

Appointed to Eternal Life

Isaiah 42:1–9, Acts 13:46–52

Paul has delivered his sermon at the synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia. He has focused on Christ, unjustly condemned to death but raised from the dead and seen by witnesses. Through his name those who believe receive forgiveness of sins and justification. This was a moment of crisis for all who heard.

There were two responses: those who begged to hear more, and those who, filled with envy, roundly rejected it. As we observed last week, there were 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. Paul and Barnabas boldly told the unbelieving Jews, “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.” This is a turning point in the book of Acts. As we shall see this morning, though Israel failed to proclaim salvation to the ends of the earth, God accomplishes his purpose through the Gentiles, filling his church with joy. Let’s consider these three points, first,

1. Israel fails.

Paul and Barnabas, citing Isaiah 49:6, say, “I have set you as a light to the Gentiles, that you should be for salvation to the ends of the earth.” Here was God’s purpose for Israel. Israel was not to keep the message of salvation to itself. It was to share that message with the world. God had said through the prophet Isaiah, “It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also give You as a light to the Gentiles, that You should be My salvation to the ends of the earth.” Here was the grand plan God had for Israel, that it would be so full of awe and wonder at the great gift of salvation that it would not want to keep that message of salvation to itself but proclaim it to the ends of the earth. Israel was to be God’s “salvation” (ישועה) representing God’s Messiah Jesus (ישוע) to the ends of the earth.

God says, “I have set you as a light to the Gentiles.” This presupposes that the Gentiles without Christ are in a state of darkness, and indeed that is the case, as Isaiah 9:6 declares: “The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined.” As Paul would later write, “you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light” (Eph. 5:8). We live in a time of great scientific discovery and advancement: computers, lasers, cellular phones, MRIs, the successful sequencing of the human genome. Yet without Christ the human race lies in darkness, without the knowledge of salvation. Without the light of Christ we will all perish.

Have you come to realize that you are a sinner with no hope of eternal life apart from Christ? Do you confess the Lord Jesus as your only Savior, committing yourself to follow him your whole life long? If *so*, then he has saved you and washed you from your sins in his own blood. If *not*, then you are in darkness, no matter how much you might know or how successful you might be. What shall it profit a man if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?

Israel had the light. It did not discover this on its own; it was revealed by God. He who at the original creation brought light out of darkness gave the light of his salvation to his people. He said, “There is no God else beside me; a just God and a Savior; there is none beside me. Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else” (Isa. 45:21–22).

Sadly, Israel failed in its duty to take the good news of God’s salvation to the ends of the earth. It was content to let the surrounding nations walk in darkness without the knowledge of God. Israel became introspective, content to keep the good news of God’s salvation all to itself. But the story doesn’t end there, for as we learn in our text,

2. God succeeds.

Luke records that “when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified the word of the Lord.” Why were the Gentiles glad? Because of the announcement that because of the Jew’s unbelief the apostles would now turn to the Gentiles. Here is the fulfillment of Jesus’ parable in Luke 14, where a man gave a great supper and invited many people, and sent his servant to tell those who were invited, “Come, for all things are now ready.” But they began to offer all kinds of lame excuses. One had bought a tract of land, another five yoke of oxen, yet another was newly married, and apparently his new wife didn’t like going to fancy dinners. At this the master of the house became angry and told his servant, “Go out into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in the poor and the maimed and the lame and the blind.” But still there was room! Then the master said, “Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled.” The original invitees refused the invitation, so God would invite others in their stead. The Jews who were the original invitees wouldn’t come, so God would invite the Gentiles. In the end he would succeed, and his house would be filled. He builds his church, and the gates of hell cannot stop it. If the Jews would not believe the gospel, it would be offered to the Gentiles, and they would come. His house will be filled.

But notice particularly the last sentence of verse 48, “And as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.” This is a very telling statement. It identifies who would believe the apostolic message: as many as had been appointed to eternal life. Who appointed them to eternal life? Clearly, God. A lot of Christians are uncomfortable with this statement.

Years ago, during my first pastorate, fresh from studying the Bible and theology very hard in preparation for my ordination exams, I became convinced of the doctrine of God's absolute sovereignty in salvation—what we call Calvinism, summarized in the acronym TULIP: Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, Preservation of the saints. I studied the Scriptures with renewed relish, devouring them as I never had before, amazed at the consistency of the gospel message, lost in wonder of a God who meticulously planned every aspect of our salvation from eternity past. All of a sudden the Bible came alive for me, and I wanted to share these precious truths with my people. Since it was the Scriptures themselves that convinced me, in my youthful naïveté I assumed that if I just showed people how these truths are taught in the Bible, they would become convinced and accept them too. Most people in that congregation believed that Christ died for the whole human race—every man, woman and child without *exception*—that he had done everything he could to save every human being, and that all that was lacking was for people to respond and receive him by faith. (Calvinists believe that Christ died for all men without *distinction*; that is, men, women and children from every kindred, tongue and nation.) But the people in my congregation believed that Jesus was knocking on the door of every person's heart, waiting for him or her to open that door and invite him in. Many people believe this. It seems so egalitarian. It also fits in with most people's notions of fairness. Every human being determines his own destiny: those who receive Christ go to heaven; those who refuse him go to hell. Everybody has an equal chance. Those who go to hell have nobody but themselves to blame. God cannot be blamed. He can never be charged with sending people to hell.

