

## God Seeking Man

Genesis 3:1–19, Acts 13:13–19

Barnabas and Saul, having been sent out as missionaries by the church at Antioch, traveled through the island of Cypress, Barnabas's home country, preaching Christ wherever they went. They traversed the whole island, about 148 miles long and 40 broad, from Salamis in the east to Paphos in the west. Paphos at that time was the capital of that island nation. In Paphos they were summoned by the Roman governor Sergius Paulus, whose heart had been supernaturally prepared to hear the word of God. Barnabas and Saul were glad to take advantage of this special providence. Despite opposition from the false prophet Elymas, who opposed them and contradicted them and debated them, the Roman governor put his trust in Christ. The text says that Sergius Paulus was "astonished at the teaching of the Lord." As Saul—now the apostle Paul—would later write, "not *many* wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called" (1 Cor. 1:26). But here was *one*—the highest public official on the island of Cypress—who by God's grace came to believe the gospel and be saved.

Our text this morning informs us that "Paul and his party set sail." The language is telling: by this time Paul had come to be the acknowledged leader of the missionary team. They arrived in Perga in Pamphilia—part of what is now modern Turkey—and traveled overland up to Antioch in Pisidia (not the Antioch in Syria from which they had been sent). This was an arduous journey. One commentator explains: "Antioch lay some 100 miles to the north across the Taurus mountain range. The route was barren, often flooded by swollen mountain streams, and notorious for its bandits, which even the Romans had difficulty bringing under control. Antioch itself was in the highlands, some 3,600 feet above sea level."<sup>1</sup> But in Antioch there was a Jewish synagogue, a place where Jews who were distant from the temple worship in Jerusalem would gather to hear the reading of the law and the prophets and hear a word of exhortation. On one particular Sabbath—the seventh day of the week which was still observed by the Jews—Paul and Barnabas took their seats. After the Scripture readings were finished, the synagogue rulers asked their visitors if they would like to give a word of exhortation to the people. This was just the opportunity Paul and Barnabas had been looking for. It was like saying "sic 'em" to a hunting dog, straining at his leash, zeroing in on his quarry! Paul immediately stood to his feet and began to address the congregation.

Now what we have in verses 16–41 is the text of Paul's sermon. There is so much in here that we cannot consider the whole of it today. But I do recommend that you take the time to read the whole sermon in one sitting, perhaps as an

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<sup>1</sup> John B. Pohill, *Acts*, 297, cited in *Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary* (Olive Tree Bible Software)

edifying Lord's-day activity. The text tells us, "Then Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand said, 'Men of Israel, and you who fear God, listen.'" These words are like "Dear John" in a formal letter: they tell us the addressees, the persons who are being addressed. Paul specifies two categories: "men of Israel"—the word used indicates males, heads of families, though there were doubtless women and children in attendance as well—and "you who fear God"—that is, Gentile God-fearers who had come to believe in the God of Israel but who had not undergone ritual circumcision, the very painful cutting of the flesh. So these were people who were familiar with the Old Testament Scriptures. They heard them read and expounded every seventh-day Sabbath. Paul tailors his message to target his hearers.

### **1. The gospel begins with God.**

But what I want you to observe at this point is how Paul's sermon begins. Take note of it at verse 17. What are the words? "The God of this people Israel." This is very important. How does the sermon begin? It begins with God! Paul's message concerns the gospel, the good news of God's salvation. Note carefully: *the gospel begins with God!* God takes the initiative. "The God of this people Israel chose our fathers . . ." *The gospel is about God seeking man, not man seeking God.* Let this sink in for a moment: the gospel begins with God.

A lot of people don't understand this. They think in terms of their response: "I came to realize that I was a sinner and needed a Savior. I bowed my head and asked the Lord to save me. It was my choice." Now all that may be true, but it misses a very important point: no fallen son of Adam would *ever* come to realize that, except by the operation of the Spirit. As Paul would later make plain in Ephesians 2, all of us by nature were "*dead* in trespasses and sins"—that is, *spiritually* dead. Think of what that means. All of us are alive physically. We are responsive to stimuli—sight, sound, light, taste, touch, smell. Our alarm goes off in the morning and we jump out of bed. We open our eyes and steer around things that get in our way, avoiding danger. We accidentally kick a piece of furniture with our little toe and we feel pain. We smell something burning on the stove and we quickly move the pan off the burner. With our tongues we can distinguish between salty, sweet and bitter. We experience pain. A mosquito bites our arm and we swat it. We don't want people poking us or jabbing us against our will. We can look into the eyes of another person and instantly distinguish whether they are friendly or hostile. All these things we can do because we are alive. God has given us the sense of touch, taste, hearing, sight, smell. But a corpse can sense none of these things. As Solomon put it, "the living know that they shall die: but the dead know not any thing" (Eccl. 9:5). Once a person dies he ceases to respond to stimuli. So it is likewise with our spiritual sense: if we are born again by the supernatural regenerating work of God's Spirit, then we can sense our danger and "flee from the

