

LIGHTS IN THE DARKNESS, PART 3

Acts 13:38-42

For the last couple of weeks we've been in Acts 13, talking about being "lights in the darkness." As a biblical analogy, God's people – God's witnesses – are like lights in a dark world. Witnesses are lights and lights are witnesses. Philippians 2:15 says that we appear as lights in a crooked and perverse world. Jesus said, "*You are the light of the world.... Let your light shine before men.*" Don't put your light under a basket, hiding it. Put it on a lampstand for all to see and to glorify your Father in heaven (Matt. 5:14-16)! That's what we want to continue discussing – some key witnessing principles from Acts 13 to help us to be winsome and effective lights.

I'll remind us briefly that this is a **pivotal chapter** in the book of Acts, taking us into the **2nd half of the book of Acts** and the gospel advancement to the Gentiles beyond the borders of Israel. We are in the **first missionary journey of Paul in Pisidian Antioch** and we ended up here through this encounter with **Sergius Paulus** in Paphos on Cyprus. I've been thinking about showing you this but there is some neat archaeology connected to Sergius. Archaeologists have found inscriptions with Sergius Paulus's name on them in Pisidian Antioch and on Cyprus. There are discoveries still being made today that affirm the accounts of the Bible.



But as we pick it up in verse 38, we are looking at the **sermon of Paul** in detail. A simple outline of Paul's sermon so far might be:

- I. **GOD'S PROMISE TO SEND THE SAVIOR. (VV. 16-25)**
- II. **GOD'S PROMISE KEPT IN THE SAVIOR. (VV. 26-37)**
- III. **GOD'S PROMISE TO SAVE THROUGH THE SAVIOR. (VV. 38-41).**

38 "Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through Him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, 39 and through Him everyone who believes is freed from all things, from which you could not be freed through the Law of Moses. 40 Therefore take heed, so that the thing spoken of in the Prophets may not come upon you: 41 'Behold, you scoffers, and marvel, and perish. For I am accomplishing a work in your days, a work which you will never believe, though someone should describe it to you.'" 42 As Paul and Barnabas were going out, the people kept begging that these things might be spoken to them the next Sabbath."

Paul has reminded them of God's promise to **send** the Savior and how He has **kept** that promise. Now, Paul moves into the **personal application portion of his message: how to be saved through the Savior!** Jesus died for sins, was buried and rose again, "therefore" (v.38) we need to respond to that in faith. "*Let it be known to you*" is personal application. Christ died for your sins, but you must **believe/trust/have faith in Him** to be **forgiven** and therefore, **justified**.

We spent some time on that word justified last week. To be **justified** is a **forensic, judicial** term. All of us are going to stand in the high court of Heaven before the Holy Judge of the universe someday and as sinners, we are all guilty and deserving of hell and separation from God. But notice verse 38 & 39 – *through Him* – through Jesus – we can go free. We can have our sins completely forgiven because of what He did for us. That’s something the **Law of Moses** could never do. The Law could deal with some sin through sacrifice but as soon as you sin again, you’re offering another sacrifice. They could never bring complete, everlasting, once-for-all forgiveness that we needed. But Jesus came and He fully **covered** (or **atoned** for) our sins so that we can have a **perfect standing before God**.

Remember, **“How can a man be justified before God?”** is the most important question we will ever answer. This question sparks the first church council in Acts 15. It caused a much needed and appropriate Reformation 500 years ago. How we answer that determines our destiny. And therefore it is the greatest issue when you witness. Sinners need to know how they can be justified (declared righteous) before a holy God. And there’s are 3 ways people approach justification.

1. Justification by **works**: Coming up in Acts we will see that many thought, *“If I keep the works of the Law of Moses like circumcision, I will be justified. I rest upon my religious works.”* These guys based the hope of their salvation on their law keeping. Today if you ask people if they’re going to heaven or hell, many say, *“Heaven. I’m not that bad of a person and I go to church, etc.”* Translation: *“I’m good enough or religious enough to get into heaven.”* That is salvation by works thinking that we measure up to God’s standards.
2. Justification by **grace and works**: *“I’m saved by grace, but I’ve also got to do my part – my religious works and good works. I can earn or merit more grace through my works.”*

But what does the Bible say? What does Paul say?

