon. Paul concentrates on three great truths – Christ, His death and His resurrection. He was put to death under Pontius Pilate though He was innocent. The reference to Him being hung on a tree carries with it the implication of Him being under God's curse (Deuteronomy 21:23). God's law had been broken, therefore God's curse is on us. The wonder of the Cross is that our curse was transferred to Christ. He died as our substitute. **Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree."** (Galatians 3:13). **We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all** (Isaiah 53:6).

Then Christ was raised from the dead. God acknowledged His Son, He ratified His atoning work. He expressed delight and approval and acceptance of what Christ had done. Jesus is now our living Saviour. He died to save, and lives to apply salvation to individual needs and hearts. God was in all this. This was God's answer to the Jews and everyone else who thought they could save themselves. Christ shows us we cannot save ourselves, because we can do nothing for ourselves.

God planned to save us. His Word foretold Christ, and He came, and died for us, and God accepted it by raising Him. God could not show us more clearly the irrelevance and futility of our own efforts.

"Thou must save and Thou alone"

Everything centres in Christ. God reveals Himself and blesses us in Christ. We in our turn get to God and pray to God through Christ. In our message, it is not enough that Christ is mentioned. He has to be central, at the heart. There is no Christian Gospel apart from Him. We do not exist to praise a spirit, to take part in mystical experiences, to listen to ethical exhortation, to seek human virtues, to help people feel good, or give spiritual uplift. We exist to glorify God and to uplift Christ, and Him crucified and risen.

William Booth wrote at the beginning of the 20th century, “The greatest danger of the coming century is religion without the Holy Spirit, Christianity without Christ, forgiveness without regeneration, morality without Gospel, heaven without hell”. His forebodings turned out to be all too true.

A Saviour presented

Then Paul applied his message very personally. Christ was provided, and therefore a personal gift and a wonderful gift and necessary gift is on offer. **Through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you** (Acts 13:38). This does not mean much to someone who is indifferent, but to someone who knows they are wrong with God, this is such a relief to know.

Then Paul goes a step further and speaks of justification – not just forgiveness, but our new standing and status. God pronounces us righteous and treats us as such. We are not just pardoned criminals, but righteous citizens. The prodigal son’s rags are replaced with the best robe. No one could be justified by the Law of Moses, for that law was relentless in its demands. To be guilty of failure in one point was to be guilty of failure in all. **For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it** (James 2:10).

What hope have we got? How can we get right with God? This is the greatest question of all religion. The Gospel of God provided a Saviour. He is the answer, and the only answer. Sin was transferred to Him and His righteousness is transferred to us. What a perfect provision. It exactly meets our need. The ultimate answer for human failure. **Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus** (Romans 8:1).

There is release and dynamic in this message which the Jewish religion, or any other religion, can never provide. It is only found in one place. The response is the same whether in the first or the twentieth century. We must accept or reject this message. Get out of the condemned cell and rejoice in glorious liberty. Or continue in condemnation and await inevitable end.

Paul solemnly warned of the consequences. Some heeded the warning, and followed Barnabas and Paul to get more instruction. They urged them to continue in the grace of God (Acts 13:43). But others rejected the message. They were filled with envy, and abused the word they had heard (Acts 13:45). So after that Paul and Barnabas went to the Gentiles, who gladly welcome the Word. **When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honoured the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed** (Acts 13:48).

Eventually the Jews used high-standing women and city dignitaries to stir up persecution. The Gospel always causes division. **Thus the people were divided because of Jesus** (John 7:43). The missionaries were expelled, but the Word of God spread and the missionaries were filled with joy in the Spirit.

Conclusion

Whether we are preachers or witnesses, we need to be sure of what we believe. As believers we should strive to continue in God's grace. To the non-believer – beware not to throw away opportunities, for you do not know when your last opportunity will come to accept Christ. **Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him** (John 3:36).