

A Crisis Moment

Ruth 1:1–18, Acts 13:42–46

Paul has finished his sermon in the synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia. He has clearly preached Christ. He has carefully explained the gospel. He has called for his hearers to believe and be justified—forgiven of their sins. And he has warned his audience that if they reject the gospel they will show themselves to be “despisers.” To fail to love Christ is to despise him—and woe to that man or woman who stands before Christ as Judge at the final day, having despised the Christ in this earthly life! To fail to love Christ with all your heart, soul, mind and strength is truly to *despise* him; there is no middle ground. Paul had proven from six Old Testament texts that the Scriptures speak of Christ—that Christ is the fulfillment of Old Testament Scripture, that the message of the Bible is *Christ*.

Paul and Barnabas would not see these folks until the next week. What did they do the next six days? One commentator suggests that they might have worked as tentmakers, as they would later do in Corinth (Acts 18), where they plied their trade with tentmakers Aquilla and Priscilla. Paul told the Corinthians, “The Lord ordained that they which preach the gospel should *live* of the gospel” (1 Cor. 9:14), but their sending church was a long ways off, and when support was slow in coming, they labored with their hands, so as to give the gospel freely to those who needed to hear it. Let us consider three points that we observe in our text—two *attitudes*, two *messages* and two *destinies*, first,

Two attitudes

Clearly, Paul’s hearers were of two types: those who received the gospel, and those who rejected it. Those who received the gospel “begged that these might be preached to them the next Sabbath.” On the other hand, those who rejected the gospel began to oppose it. Here, then, were two attitudes toward the gospel: reception and opposition.

Paul has finished speaking, and everyone is leaving the synagogue. He had preached before men of Israel and God-fearing Gentiles. We learn that the Gentiles were hungering to hear more; they “begged that these words might be preached to them the next Sabbath” (v. 42). The word *begged* indicates that these men and women had spiritual hunger. They couldn’t get enough of the word of God. The word for *beg* means *request*, *implore*, *appeal to*. It is the word used in Romans 12:1, “I *beg* you, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living sacrifice.” These men begged. They were earnest, not passive. They sincerely wanted to be persuaded from the Scriptures that Christ is the Messiah of Israel, that what they had just heard was the truth. They had never heard anything like this before. They had a hunger and thirst for righteousness. They weren’t ready to commit themselves to the church of Christ, but they wanted to learn more.

Do you have spiritual hunger? Jesus said, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled” (Matt. 5:6). By nature “*no* man seeketh after God” (Rom. 3:11), but when a person is born again by the blessed Holy Spirit, he is given spiritual insight. He has a hunger and thirst for what he used to consider wholly unpalatable. If the Holy Spirit has changed your heart, then you *love* the Lord Jesus Christ, you love his truth, you love his worship, you love his people. On the other hand, you *hate* sin, as that which required the death of the perfect Savior, the lover of your soul.

How do you know that you have spiritual hunger? You have an appetite for the word. You say, with the prophet Jeremiah, “Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart: for I am called by thy name, O LORD God of hosts” (Jer. 15:16). Can you say that the Bible is the joy and rejoicing of your heart? Do you long to read it, to spend time in it, to hear it read publicly, to hear it preached? Do you desire to obey it; to bring your thoughts and actions into conformity with it, even when it is difficult; to let it challenge your attitudes and actions; to hide it in your heart? These are elements of spiritual hunger. Jesus said, “I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst” (John 6:35).

The story is told of the celebrated composer Johann Sebastian Bach as a young boy. After his mother died, and his father eight months later, leaving young Johann an orphan, the 10-year-old Bach moved in with his eldest brother, Johann Christoph Bach, who was a church organist. There he practiced the harpsichord and copied music, despite being forbidden to do so because scores were so valuable, and blank ledger paper was costly.¹ Young Johann loved music so much that he wanted to keep learning new music. Later in life he would write the words “To God alone be glory” on his musical scores. Lovers of Christ ought to hunger and thirst for the Word the way Johann Sebastian Bach hungered for music.