3. Justification by **grace**: *“I am completely unworthy and unable to gain salvation by anything I am or anything I do. I must depend on / believe in / trust in / have faith in what Christ has done for me.”*

Only the last one, justification by grace, is the good news. **Gospel** means “Good news.” The good news is that **salvation is a free gift received not by works but by faith** – the opposite of works. Rather than working you are depending on Christ’s work.

Romans 4:5 – *“But to the one who does not work but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.”*

Paul is going to take some heat from Jews all throughout the rest of his ministry for teaching the Law as insufficient to save and preaching this free grace gospel. But as we’ll see, he stands firm. We too, live in a very religious world that wants to make grace something you can earn. A Catholic priest on the radio last week told everyone that the dogma of the Catholic church is that grace is

something to be earned through religious works and good works. But the biblical definition of grace is different from his. You cannot earn it. Romans 11:6 says, *“But if it is by grace it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace.”* Our proud sin nature wants to try and earn grace. But like Paul, we have to stand firm in the clear gospel of grace.

A lot of the confusion would be solved if we understood that because God is perfect, **we need a perfect righteousness to stand before Him**. Since we are fallen sinners, we will never be perfect. But that’s why Jesus died for us so that He could offer us His righteousness in exchange for sin. We need a righteousness that is not our own – a perfect one. In **Philippians 2:7-9**, Paul talks about how he kept the Law to a T at one point in his life but it’s all rubbish because now he wants *“to be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ Jesus, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith.”*

Lights share the clear gospel message of free grace through faith in Christ.

We have to keep that message clear if we are going to be lights. This gospel presentation of Paul also shows us that when you present the gospel to someone, you should **encourage personal application**. Encourage them to believe on Christ. In a one-on-one conversation you might ask them after sharing the good news, *“Do you believe this? Is there anything preventing you from trusting Christ as your Savior right now?”* And if not, you might lead them in a simple prayer, reminding them it is not the prayer that saves them but faith in Christ. After that, I would never tell anyone they are saved because I really don’t know, but I would **encourage assurance of salvation** to keep them from falling back into a works-based mindset with John 3:16 or 1 John 5:11-13: *“If you have really believed in Christ, the Bible says you have eternal life.”*

In verses 40-41 we are reminded of why this issue of justification by grace or by works is so important and must be so divisive: because eternal destinies are at stake. Look again at Paul’s **warning**, a quote from the Old Testament prophet, **Habakkuk** (1:5): 40 Therefore take heed, so that the thing spoken of in the Prophets may not come upon you: 41 ‘Behold, you scoffers, and marvel, and perish; for I am accomplishing a work in your days, a work which you will never believe, though someone should describe it to you.’” When Habakkuk wrote that, he was calling on an unrepentant, scoffing nation of Israel to look with astonishment at God’s coming judgment by Babylon, which they refused to believe would happen. Time and time again through the prophets God warned them judgement was coming on the nation if they didn’t repent of their idolatry and lack of obedience – they scoffed and ended up in exile. Now, Paul is using this warning again in their situation to show them that once again God is offering **eternal salvation from eternal judgment**. To refuse the gospel would be even greater, eternal disaster!

If God has offered forgiveness of sins and justification – to reject that offer would mean you still pay the penalty for your sins in hell (instead of Christ) and to remain unjustified (declared guilty instead righteous). Sadly, many scoff in unbelief. They turn their nose up at God’s grace and will perish for it. That word **perish** reminds me of **John 3:16** says, *“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son so that whoever believes in Him will not **perish** but have everlasting*

life.” The perishing is not just physical but an eternal separation from God in hell and this warning about perishing gives us another **proper and significant biblical motivation for sharing the gospel**:

Lights warn unbelievers of eternal judgment.