wrath to come” (Matt. 3:7). But if we are still “dead in trespasses and sins,” we are senseless to our danger. We are in love with our sin; we are not inclined to give it up. We want to run our own life. We have no inclination to submit to God. We are spiritually dead. Listen to the first five verses of Ephesians 2 in the English Standard Version:

“And you were *dead* in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were *dead* in our trespasses, made us *alive* together with Christ—by grace you have been saved.”

The contrast is not between two runners, one of whom comes in first and the other who comes in second. It is not the difference between meeting a deadline and missing it by one minute. It is the difference between being saved and being lost, between heaven and eternal hell. We—all of us—were once *dead* in trespasses and sins. But when God had mercy upon us he made us *alive* together with Christ. What made the difference? God! We were dead—spiritually dead. We had no sense of spiritual sensitivity—none whatsoever. Preachers could tell us we were lost and on our way to hell. They could warn us over and over that “it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment,” but we weren’t ready to hear that. We could hear the words of Christ that “He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him,” but it made no impression on us. We were spiritually dead.

So what made the difference? God! In the words of Paul, “But God, being rich in mercy . . . made us *alive* together with Christ.” Making the dead alive is something only God can do.

Early last Monday morning my cousin Faith died at a hospital just four miles from here. She had been there only a couple days. I didn’t know she was there. The staff did everything they could for her, but still they lost her. She was only 62 years of age, the second-youngest cousin out of 15 on my mother’s side, and the first to die. Thankfully, she knew the Lord. I didn’t see her often, but every time we talked on the phone we had good fellowship. She was very sweet and caring. Next Sunday, which would have been her 63<sup>rd</sup> birthday, will be her memorial service. It was not God’s will to spare her life but to take her home. God did not raise her to life yet, but he will at the last day.

When Jesus was here on this earth his dear friend Lazarus died. By the time Jesus got to the tomb, he had been dead four days. But he intervened. Over the protests of the family he commanded the stone to be rolled away. Then he called

out, “Lazarus, come forth,” and Lazarus came forth, still wrapped in his grave clothes! Jesus—God in human flesh—has the power to raise the dead.

So note well where Paul’s sermon begins: “The God of this people Israel chose our fathers.” The gospel begins with God. Israel, like all the nations that walked in darkness—like the United States—was lost, alive physically but spiritually dead, thinking only of the present, not of eternity. Abram lived with his family in Ur of the Chaldees. His father Terah set out to go to the land of Canaan, but they got only as far as Haran, and Terah died in Haran.

But God took the initiative! He said to Abram, “Get out of your country, From your family and from your father’s house, to a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” Here was a promise that led to Christ: “in *you*”—that is, as it was later clarified, *in your seed*, Christ—“all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” All the families of earth would one day experience the salvation of the Lord through Abraham’s seed, the Lord Jesus. He is God in human flesh. He is the Messiah, the one who “came into the world to save sinners.” He is able to save *to the uttermost* those who come to God through him (Heb. 7:25). He is able to save the chief of sinners!

Do you know this? Do you know that you are a sinner? Do you know that you cannot save yourself? Do you know that you have no hope of eternal life apart from Christ? By the Spirit’s help do you commit your life to Christ and acknowledge him as Lord? Then you can rejoice that the gospel begins with God. The gospel is about God seeking man, not man seeking God. If it were otherwise, then *no one* would be saved, for spiritually dead persons do not seek God. They remain in their sins and are eternally lost. O sinner, rejoice that the gospel begins with God—a fact dramatically brought out by Paul when, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he began his message with “The God of this people Israel.” Salvation begins with “the God of Israel”—that is, the only true God—otherwise, no one would be saved.

