

# Acts 13:13-43: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Acts chapter 13 verses 13 to 43. Now Paul and his companions set sail from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia, and John left them and returned to Jerusalem. But they went on from Perga and came to Antioch in Pisidia. And on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down. After the reading from the law and the prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent a message to them, saying, Brothers, if you have any word of encouragement for the people, say it.

So Paul stood up and motioning with his hands said, Men of Israel and you who fear God, listen. The God of this people Israel chose our fathers and made the people great during their stay in the land of Egypt. And with uplifted arm he led them out of it. And for about forty years he put up with them in the wilderness. And after destroying seven nations in the land of Canaan, he gave them their land as an inheritance. All this took about four hundred and fifty years. And after that he gave them judges and told Samuel the prophet. Then they asked for a king. And God gave them Saul the son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, for forty years. And when he had removed him, he raised up David to be their king, of whom he testified and said, I have found in David the son of Jesse, a man after my heart, who will do all my will. Of this man's offspring God has brought to Israel a saviour Jesus, as he promised. Before his coming John had proclaimed a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. And as John was finishing his course, he said, What do you suppose that I am?

I am not he. No, but behold, after me one is coming, the sandals whose feet I am not worthy to untie. Brothers, sons of the family of Abraham, and those among you who fear God, to us has been sent the message of this salvation. For those who live in Jerusalem and their rulers, because they did not recognize him, nor understand the utterances of the prophets, which are read every Sabbath, fulfilled them by condemning him. And though they found in him no guilt worthy of death, they asked Pilate to have him executed. And when they carried out all that was written of him, they took him down from the tree, and laid him in a tomb. But God raised him from the dead, and for many days he appeared to those who had come up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are now his witnesses to the people. And we bring you 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. And as for the fact that he raised him from the dead, no more to return to corruption. He has spoken in this way,

I will give you the holy and sure blessings of David. Therefore he says also in another psalm, You will not let your holy ones see corruption. For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep, and was laid with his fathers and saw corruption. But he whom God raised up did not see corruption. 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 from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses. Beware therefore, lest what is said in the prophets should come about. Look, you scoffers, be astounded and perish, for I am doing a work in your days, a work that you will not believe, even if one tells it to you. As they went out, the people begged that these things might be told them the next Sabbath. And after the meeting of the synagogue broke up, many Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who, as they spoke with them, urged them to continue in the grace of God. The heart of Acts chapter 13 contains one of the great sermons of the book of Acts, comparable to Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost, or Stephen's speech in chapter 7. This is Paul's inaugural sermon in the book of Acts, and it might play a special role in characterising his message more generally. Craig Keener notes a number of elements of distinctively

Pauline style and some prominent themes of Pauline theology within it. Paul, Barnabas and their companions had begun their mission on the island of Cyprus, from which they now sailed for the mainland of Asia Minor, modern-day Turkey. From Perga they go about 100 miles north as the crow flies, up to the highlands. Pisidian Antioch is a different Antioch from the one from which they set out. There were 16 different Antiochs in the ancient world. According to Josephus, there was a large Jewish population in the city, and about 2,000 Jewish families in the region. Paul and his companions go into a synagogue, and there's a reading from the law and the prophets, which would have been part of a regular synagogue service. It's important to consider that such public readings of the scriptures were commonplace and routine. They would have sometimes been accompanied by some exposition, although this was likely less regular. Keener suggests that the messages were likely more focused on moral exhortation and comfort. Those attending such synagogues would be expected to have a substantial familiarity with the scriptural text, though. Paul and his companions are invited to speak by the rulers of the synagogue after the regular parts of the proceedings have occurred. This might be because it's become known that Paul is someone who has studied the law more formally, and because Barnabas is a

[ 5 : 21 ] Levite. Paul gets up to speak and he addresses the Jews present, along with the God-fearing Gentiles. It has been suggested that Paul would have been weaving together some of the liturgical readings in his message, connecting their message together and moving them into a greater message about Jesus.

