

A Watershed Moment - Salvation to the Ends of the Earth

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[0 : 00] Well, folks, I'd like to turn back to that passage, Acts chapter 13, for a few moments. I'm a student of history, so I find myself often thinking of the past.

And what we find in the Bible, that we are often reminded of past events, but also past promises. So just eight days ago, we were celebrating or commemorating the Victory in Japan Day, the 15th of August of 1945, 75 years ago, the Empire of Japan surrendered unconditionally.

Now, it's quite right to recognize and remember the date on which a war ended, because that really ended the whole war. The war in Europe had been over, the war in the Pacific had ended.

But actually, if you look at the history, 15th of August 1945 was important. But even more important was the 4th of June, 1942. That was the Battle of Midway.

Now, the Battle of Midway is described as one of these key military turning points. That the history of the war in the Pacific, often called the Forgotten War, that the war in the Pacific turned dramatically on that point.

[1 : 16] Up until then, almost every battle that the Allies and the Japanese were engaged with ended with the Allies losing and the Japanese winning. But after Midway, it seemed as if almost every battle between the Allies and the Japanese ended with an Allied victory and a Japanese defeat.

And that's what a turning point is, where there's a change, a dramatic change in the fortunes of a country or the prospects of a people or just in the course of human history.

And as we turn now to Acts chapter 13, we encounter 46 AD, one of these historical turning points. You know, I describe it as a watershed moment because before Paul's first missionary journey and after Paul's first missionary journey, the history of the world was transformed, was never again the same.

You see, God had made a promise a long time ago. He had made a promise to Abraham. Now, think roughly, we're talking roughly 3,000 years ago, 2,000 years before the time of Jesus.

So if you go right back to the beginning, Genesis chapter 12, God made this promise. God said to Abraham, Go from your country, your people, your father's household to the land I will show you.

[2 : 39] I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you. I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse.

And all peoples on earth will be blessed through you. All peoples blessed through Abraham. God's promise to one, God's blessing to all.

Now, sometimes as Christians we wonder, what is our purpose? What is our calling? Now, in this call of Abraham, which is specific to him, we can find an insight into our own individual calling.

It's kind of a sidebar. But you see, God called Abraham both to be blessed and be a blessing. And when God calls you, he does the same thing.

God wants to bless you. He wants to give you eternal life. He wants to give you hope, joy, peace, love, etc. He wants to bless you abundantly, but he also wants you to be a blessing wherever he puts you.

[3 : 46] Whatever your circumstances, your family life, your work life, your studies, your neighborhood, within your friendship group, and within the congregation of Bon Accord.

So, blessed and be a blessing. But you see, there's a specific promise here. There's not just a, there is a general, I think, pattern. But the people of God are meant to be a blessing.

So, wherever God has placed you, that place should be better for you being there, if you're a follower of Jesus. Whatever neighborhood you live in, that neighborhood should be better. A bit more salt, a bit more light, because you're there.

But there's a particular promise here. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you. In the world today, there are, at last count, 195 nations.

The 195th was South Sudan. But the nations, what Abraham is being told here, it's not just nation states, as important as they are, but it's actually peoples or families.

[4 : 50] And we're told by the experts in mission that there are approximately 17,429 people groups.

That's a lot of people. 7.5 billion people, 17,429 people groups. And that promise, you see, God makes a promise, and God keeps a promise.

And Acts chapter 13 is a key step in God keeping that promise. Now, you might think, that promise to Abraham was a long time ago. Acts chapter 13 was a long time ago.

But God is faithful. When he makes a promise, he keeps a promise. When he makes a commitment, he keeps his commitments. He's faithful. He's reliable. He is dependable. Now, I want to give you just an illustration of the way in which God does his work.

Through people. You see, God doesn't need you. He doesn't need me. And yet he uses us. He uses people like us. Not the wise and the strong, but the weak and the foolish.

[5 : 58] Not those who are all together, but those whose lives are often disordered and messed up. Because if you think of those 17,429 people groups, one of those people groups is called the Lisu people.

These are mountainous people. They live in the mountains in the far southwest of China. It's kind of where China and Burma, Myanmar, meet. Now, in 1910, there was a man called James Fraser.

James O. Fraser. And Fraser left London, and he went to Yunnan province. Now, within China, the Yunnan province was a remote province with very few Chinese believers.

So his work was cut out for him. But what he did when he arrived there was he saw this unusual people. They had an unusual costume or dress.

They had an unusual language. Nobody could, or he couldn't understand them. And he quickly realized that these Lisu people had no indigenous believers. Not one of the Lisu people, as far as you could tell, as far as anyone knew, was a believer in Jesus.

[7 : 07] So James Fraser felt called to these people to bring the gospel to them. Now, in the province of Yunnan, there's a plaque now that reads, In loving memory of James O. Fraser, 1886 to 1938, How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news.