## **2. God in covenant with his people**

But look more at Paul’s opening words: “The God of this people *Israel*.” God chose Israel, the name given to Abraham’s grandson Isaac, and hence to all his sons, heads of the twelve tribes. God entered into covenant with his people Israel. God did not choose to save unrelated people, each acting independently, doing their own thing. No! He called a *people*. He entered into fellowship with a community—a community of worshipers. God entered into covenant with Abraham and his spiritual seed—all those who would commit themselves to God through his servant Christ. As Paul states explicitly in Galatians 3:29, “And if you are *Christ’s*, then *you* are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”

Those who are apart from Christ may be Abraham's physical seed, but they are not his spiritual seed, heirs according to the promise. In our text today Paul preaches to a synagogue, men of Israel and God-fearers. No doubt many of them were the physical seed of Abraham, and by God's grace and the regenerating work of his Holy Spirit some of them would become Abraham's spiritual seed as well—incorporated into the church, the worshiping community that God's was building through the preaching of the gospel by Paul and others. Our text doesn't say that God would save a few unrelated individuals, distributed helter-skelter throughout the world, each doing their own thing, having absolutely no connection with one another. Paul's Spirit-informed, Spirit-inspired words were powerful and apt and well-chosen: "The God of this people *Israel*." The word "of" is very important. It indicates a relationship, the relationship between God and his people. It indicates *belonging*: "I am his, and he is mine." Just as in marriage, which is a picture of the relationship between Christ and his church, the husband and the wife *belong* to one another: "I take thee to be my lawful wedded wife," "I take thee to be my lawful wedded husband." So in the covenant of grace, the living Christ takes all the people God gave to him in eternity past, before time began, as his own. He is joined to his people eternally. Baptism is the sign and seal of the covenant of grace. In baptism God puts his mark of ownership upon the person baptized. Those who receive him by faith—but not faithless persons—are joined to him *eternally*: "those that thou gavest me I have kept, and none of them is lost, but the son of perdition; that the scripture might be fulfilled" (John 17:12).

Here, then, in the opening words of Paul's sermon, are the truths that the gospel (1) begins with God (2) in covenant with his people. All those who are joined to Christ by faith are part of God's covenant people Israel. God doesn't have two different peoples and two different programs, a heavenly people who live with him eternally, living in the light of his countenance, standing in the presence of the Lamb who was slain, singing his praises unendingly; and an earthly people who live in the Promised Land. No! The land of Canaan, distributed to Israel "by allotment" (v. 19), is more accurately translated "he gave them their land as an *inheritance*," as ESV). Palestine, the land of Canaan, was given to the twelve tribes as an inheritance, typifying heaven itself, given to all those who are born again as "an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven" for those who trust in Christ (1 Pet. 1:4).

Do you belong to Christ? Then you have been made a part of the covenant people by faith. You are a partaker of a heavenly inheritance. No crooked lawyer or corrupt legal system can take it away from you. It is an inheritance incorruptible, reserved for you by the promise of the living God who is truth itself, who cannot lie, who will never break a promise. You who sing the praises of Christ on earth will one day sing the praises of Christ with the saints in heaven. God is in covenant

—an unalterable, eternal covenant—with his people, and if you are united to him by faith in his Son, you are part of his covenant people. It is your joy to gather weekly with the saints to sing Christ’s praises.