The only problem is that the Bible expressly teaches that the fallen sons and daughters of Adam are spiritually *dead*—"dead in trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1). If left to themselves, *no one* would choose Christ; the dead have no ability to choose. I could not get around that truth.

One Wednesday night I was preaching on the text "all who were appointed for eternal life believed." I preached my heart out, hoping to persuade my congregation that the reason some people believe, while others remain in unbelief, when the gospel is preached, is that those who believe were sovereignly appointed by God. Those who were chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world are infallibly brought to faith by the secret working of God at his appointed time. The rest of mankind remain in their sins and are lost. That night I felt as if I had proven my case; my congregation would surely concur. But after the service a kindly grandmother came up to me and said, "I like the way my Bible puts it better." I asked her what hers said, and she showed me. Her translation had "When the Gentiles heard this, they were very glad and rejoiced in Paul's message; and as

many as *wanted* eternal life believed.”¹ I was incredulous. Here was a popular Bible that turned the meaning of the original Greek word completely on its head. The original uses the word *τάσσω* (draw up in order, fix, determine, appoint), which is the root of our word *taxonomy* (the orderly classification of plants and animals), and turns it on its head. Rather than saying, “as many as *were appointed* to eternal life (passive voice), this popular Bible twisted it to say, “as many as *wanted* eternal life” (active voice). Rather than *God* being the determining factor, this popular Bible paraphrase made *man* the determining factor. But Luke’s purpose in penning these words was to glorify *God* for his sovereign choice of individuals in eternity past. The reason some people, hearing the gospel, receive it and come to Christ is because they were *chosen by God* in eternity past. It dawns on their consciousness that they are sinners, that they have no hope of heaven apart from Christ. They have never seen this before. They are blown away by this truth. Heretofore they were God’s enemies, running from him, hiding from him, trying to put out of their minds the uncomfortable truth that they were rebels on their way to an eternal hell. Now, their hearts and minds have been supernaturally opened up to the gospel, and they wouldn’t have it any other way. They are full of new-found love for the Savior. There is no way that they want to take credit for their salvation. All the glory must go to God. They can say with the hymnwriter, “I sought the Lord, and afterward I knew *he* moved my soul to seek him, seeking me; it was not I that found, O Savior true; no, I was found, was found of thee.”²

At the time of their conversion they were completely unaware that their coming to Christ had been secretly appointed by a sovereign God in eternity past, but their ignorance of this fact in no way changed it. In the words of Gill, their faith “did not arise from previous dispositions to eternal life, but was the fruit and effect of divine ordination.” All the sinner has to do is believe; he does not have to understand everything at the moment of his conversion. You do not have to understand all the intricacies of programming in order to use a computer; it is sufficient that the programmer understands and has written the code correctly. So it is with salvation. God has programmed everything perfectly; our part is to believe and act in faith. You may not have understood before how your faith was the fruit and effect of God’s sovereign ordination, but now God is opening up your heart to the truth. You too, like the Gentiles in Pisidia, can receive this truth with gladness and glorify the word of the Lord. You have been brought to faith through the secret working of a sovereign God. He has taken care of all the details. All you have to do is believe. “As many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.”

¹ *The Living Bible Paraphrased* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, 1971), 878

² “I Sought the Lord, and Afterward I Knew,” *Trinity Psalter Hymnal* 427

Dear one, do not trouble yourself, thinking that unless you understand everything perfectly you cannot be saved. It is not your *understanding* that saves you, it is *Christ* who saves you. And whether the believer is a seasoned theologian or a newcomer to the faith, his salvation is, in the final analysis, the secret working of the triune God. God takes care of all of the details from start to finish. Those who have been appointed to eternal life believe, and whether they are awake or asleep, whether they have a full understanding of everything that is involved or not, whether their understanding is diminished by reason of age or infirmity or dementia, the God who has taken them to himself by covenant is eminently able to keep them. He is “able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them” (Heb. 7:25). Thirdly, see the result,

3. The church has joy.

Verse 49 records that “the word of the Lord was being spread throughout all the region.” The gospel was getting results! Not only were Paul and Barnabas preaching it, but the new converts were spreading the good news as well.

