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Sermons that Shook Society

Shaking History

Acts 13 v 13-52

Introduction

Church is boring. Or it can be. The singing is ok, but then you have to listen to a guy talking to you for 25-30 minutes. And it's about stuff that happened thousands of years ago in a far away country. Is any of it relevant to me? To now? To here?

I think for Jews their weekly trip to the synagogue for Sabbath service probably felt the same. There was a familiarity to it, as it followed the same pattern week after week. There would be an introductory bit, then someone would read from the law: something about how God helped the Jews in the past. Then someone would read a bit from the prophets, with some vague predictions that seemed far in the future.

Sometimes there would be a visitor in the town and they would be asked to give a short word. At least then you got a different voice. One day in the town of Antioch, in Pisidia, a group of Jews had arrived in the town and came to the synagogue on the Sabbath. One of them, a man named Paul, was asked to give a work of encouragement. He was about to blow their socks off.

Background

How did we get here?

If we go back a few months and to another Antioch, the Christian church was starting to grow. The elders at Antioch were guided by the Spirit to send out a couple of young men: Barnabas and Paul. They were to travel to surrounding towns and spread the message of the gospel. They crossed over to Cyprus and preached all around the island, then returned to Perga on the mainland.

> *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.*
>
> *[Acts 13 v 13-14]*

The journey from Perga on the coast to Antioch wasn't an easy one though. A walk of 100 miles through very rough, mountainous terrain eventually got them to Antioch, 3000 feet above sea level. As long as they could avoid the robbers and wild animals along the way. The cool climate in Antioch would have been a change from the heat of the coast, possibly a relief. But getting there was hard work.

They went to the synagogue. This method of getting a chance to speak to the Jews in a town was one that Paul would use a lot on his travels. It's interesting to see how the sermons we've

covered so far were instigated. We think today of a sermon being prepared over a week, or even a number of weeks, but some of these have been responses to the immediate situation:

- In Acts 2 Peter spoke at Pentecost after the locals thought the disciples were drunk
- In Acts 3 Peter spoke to the onlookers to explain how he had healed the lame man
- This brought them before the Sanhedrin and Peter replied to their accusations with a sermon
- Again they are arrested and again given the opportunity in Acts 5 to answer to the Jewish leadership
- In Acts 7 we have Stephen accused of speaking against the Jewish religion, and he uses the chance to preach the gospel, even though it results in his own condemnation and execution.
- And last week we heard from Acts 10 where Peter has a vision and a visitor, and is asked to speak to a bunch of Cornelius's family and friends.

Most of these situations required an instant response to the situation. That can happen to us as well. Peter encourages us to always be ready to explain the gospel:

but in your hearts honour Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect,

[1 Peter 3 v 15]

Pauls' Sermon

Let us have a look at Paul's sermon. He followed the pattern of the synagogue, first looking at history in the scriptures, then at prophecy, and then ties the scriptures together with the new message he has for them.

He starts with a great summary of the history of the old testament, and how God has graciously guided his people through good times and bad. This is all stuff they know well. But look at how he seamlessly flows into telling them about Jesus, the promised saviour.

So Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand 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 450 years. And after that he gave them judges until 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 Savior, 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 of whose feet I am not worthy to untie.'

[Acts 13 v 16-25]

Some of them must have startled awake at the last bit. "What was that again? The bit after David?" This wasn't just ancient history, Paul was claiming that the story had come to its climax just in the last few years.

I wonder if we can do the same thing, continue the story through history to our own time? We should be able to, because the story continues in our own lives. We should be able to say "and that Jesus entered into my life and has changed me beyond recognition." This is why we love to hear people's testimonies. It brings the gospel message right up to the current day.

Now Paul turns to prophecy in the scriptures. HIs audience will have heard many times about the promises of God, about how he will send a saviour, about how his servant will suffer. But did they really understand the prophecies? Paul lays a bombshell on them in verse 27:

For those who live in Jerusalem and their rulers, because they did not recognise him nor understand the utterances of the prophets, which are read every Sabbath, fulfilled them by condemning him.

[Acts 13 v 27]

Paul is saying that the prophecies in the scriptures are no longer future promises but have been happening in these recent days. And not only did the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem not realise, they were so ignorant of the true meaning of the prophets that they fulfilled them by condemning the very Messiah they were waiting for. He goes on to show how Jesus fulfilled some of the scriptures.

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.'

[Acts 13 v 33]

Jesus was not just another prophet, but the Son of God himself.

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.'

[Acts 13 v 34]

His listeners will know that God promised an everlasting kingdom to the descendent of David.

Therefore he says also in another psalm,

"'You will not let your Holy One see corruption.'

[Acts 13 v 35]

His claim that Jesus was raised from the dead fulfils this prophecy made in the Psalms. And Paul goes on to talk about some of the other promises of God fulfilled by Jesus: the forgiveness of sins, freedom from the chains of sin, finishing with a warning for those who will not believe.

How do we respond to the promises in the Bible? Are they just nice words to recite or to sing? Or are they realities in our lives? Do we claim them for ourselves?

The People's Response

How did the people in Antioch respond to Paul's sermon? Now if you've ever given a sermon or a talk, you'll probably see this as one of the great miracles in the New Testament:

> *As they went out, the people begged that these things might be told them the next Sabbath.*
>
> *[Acts 13 v 42]*

As a preacher you might get people saying they appreciated the word, or that they enjoyed the sermon, but very rarely does someone ask you to give the same message next week.

Was is Paul's eloquence? No, I think it was because he made history real and relevant to them. And personal. The invitation was to believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who was the fulfilment of the scriptures they were so familiar with. It's hard to have a neutral response to that. We either believe or reject the message.

Many did believe. And many more wanted to hear what was going on in the synagogue. The next Sabbath day nearly the whole city turned out to hear from Paul.

Opposition

Of course with success comes opposition. We read about it in verse 45.

> *But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began to contradict what was spoken by Paul, reviling him.*
>
> *[Acts 13 v 45]*

How do we deal with opposing views? It's interesting how Paul and Barnabas respond. They don't get into a debate or argument with the Jewish leaders. Instead they use it as their opportunity to turn to the gentiles in the city and bring the gospel to them as well:

> *And Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, "It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles.*
>
> *[Acts 13 v 46]*

You see the Jewish leaders weren't rejecting Paul or Barnabas, or their arguments, they were rejecting God, his Son, and his offer of salvation. It's not up to us to persuade people into heaven, but to make God's word known, and to minister to those who want to hear. Many of the gentiles believed and the church in Antioch was formed.

The Result

So how did the church plant in Antioch go? Well, Paul and his group were ejected from the town after little more than a week. But they had started a fire in the city. Many had believed and the gospel was spreading. I'm not suggesting it's a pattern we should follow as we attempt to plant a church, but it's a pattern that Paul and friends would follow as they preached in Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe, and were thrown out of most of them.

However if Paul and friends had quickly given up on those who refused to believe, they were dedicated to those who had. We'll look at Lystra and Derbe next time, but let's jump ahead to see what Paul did after being ejected, threatened and stoned in these towns:

When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

[Acts 14 v 21-23]

We often see evangelists who are determined that people hear the gospel message, and one they're saved everything is great. However Paul shows us that salvation is just the first step, not only for the believer but for the evangelist. It needs to be followed up with teaching, guidance and discipleship.

So there we have it. Paul turned a dull history lesson into something real, vital and personal to the listeners. He showed how Jesus had fulfilled the history and the prophecy in the scriptures, and it shook the city of Antioch to its core. Let's pray that our witness is as real, vital and personal as Paul's sermon, and that it may drive people to Jesus.