### **3. A retelling of the biblical story**

Verse 17 reads in full, “The God of this people Israel chose our fathers, and exalted the people when they dwelt as strangers in the land of Egypt, and with an uplifted arm He brought them out of it.” Thus begins the body of Paul’s sermon. Paul goes over facts that would have been well-known to his hearers in the synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia. If you read through the entire sermon—just 675 words in English, far fewer than what I have spoken already—you will see that Paul’s sermon is essentially a retelling of the biblical story. Paul didn’t use up his hearers’ time giving cute anecdotes or witty or heartwarming reminiscences to try to get or keep his listeners’ attention. No, he essentially retold the biblical story, choosing the facts and incidents that best helped him to make his point. And so it is for us as well. Evangelism is essentially a retelling of the biblical story. The God of heaven wants people to understand his inspired *word*. If you want to be an effective evangelist, if you want to see your loved ones, friends and neighbors come to Christ, then you have got to *know* the biblical story. Evangelism is not knowing how to manipulate people, to get them to do what you want them to do. No, evangelism is *telling the good news*. It is part of the calling of every Christian. God wants the good news of his salvation in Christ to travel fast. It is appropriate to share with all kinds of people. Every human has the same problem: it is the sin problem. The Christian ought to emphatically repudiate what is called “critical race theory”: that black and brown people are oppressed and cannot succeed in life without assistance, and that all white people are racists, and those who deny it thereby *prove* that they are racists. God in his word has given us *all things* that pertain to life and godliness, and the inspired word of God nowhere teaches critical race theory; rather, it teaches that all the sons and daughters of Adam are in exactly the same state: sinners, lost without Christ. What sinners need to hear is the word of God: that Christ Jesus came into the world to save them, that he will empower them to overpower obstacles and live the abundant life, that the believer can do all things through Christ, who strengthens us, and that he has come that his redeemed people might have life, and have it more abundantly! Yes, gospel preaching is essentially a retelling of the biblical story. What needy sinners in our homes and all around us need to hear is the message of the *Bible*. How well do you know your Bible? Do you read it? Do you listen to good preaching? Do you sing the songs of Zion? Do you memorize Scripture? Do you meditate on biblical truths and seek to apply them to yourself and to others? Do you pray for zeal to share God’s truth? God intended that his truth be communicated through his people, and that truth is

### **4. The good news of reconciliation**

The Bible teaches that God “has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5). The gospel is the good news that God has reconciled us to himself, and in turns given us the ministry of reconciliation. Reconciliation is *the restoration of friendly relations*. When people are reconciled to each other, they are on friendly terms. They rejoice to see one another. They enquire about one another’s well-being. They help one another, they assist one another. They rejoice in the unique gifts that God has given to each human being. They are not in competition with one another but want to bring out the best in one another. They want to uphold one another’s reputation.

But relationships are broken because of sin. When relationships are broken, people are on the outs with one another. They can’t stand being with one another. They want to run and hide from one another. We see this in both our Old and New Testament texts this morning. Our Old Testament text was the record of the fall, when Adam ate the forbidden fruit and brought death upon himself and all his posterity. When our first parents sinned, “they knew that they were naked.” They sewed fig leaves together to cover their nakedness. But Adam and Eve did not go to God and confess what they had done. Rather, *God* took the initiative; *he* called out to Adam and Eve. He made for them tunics of animal skins—a picture of substitutionary atonement that would ultimately be accomplished in Christ. An animal had to die so that man’s nakedness could be covered. Likewise, the Son of God had to die so that man’s spiritual nakedness could be covered. Jesus the Substitute had to die to atone for the sins of of his people. He took our sins upon him and gives to us his imputed righteousness.

We also see this in our New Testament text. Back up in verse 4 we read that when Barnabas and Saul landed in Salamis to begin their first missionary tour, “they also had John as their assistant.” But in verse 13, as Paul and his traveling companions set sail from Paphos, we read that John departed from them and returned to Jerusalem. The reasons for his departure are not clear, but Paul was offended. In Acts 15 we read that when Paul and Barnabas were planning another missionary tour, Barnabas wanted to take John Mark with him, but Paul did not think that was such a good idea because John had departed from them from Pamphilia (the word used in Acts 15:38 is a strong word: John Mark *apostatized* from them). Yet there is reconciliation as well. After some years Paul would write to the church at Colossae, “Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, with Mark the cousin of Barnabas.” John Mark becomes the author of the gospel of Mark. And in his last epistle Paul would write: “Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for ministry.” So the relationship between Paul and John Mark was broken for a time, but later the two were reconciled.

The gospel reconciles both vertically and horizontally—both with God and with our fellow men. The Lord’s supper illustrates this: those who put their trust in Christ are invited to the Lord’s table. They have fellowship with Christ, who serves them through the ministry of their pastor, and they have fellowship with one another, all eating from the same loaf and drinking the same drink.

Are you reconciled to all your brothers and sisters in Christ? Then celebrate that reconciliation in the Lord’s supper. Have you sinned against a Christian brother or sister? Then repent and confess your sins. Be reconciled to your fellow saint, then come together to commune before the table of God.

Has a fellow believer said something hurtful to you? Has he slandered you or damaged your reputation? Then pray for repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation. Don’t give up; true believers will be reconciled in the end.

In all this be thankful that in the gospel *God is seeking man*—God takes the initiative. Otherwise, you and I would be lost eternally. Amen.