Businesses spend lots of money on advertising—billboards, radio and TV, internet, direct mail—but the best advertising is mouth-to-mouth. A satisfied customer tells a friend about his experience: “You should really get one of these. It helped me, and it can help you too.” The satisfied customer and his friend already have a relationship; the friend already trusts him. The friend realizes that the man or woman giving him the good recommendation is not a paid actor but a friend who is just trying to help him.

Let me ask you a question. What has Christ done for you? Has he saved you from your sins and given you victory over your temptations? Has he given you hope in place of hopelessness? Has he given you joy in the Holy Ghost? Has he enabled you to live in newness of life? Many people you know are outside of Christ. They struggle with addictions, they struggle with anger, they struggle with bad habits, they are alienated from friends and loved ones. They know nothing of the abundant life Christ gives. You can help these people. If you have discovered the best news in the whole world, then why not share it?

One can only image how the word of the Lord was being spread throughout Pisidia. Paul and Barnabas had been expelled from the area. The prominent women and chief men of the city began to persecute Paul and Barnabas. They could not disprove their message, so they expelled the messengers. They could not answer their arguments, so they tried to shut them up. Kind of like those in government and the legacy media trying to silence those who do not adhere to the approved narrative, labeling them as purveyors of “fake news.” Rather than answering arguments with facts, they try to silence their opponents. Truth is no longer determined by cogent arguments but by bullying. So it was in the case of Paul and

Barnabas. They had proven that God raised Christ from the dead. If he rose from the dead, then that proves that he is Lord, and we must follow him. If he did not rise from the dead, then he is not worth listening to. What can power-mad zealots do but try to silence the opposition? But the word of God cannot be silenced. It will not return void but will accomplish the purpose for which it was sent. At the last day every mouth will be stopped and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

The Jews wanted to preserve the status quo. They wanted to believe that being Jewish was everything. They saw the gospel as a threat. They began to persecute the followers of Christ. They hoped that nothing would come of it, that it would just blow over, and things would return to the way they were before.

Notice how the chapter ends: “The disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.” Joy in the midst of persecution—what a testimony to the power of the gospel! When things are going well it is natural to experience joy, but when there is heavy opposition, persecution and cruelty, only the Holy Spirit can enable the follower of Christ to overcome and experience joy. Our Shorter Catechism asks,

Q. 36. What are the benefits which in this life do accompany or flow from justification, adoption and sanctification?

A. The benefits which in this life do accompany or flow from justification, adoption and sanctification, are, assurance of God’s love, peace of conscience, joy in the Holy Ghost, increase of grace, and perseverance therein to the end.

How can a person experience joy even in persecution? Romans 14:17 says that “the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” It is not having everything perfect, but submitting every moment to Christ and having the confidence that he does all things well.

A recent issue of *The Voice of the Martyrs* tells the story of Ibrahim, a Somali Christian who perseveres through persecution to plant 23 churches. He has been attacked by rock-throwing Muslims many times. One man who led a stoning attack on Ibrahim eventually came to faith in Christ and later humbly apologized for his actions. Ibrahim was even forcibly separated from his wife for 11 years and was not even told when she passed away. Ibrahim returns to Psalm 5 again and again, where it says, “Give ear to my words, O LORD; consider my groaning. Give attention to the sound of my cry, my King and my God, for to you do I pray.”

Very few of us will be attacked for our faith by rock-throwers, but may we all experience joy in the Holy Ghost and keep our eyes on Christ.

We have seen that Israel fails. It was given the assignment of taking God’s salvation to the ends of the earth, but it failed to do that. But God succeeds. He brings to obedient faith all those who would have been appointed to eternal life. And the church has joy. The word of the Lord was being spread, in spite of official persecution. The church bravely endures persecution rather than give up and keep

its mouth shut. Though man fails, God still accomplishes his purpose, bringing joy to his people. And so it is today: Though man fails, God still accomplishes his purpose, bringing joy to his people.

Church of Jesus Christ, you have been given the task of taking the gospel to the ends of the earth. One way we do this is through our gifts to the annual Thank Offering. If God has blessed you, then show your joy by giving.

If you have come to Christ by faith, if you are truly trusting in Christ alone for salvation, then you have been appointed to eternal life. You may not have understood it before, you may not understand it fully now, but it is true. The fact that you were appointed in eternity past is the reason you believe in the present. Your job is to believe and be glad, and glorify God, for it is he who appointed you, who chose you out of the mass of humanity to be part of his covenant people, who gave his Son to save you. He who began a good work in you is going to continue it. He is going to save you to the uttermost. Nothing can separate you from the love of Christ. You are secure in him. To him alone be glory both now and forever. Amen.