But note, not everyone who walked out of the synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia that day had spiritual hunger. Far from it! The next Sabbath—the seventh day of the week that was the day of gathering and worship under the Old Covenant—“almost the whole city came together to hear the word of God.” Word of Paul’s gospel—the good news of Jesus Christ—had spread! But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy. Envy is destructive; if it cannot have a certain benefit, then it will seek to destroy it so that others cannot have it either. Envy riots, loots, and burns down businesses, it sets fires and destroys and defaces property, ruining things so that *no one* can have them. It would rather reduce everyone to poverty rather than see anyone be successful. The Jews in Antioch of Pisidia had formerly been counter-cultural. The Romans, with the exception of the

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johann_Sebastian_Bach

God-fearers, who had experienced the grace of regeneration, were not interested in going into a synagogue to hear the Bible read and preached, so synagogues were relatively small. Those who attended synagogue were pretty much countercultural. When large crowds came out to hear Paul, the Jews were “filled with envy.” If they couldn’t draw the crowds that Paul drew, then they would do anything in their power to make sure Paul wouldn’t have them either. So they contradicted, blasphemed and opposed the apostle Paul. But God’s word is truth; it will not return to him void but will accomplish the purpose for which he sent it. We have seen two *attitudes* toward the gospel: reception and opposition. Second,

Two messages

God had a different message for each group. To those Jews and devout proselytes (converts) who were receptive to the gospel, Paul and Barnabas spoke to them, persuading them to continue in the grace of God. Here is the message of *blessing*. Blessed is the man whose delight is in the law of the Lord; and on his law doth he meditate day and night. He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper. Paul and Barnabas had a message of encouragement for those who wanted to hear more. The word of God is an exhaustless treasure. No mere man can fully plumb its depths. “The kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure things new and old” (Matt. 13:52). “Understanding is a wellspring of life to him who has it” (Prov. 16:22).

Paul and Barnabas urged the receptive disciples to continue in the grace of God. The tense of the verb indicates that this was not just a perfunctory, once-off exercise. The evangelists *kept on urging* these disciples to continue in the grace of God. This implies classes, meetings, home Bible studies, conversations over meals—any setting in which ministers of the word could impart life-lessons to willing disciples. Here is a message of blessing. We know from the written sermons that Paul preached in the book of Acts that his sermons were mainly a retelling of the biblical story, choosing elements that fit his theme or audience. The missionaries specifically kept urging these new believers “to continue in the grace of God.” What did this mean? The message of the gospel is the message of grace. Grace is unmerited favor—think of the acronym “God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense.” Grace can mean *favor, kindness, friendship*; to continue in the grace of God is to continue in his favor and friendship. It is the converse of living a life of sin which separates men and women from God. Continuing in the grace of God implies living in fellowship with the church, receiving the sacraments with God’s people, living under the oversight of the pastors and elders, and counting God’s people your dearest friends. Continuing in the grace of God, as Gill notes, means continuing “in those special doctrines of grace, which had been insisted on, namely, remission of

sins, and free justification by the blood of Christ,” resting on the finished work of Christ as the basis and ground of your justification.

Paul would later write to the churches of Galatia, “Ye did run well; who did hinder you that ye should not obey the truth?” (Gal. 5:7). Those who are confirmed in the grace of God should continue to run and not give up, aiming to be faithful unto death (Rev. 2:10).

So Paul and Barnabas had a message of encouragement for those who receptive. Those only are receptive who are born again of the Holy Spirit. God promises, “I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them” (Ezek. 36:24). Such are “born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth forever” (1 Pet. 1:23).

But there was another group, the Jews who were filled with envy, contradicting, blaspheming, opposing and seeking to drown out the gospel message, so that no one would hear it. The English word *blaspheme* comes from the Greek βλασφημέω; it is basically a transliteration of the Greek word, expressing the sounds of the Greek with English characters. The word is used in regard to men or God. The Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich lexicon helpfully points out that in relation to men it means *injure the reputation of, revile, defame*. In relation to God it means *blaspheme—to speak in a way that shows irreverence to God; to utter blasphemy*. How out of character with the law of Moses, to which these Jews should adhere! The third commandment is “Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.” The third commandment requires “the holy and reverent use of God’s names, titles, attributes, ordinances, word and works.”² Brothers and sisters, we should never utter the name of God except in prayer, worship or witness. We should not use the name of God as a demonstration of our sincerity. We should never say, “I swear to God” unless we mean it; such is a calling down of judgment upon ourselves if we are using it irreverently. We should never misuse the name of Yahweh our God. The Jews of Antioch of Pisidia were so enflamed against the true gospel and infuriated against the apostles who spoke it that they blasphemed. They reviled the apostles and blasphemed the God of heaven. To this latter group Paul and Barnabas delivered a message of warning: “Since you reject our message, you judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life.” In speaking these words the apostles echoed the words of their Savior, “whoever will not receive you nor hear your words, when you depart from that house or city, shake off the dust from your feet. Assuredly, I say to you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that city!” (Matt. 10:14–15).