He retells in summary the entire history of the nation, from the Exodus to the raising up of David, recounting the wilderness wanderings and the conquest of the land, a period taking roughly 450 years.

He skates over the period of the judges prior to Samuel, before discussing King Saul, Israel's first but unsatisfactory king of the tribe of Benjamin. Saul of Tarsus' name has only just been switched to Paul in Luke's narrative, and the reference to Saul here might make us wonder whether there is a connection between the two. I believe that there is. If we look through the Old Testament, we see that King Saul is in many ways a paradigmatic persecutor. He is the one who fights against the true king.

He is the king of Israel, but he opposes David, the rightful successor. He tries to kill him with his spear. He tries to put him in harm's way, fighting the Philistines. He is implacable in his pursuit of and his opposition to David. And yet God arrests him in his steps at various points, and there are some very strange twists in that story. As we look through the story of Saul of Tarsus, we will notice a similar pattern. Saul begins as a zealous persecutor of the church, breathing out murderous threats, seeking to take the disciples into prison and bring them before the high priest and eventually put them to death. There is a similarity between these two characters. And within the book of Acts, this is presented not just as a matter of persecuting the individual disciples, but as persecuting Christ himself. Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? Not just my disciples, but why do you persecute me?

The greater David is asking Saul of Tarsus why he is pursuing him, why he is persecuting him, what he has done to deserve his opposition. In 1 Samuel chapter 20, we find David asking Jonathan a similar question about Saul. What have I done? What is my guilt? And what is my sin before your father that he seeks my life? Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? In 1 Samuel chapter 19, there is also an interesting incident that might remind us of Saul's conversion or his illumination on the road to Damascus. King Saul goes to pursue David to Nioth in Ramah, and the Spirit of God comes upon him and he prophesies until he comes there. And he too stripped off his clothes, and he too prophesied before Samuel, and lay naked all that day and all that night. Thus it is said, is Saul also among the prophets?

[ 8 : 01 ] It is a remarkable event, and it might recall some of the things that are described in connection with Saul's conversion event on the road to Damascus. There is an interruption of his course of persecution and pursuit, and there is a period of waiting, all day and all night, in the story of King Saul, and a number of days for Saul of Tarsus before Ananias comes and baptises him in the story of Acts.

These parallels, a potential conversion event in what happens to King Saul when the Spirit comes upon him and he prophesies, and the question that David asked Jonathan, why is your father persecuting me?

Recall the events on the road to Damascus. But whereas King Saul arrests his pursuit of David, only for a time, and it doesn't really amount to anything in the end, the arresting of Saul of Tarsus leads to a complete change. From that point on, his character is completely transformed, he becomes the key apostle, even though he was the least of the apostles on account of his persecution of the church. King Saul said that he was from the least tribe, from the least family of that tribe in Israel, and yet God raised him up to be king. And there is something quite similar in the story of Saul of Tarsus. He was the least qualified, the least worthy to be an apostle, but God raised him up in many ways to be the greatest of the apostles, or a leader among the apostles.

Another thing to notice about these parallels is that David, as he is pursued by Saul, is let down through a window by Michael and escapes. A similar thing happens to Saul after his conversion. He is let down through a gap in the wall of Damascus in a basket and escapes while they are guarding the gates. That pursuit of Saul of Tarsus might remind us of the pursuit of David and his escape from King Saul. But there is a switch of the characters. The king who pursued the lion of the tribe of Judah is now changed to the one who is converted and is a true servant of the king and takes on the character of that king. He too is trying to escape as King David did now, no longer the persecutor, but the one who is being pursued. Saul is the king who is removed in order that David, from whom comes the Messiah, will come on the scene. So that framework of Saul being replaced by David is at play within the book of Acts. This might help us to understand why in the immediately preceding passage to this, there is a switch from Saul to Paul. That switch of names draws our mind back to that replacement, that changing of the character of Saul. In his speech, Stephen had focused upon the characters of Joseph and Moses, and now Paul focuses upon David, because David is the ancestor of Jesus, who is his true son and the one in whom the messianic hope of Israel is fulfilled. Having introduced