With deepest love, remember you always, the Lisu Church. So I mentioned earlier 17,429 people groups. Of those people groups, we're told that 7,397 are unreached.

But the Lisu people are not one of the unreached. 1910, they had zero believers. 2020, they are approximately 50% evangelical Christians.

Why? Well, on a human level, because a man called James Fraser left London, went to Yunnan, and began to minister to the Lisu people. But in a bigger sense, God was fulfilling his promise.

He fulfilled his promise in Acts chapter 13, when Paul preached to a Pisidian Antioch, to a mixed crowd there. And God continues to fulfill his promise through his word, and by the gospel concerning his son.

[8 : 32] And this is the remarkable thing. Not only that God makes a promise 3,000 years ago, that 1,000 years, I'm sorry, even though that's 4,000 years ago, actually. Yeah, so 2,000 years before Jesus.

So we're talking about a 4,000 year period from now until the promise, when the promise of Abraham was given. 2,000 years ago, the apostle Paul preaches.

100 years ago, James Fraser is ministering away in Yunnan province. And God fulfills his promise. God keeps his word.

And as we turn to Acts chapter 13, I want to notice, as we begin, and I'm going to come back to James Fraser in a moment, but notice the way Paul begins, or notice the introduction that Paul has given, and this is quite significant.

Because the rulers, the leaders, say, hey, brothers, if you have a message of encouragement for the people, please speak.

[9 : 33] Now, if you read Romans chapter 12, you'll find that the ministry of encouragement is a ministry. It's a spiritual gift. And it's so important to be an encourager.

Barnabas was the son of encouragement. The apostle Paul here is asked to bring a message or a word of encouragement. And this word encourage is the same root word from which we get one of the words to describe the Holy Spirit, the comforter.

The Spirit comes alongside of us and strengthens us. And encouragement does exactly the same thing. That a word of encouragement strengthens us, heartens us, lifts us up.

Helps us keep going. And maybe today, maybe if you forget everything that you've heard, or everything that I've said, maybe if you can remember this idea of encouragement.

That if you're a follower of Jesus, today, say something encouraging. Say something encouraging to your family. Say something encouraging to your church family.

[10 : 44] Say something, bring a message of encouragement to the people that are in your life. Because I'm certain that in every given week, in any given household, there's plenty of discouragement.

Plenty of things that get us down. Plenty of things that confuse us or trouble us. You see, Paul was asked, give us a message of encouragement.

If you have a message of encouragement, please speak. This is a ministry that every Christian can exercise. And I would suggest that it's a ministry that very few people actively engage in, the ministry of encouragement.

So as we turn to this passage, I want to notice three things. I want to notice first, that Paul begins his address with a history lesson.

I want to show how he then continues his history lesson into a presentation of the good news of Jesus. And then finally, how he shows that the good news of Jesus and the word of God fits seamlessly together to bring promise of blessing to all who receive.

[11 : 58] And then as the sermon concludes, and as this sermon concludes today, there was and there is a division. There's a separation. Some say yes, some say no.

Some say I believe, some say I reject. And wherever the gospel goes forward, from the north and to the south and to the east and to the west, the same thing happens.

Day in, day out. Year in, year out. Century to century. So let's begin where Paul begins. He begins with a history lesson.

So this word of encouragement, Paul then goes on to summarize the history of God's people, about 2,000 year history, from the patriarchs to Egypt, to the wilderness, to the promised land, the time of judges, the time of kings, and then all the way down to John the Baptist.

You'll see that from verse 16 down to verse 25. Paul compresses history into just a few paragraphs, a few lines.

[13 : 06] But the theme that he highlights again and again is God's grace, God's power, God's persistence, God's perseverance.

He chooses this people. He perseveres with this people, not because they're great and good, not because they're marvelous people, but in spite of their obvious feelings, in spite of their provocations, in spite of their complainings and grumbings, God sticks with them.

Doesn't that encourage you? That God sticks with his people, doesn't leave them, doesn't let them go, doesn't turn them over, doesn't abandon them. That whether it's in the time of Egypt, whether it's in the wilderness journey, but notice time and again that the subject of the verb is God and the object of the verb is God's people.

Verse 17, God of the people of Israel chose our father. He made the people prosper and then he endured, verse 18, their conduct.

He put up with them. He overthrew the nations of Canaan. He gave their land to his people. God gave them judges.

[14 : 28] God gave them a king. God gave them John the Baptist. God gave them those who would go ahead and prepare the way. So God is in charge and God continues to work in the lives of a people who are continually going their own way, doing their own thing, forgetting who God is, forgetting what God has done.

Nothing changes. God continues to work in the life of his people. He perseveres. He doesn't give up. He doesn't let you go.

There's a great verse in Philippians, I think it's Philippians 1-6, where we're told that he who began a good work in you will bring that work to completion in Christ Jesus, that he will fulfill his promise, his purpose, his plan in his time.