² Shorter Catechism 54, *Trinity Psalter Hymnal*, 972

We have considered two *attitudes*: reception and opposition; two *messages*: comfort and warning. Thirdly, consider

Two destinies

In our text this morning the first destiny is implicit, the second is explicit. So let's take the second first. Paul boldly speaks to the Jews who were "contradicting and blaspheming." He tells them, "It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles." Why was it necessary that the word of God should be spoken to the Jews first? To remind the Jews of their God-given purpose—to be a light to the Gentiles, to bring his salvation to the ends of the earth. To be a witness against them, that if they failed to live up to God's eternal purpose for them, they would suffer judgment. In every place where the apostles took the word of God, they sought the Jews first. They went into their synagogues, not to worship, for they were Christ-rejectors who had cried out, "We will not have this man to rule over us; his blood be upon us, and upon our children."

After the resurrection Jesus kept the first-day-of-the-week sabbath with his disciples. He met with them the evening of Resurrection Sunday, he met with them "eight days later" (Jewish inclusive time, counting the first and eighth days, equal to our "seven days later"). The second first-day Sabbath included the disciple Thomas, who was not present the week before. Then, after his ascension, when he was enthroned in the highest heaven, Christ poured out his Spirit on his disciples, fulfilling his promise when he breathed on them and said, "Receive ye the Holy Ghost" (John 20:22). The point is that the risen Christ established the pattern of new covenant worship on the first day of the week, as he met with his disciples on three out of the first seven first-day Sabbaths in the new covenant era.

Note well that the apostles did not go to the synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia to worship but to *witness*—to be a witness to the Jews that if they failed to live up to God's purpose for them, they would suffer judgment. So Paul said, "It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles." He reminds the unbelieving Jews that they got the first opportunity to hear the word of God, but they rejected it and suffered judgment. What judgment? Paul makes the argument that by rejecting the gospel the Jews judged themselves unworthy of eternal life. How tragic for a person to judge himself unworthy of eternal life! This we do by unbelief. For their rejection of Christ the unbelieving Jews would go to eternal punishment on Judgment Day. Furthermore, from this time forward the gospel would go to the Gentiles. The Jews forfeited their covenantal privilege. Not only that, but within a very few years Jerusalem would be surrounded by armies and fall to the Romans. The temple would be completely

destroyed, and the animal sacrifices would cease. All the temple genealogical records would likewise be destroyed, and as a result there would be no more levitical priesthood—no more temple, no sacrifices, no priesthood. This would be a crushing blow to pious Jews. Israel would lose its place of covenantal privilege. There would be no more centralized worship. From this time forward God would meet with his people in small assemblies. Wherever two or three would gather in his name as the church, Christ himself would be with his people through his Spirit.

At the same time, believing Jews and Gentiles would inherit the blessing of Abraham: “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” (Gen. 12:2–3). God’s people who look to him in true faith would be truly blessed, while those who rejected his Messiah would be cut off—excluded from the covenant. In our text today, those who eagerly received the word and begged that the gospel be preached to them the following Sabbath would be blessed exceedingly abundantly above all that they could ask or think. There is an explicit curse put upon the unbelieving Jews and an implicit blessing put upon the believing Gentiles. But what is implicit in our Acts text is explicit in the epistle to the Romans, where it says that God “will render to every man according to his deeds: to them who by patient continuance in well doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life: but unto them that are contentious, and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, upon every soul of man that doeth evil, of the Jew first, and also of the Gentile; but glory, honor, and peace, to every man that worketh good, to the Jew first, and also to the Gentile” (Rom. 2:6–10).

Believing Gentiles would be blessed with grace and glory, unbelieving Jews would be covenantally cursed and receive judgment and rejection in accordance with the covenantal curses revealed to Israel in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28. God’s promise is valid in every generation: rejection of the gospel leads to rejection on the day of judgment. God’s believing people would hear tender words of encouragement, his disobedient people would receive stern words of judgment.

We have thus seen two *attitudes*: reception and opposition; two *messages*: comfort and warning; and two *destinies*: grace and glory on the one hand, and judgment and rejection on the other.

Hearing the gospel is a crisis moment. If you hear and believe, you are blessed. If you hear and disbelieve, you are cursed. It is the same in every age.

The takeaway for us all is to continue in the grace of God, believing in him, inheriting the blessing. O my dear one, put your hope and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, and call upon him for salvation. Amen.