Jesus as the true son of David, he proceeds to tell the gospel story, beginning with the ministry of John the Baptist and ending with the resurrection and the appointment of witnesses to it. It's worth remembering that Paul is addressing diaspora Jews here, who were distinct from the Jews of Palestine, whether in Jerusalem in particular or Judea more generally. They had quite possibly gotten wind of some of the events that had happened in Jerusalem concerning Jesus, and of the rapid rise of a new sect there, but they might not have known much beyond that. However, they might be more familiar with the ministry of John the Baptist, which might be why Paul gives rather more attention to John's witness.

[ 11 : 13 ] Jesus was condemned by those who lived in Jerusalem and their rulers, because of their failure to recognize him or to understand the scriptures. They ironically fulfilled the scriptures by condemning Christ. Speaking to diaspora Jews, the gospel's unflattering portrayal of the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem might have had a different resonance. It's important that we bear in mind how diverse the Jewish population was, how widely spread out they were, how many internal sects and factions they had, and the differences between, for instance, a Jew of the ruling classes in Jerusalem, a poorer member of the crowd in Jerusalem, a Jew living in a Galilean village, a Samaritan, or an educated diaspora Jew with Jerusalem connections like Paul, or even a diaspora Jew without such connections, or extensive travel, living in a place like North Africa, for instance. Perhaps this might be one of the reasons why Paul mentions that Jesus' followers came with him from Galilee to Jerusalem.

They weren't Jerusalem insiders. In Jesus, God fulfilled the promises made to the fathers by raising Jesus up as the Davidic king. There is a fulfillment of the second psalm here, you are my son, today I have begotten you. His raising from the dead fulfills the promises concerning the Davidic king, promises referenced in Isaiah chapter 55 verse 3 as being for the benefit of the whole people. The Davidic covenant concerns the elevation of the whole nation, in which all of the people are glorified. As in Peter's Pentecost sermon in Acts chapter 2, Paul references Psalm 16 verse 10, making much the same argument from it as Peter did.

The psalm promises the raising up of David, but it can't ultimately refer to David himself, who died and was buried. Rather, it must refer to David the dynasty. The Davidic dynasty is raised up in Jesus of Nazareth. Not just Jesus, but the Davidic dynasty seemed utterly dead. It's been removed, leaving only the stump of Jesse. But like a root out of dry ground, this one will rise up, the one who will fulfill the promises given to David, even when it seemed that David and his house were no more. Through God's action in the resurrection, David does not see corruption, but reigns eternally in his greater son, Jesus of Nazareth. Through Jesus, forgiveness of sins is proclaimed. John's baptism was a baptism of repentance in preparation for the forgiveness of sins that Jesus brings. Through Jesus, justification is offered, total forgiveness, total clearing of the slate, which the law of Moses could never offer or achieve. The term that Paul uses here is the term that he typically uses for justification. Translated as freed here, it helps us to capture some sense of the term justified that is often neglected. We also encounter such a use of the verb in Romans chapter 6 verse 7, for one who has died has been set free or justified from sin.

In Christ, people can be placed in good standing with God through him, which they could never be by the law. They are released from the debt by forgiveness. There is, however, a warning from Habakkuk chapter 1 verse 5 attached. When God acts so powerfully and decisively in salvation, it is a most serious thing to reject, to neglect or to scorn his deliverance. Responding faithfully is imperative, a matter of the utmost urgency and importance. Those who scoff at God's salvation will perish utterly. The response of the people is very positive. After the meeting is over, many of the Jews and the proselytes and the God fearers follow after Paul and Barnabas. They want to find out more, and Paul and Barnabas urged them to continue in the grace of God. A question to consider. In this Paul's first sermon in the book of Acts, what are some of the connections that we could draw between his message here, and various themes that he brings out in his epistles?