So God works in the lives of real people, real places, real situations, real problems, real difficulties, but he is in charge.

So you have this very brief summation of 2,000 years. So Paul condenses the history of Israel. So his audience is primarily a Jewish audience.

[15 : 50] They know the story. So he can compress the story. They know the details. They know who Saul is. They know who David is, Samuel, the judges, etc. But then he comes to verse 26, and he slows the history lesson down.

So in a couple paragraphs, he covers 2,000 years. And then in the next couple paragraphs, he covers a weekend. Something's happened here. Something has happened in this particular weekend, Friday to Sunday, that requires particular care and attention.

Now I mentioned before, James Fraser is something to tell us. Because Fraser was studying Chinese, and his first preaching was in Chinese to the Chinese people.

So he had to learn Chinese, and then he had to teach himself the Lisu language, which no one else had ever learned. He created an alphabet for the Lisu people that had never been recorded.

So he put that aside. But when he was preparing his first gospel address, he noted this in his diary. He said, In preparing my address, I first went through the Acts of the Apostles, exactly where we are, and some other passages, comparing them with a view to finding out the actual gospel we are bidden to preach.

[17 : 10] The result was very instructive. I had never imagined the gospel was so simple. Why Peter and Paul both preached the gospel in words which would not take one minute to say.

And I found out that there are just four things that seem to be essential in preaching the gospel. The crucifixion of Jesus Christ, no theological explanation needed.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ, most important of all, the gospel was never preached without this being brought in. Three, exhortation to hearers to repent of their sins.

And four, promise to all who believe on Jesus Christ that they will receive remission of their sins. Beyond these four points, others are mentioned occasionally, but they are not many.

And teaching Christians is quite another matter. To them, we are to declare the whole counsel of God as far as they can receive it. But the gospel as preached to the unsaved is as simple as it could be.

[18 : 14] I should not care to take the responsibility of preaching another gospel. So James Fraser wants to preach the gospel to the Chinese people and then to the Lisu people.

Goes to the book of Acts, good place to start. Goes to the preaching of Paul, the preaching of Peter, the ministry of Philip. And here we are. Paul is preaching to the city in Antioch.

He's preaching to God-fearers. He's preaching to Jews. He's preaching to a mixed multitude of people. And what does he do? He proclaims these four great truths.

He proclaims the death of Jesus. He proclaims the resurrection of Jesus. He exhorts his people to repent. And he promises that those who repent will receive forgiveness for their sins.

Let's look at how he does it. Verse 26. Brothers, children of Abraham, and you, God-fearing Gentiles, it is that this message of salvation has been sent.

[19 : 13] The people of Jerusalem and the rulers did not recognize Jesus. Yet in condemning him, they fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath.

They found no proper ground for a death sentence. They asked Pilate to have him executed. When they carried out all that was written about 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 was seen by those who had traveled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem.

Dead, buried, raised, seen. Very little in the way of explanation. Paul is giving them the narrative, but the key narrative of that key weekend.

Now, we were saying that Acts chapter 13 is a turning point in ministry to the nations, yes. But obviously, the key, the most important turning point was that weekend. Jesus Christ died on the Friday.

[20 : 13] He was buried. And he was raised from the dead on Sunday morning. And from that point forward, everything changed. So, the death of Jesus, the resurrection of Jesus.

But then, what next? Verse 32. We tell you the good news. What God promised our fathers, he has fulfilled for us by raising up Jesus.

And then Paul goes on to quote three key Old Testament texts. If you have time later today, read Psalm 2. Read Isaiah 55.

And read Psalm 16. Because Paul is saying to his audience who knows the scriptures, to say, look for yourself.

See the promise of Psalm 2, Psalm 16, Isaiah 55. See the events of the crucifixion weekend and the resurrection weekend. And see how God fulfilled his plan.

[21 : 16] And God kept his promise. And God worked out his plan of salvation at that time, in that place, in those events, for our benefit.

And then Paul goes on to speak to the crowd. He gives them the history lesson. He tells them about that in essential weekend. But then he goes on to say, verse 38, therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus, the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you.

Through him, everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law. So what does Paul do?

Paul says, let me tell you what God has done in the past. Let me tell you what God did on that weekend. And now let me tell you what you must do. You must believe.

Now, you mentioned earlier, Fraser mentioned earlier about repentance. And you might say, well, there's no repentance here. The word repent is not included in this particular sermon. And yet it is.

[22 : 27] You see, there are certain words that go together. Believe and repent go together. Remember when Jesus preached in Mark chapter 1, 14 and 15.

The kingdom of God is at hand. The time has come. Repent and believe the good news. Repent and believe. You see, you can't turn from sin without faith.

You can't believe without turning from sin. These two things are like the two sides of a coin or the two sides of the same movement.

faith and repentance are inextricably linked. So even though Paul doesn't speak of repentance here, it's implied when he exhorts and commands people to believe.

So the terms and conditions are straightforward. We tell people what God did. Jesus died and Jesus was raised. We exhort them to believe. We command them to repent.

[23 : 29] And notice that Paul promises that forgiveness forgiveness and freedom or forgiveness and justification are promised to all who so do.

Unconditional. Unlimited. Unqualified. Here is what the terms and conditions of the gospel are. If you repent and believe, you will be forgiven. You will be freed.

You will be justified. You will be accepted by God. Whoever you are, wherever you're from, whatever your circumstance may be. Fraser was ministering for six years without seeing any Lisu converts.

In his diary in 1916, he recorded these words. He says, I do not intend to be one of those who bemoan little results while resting in the faithfulness of God.

My cue is to take hold of the faithfulness of God and use the means necessary to secure big results. A few weeks later, 129 families, 600 Lisu people turned from darkness to light, turned from their previous spiritual darkness to come to believe in Jesus Christ, and the means that were used were the same means that were used in Acts chapter 13.

[24 : 55] Fraser proclaimed the death of Jesus. He heralded the resurrection of Jesus. He exhorted men and women to repent of their sins, to believe in the Lord Jesus, and promised them forgiveness or remission of sins.

And from that point forward, the Lisu people spiritually were transformed. They are now one of the reached people groups in this world.

God is faithful. What Paul did in Pisidian Antioch 2,000 years ago continues to be done here at home and to the ends of the earth.

Why? Because God promised to Abraham that he would be a blessing to all the nations and all the peoples on earth would be blessed through him. What did Abraham do?

Abraham believed God and that was credited to him as righteousness. So the same gospel that was there 2,000 years before Jesus is there 2,000 years later when Paul is preaching, was there a hundred years ago when James Fraser was preaching to the Lisu people and is here today.

[26 : 04] There is no other choice. There is no other option. There is no plan B. God faithfully proclaims forgiveness, freedom, justification, is found in no other place and found in no one else other than his son.

Now you might think, well, is that it? Well, that's it. These are the means by which God brings about his plan and purpose.

He calls ordinary people to proclaim this extraordinary message, this message of transformation that comes through faith in Jesus Christ.

Christ. This is the history lesson that God is teaching us today. He's telling us about our history. He's reminding us of the gospel.

He's exhorting us. He's encouraging us to go forward in his name with this message which alone can bring hope, forgiveness, justification.

[27 : 08] Jesus. So, if you're listening today, maybe this is not your story. Maybe you find it difficult to enter into this narrative. You might not understand what happened in the Bible.

You may never have heard of the kings or the judges or Egypt. But what I want to say to you is whoever you are, Jesus Christ died on the cross, he was buried, he was raised.

And in him, forgiveness of sins, eternal life is offered to you. If you repent and believe, you will be forgiven.

You will be justified. I can't add to that. I can't take away from that. That is the simple proclamation that alone can save. And strangely, God is pleased to bless that heralded message, to bless that proclamation that wherever that message goes forward, somehow, some way, people hear, people respond.

And the promise that God makes is fulfilled in their hearing. That happened 2,000 years ago. Some said yes. Some said no. Some wanted to hear more.

[28 : 19] Some stirred up opposition. Wherever Jesus is proclaimed faithfully, there will always be two things. There will always be blessing and there will always be problems. Why?

Because some receive this message with great joy and their lives are never again the same. Where others hear the same message and receive it with anger or with bitterness or resentment or want nothing more to do with this Jesus and with his gospel.

2,000 years ago, the history of the world was changed when a man called Paul, who himself had a life-changing encounter with Jesus Christ, stood up with a word of encouragement to the gathered group in Pisidian Antioch.

He preached the gospel. He preached the death and resurrection of Jesus. He exhorted his hearers to respond to that gospel. And with these words, we read, when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord and all who were appointed for eternal life.

The gospel is good news. And those who believed were glad. He took God at his word. They received the blessings that he promised and their lives and the life of this world.

[29 : 37] The history of this world was never again the same. The same terms, the same conditions, the same invitation, the same opportunity is afforded to you today to receive this gospel, to believe in this Jesus.

And if you're already following him, maybe the example of James Fraser a hundred years ago, or maybe just this reminder that God can use ordinary people to achieve extraordinary results by the use of the means that he himself gives.

James Fraser took God at his word a hundred years ago. The apostle Paul took God at his word 2,000 years ago. Abraham took God at his word 4,000 years ago. And no one who takes God at his word will ever be disappointed.

They will never be let down. They will never be abandoned. They will find time and again that our God is faithful, loving, kind, and gracious. So may God bless his word to each of our hearts.

And may his name be praised. May he receive all the glory. Amen.