This is something we don't typically like to talk. The doctrine of hell is something of a relic anymore or in liberal churches it's seen as toxic. But it is part of the full counsel of God and without hell, the gospel message of salvation and Jesus' mission to save wouldn't make any sense. The good news is good because there is bad news. Sinners have been separated from God and will be forever if they don't accept Christ. The reason why we struggle with the thought of hell and don't talk about it is because we love people who know don't know Christ or have passed on without Christ and it's difficult to wrestle emotionally and intellectually with that. But maybe because Jesus loved people, He spoke the truth about hell more often than He did of heaven, at least in the Scriptures. (Matthew 5:22, 29, 30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33; Mark 9:43, 45, 47; Luke 12:5). He wanted people to enter through the narrow gate by warning them of the broad gate's destination.

But because we wrestle with the reality of it, many **erroneous views of hell have developed**:

1. There is no literal place called hell.

The nearest idea of hell is like saying, *“I've lived through hell”* or *“war is hell”* or *“your make your own heaven or hell right here on earth.”* We treat it flippantly or like Mary Baker Eddy, the false teacher and founder of the Christian Science cult, said things like *“our evil beliefs are hell”* or *“mental torment.”* To her, hell is more *“a present state of doubt, discouragement, and despair than it is a future condition.”*

2. There is a hell, but those in it will be annihilated.

Based on the way the hell is described as a place of **destruction**, some assume that people are completely destroyed and cease to exist in hell and hell is really empty. There was a billboard in Hermosa just south of Rapid City a couple of years ago promoting a website that was dedicated to this teaching. But I can destroy a pop can by crushing it without it ceasing to exist, right? Destruction can carry the idea of ruin or lostness, not cessation of existence. 2 Thessalonians 1:9 says those who reject the gospel of Jesus will *“pay the penalty of eternal destruction”* but this word is also used to describe the “lost” sheep, the “lost” coin, and the “lost” son in Jesus' teachings. Someone who dies without Christ is eternally lost and in ruin. Thessalonians verse finishes by saying those who reject the gospel who will *“pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power.”* So they exist, but are separated from God and His goodness. In this world, Jesus said He causes the sun to rise and rain to fall on the righteous and unrighteous. That's His goodness and charity to all now. In hell, there is nothing good because they are separated from God's goodness.

3. There is a hell but those there will be given a second opportunity.

There is nothing in Scripture to support this view, but many believe it. **Reincarnation** is a religious philosophy that promotes this idea. The Catholic doctrine of **purgatory**, a temporary hellish place between hell and heaven where we pay for our own sins might also be classified

as a second opportunity. Last week, again, that Catholic priest on the radio said another dogma of their church is that prayers can help people get out of purgatory but he also said you can't measure how many prayers you need (or how much grace you need to earn to skip purgatory!). Can't you see how a false gospel system like that would keep people enslaved? And why Paul would pronounce an anathema curse in **Galatians 1:6-9** on anyone who preaches a works-based salvation gospel? Anathema means let them be damned to hell. Why? Because such a works-based gospel sends people to hell. In Galatians 4:30-5:1 he says to cast out the false teachers bringing you into bondage because it was for freedom that Christ set us free. Keep standing firm in grace. Don't cuddle up to these. Cast them out and don't let them propagate their fake gospel (5:12).

Hebrews 9:27 says that **it is appointed once for man to die and after that face judgment** – so no second chances – you either accepted Christ or didn't and that's it. **The biblical view of hell is that hell is a real place of eternal, conscious punishment for Satan, demons, and unbelievers.** **Revelation 20:10, 15** says, *“the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are also; and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever... and if anyone's name was not found in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.”* Eternal torment, day and night, forever and ever.

Maybe nothing pulls back the curtain on eternal damnation like **Luke 16:19-31** where Jesus talks about the afterlife of two men. One died and went to paradise. One died and went to hell, having never considered his eternal destiny. In eternity they are in two different places – one of comfort and one of torment. Between the two places, a great uncrossable chasm exists. The man in hell is in agony, longing for a drop of water on his tongue. When he asks if someone can warn his brothers who are still alive about this place of torment, he is told if they don't listen to Word of God, they won't be convinced even if someone rises from the dead. I also want to say that while we should speak of hell in witnessing, we should speak of it in such a way that we don't become noisy gongs. We share the bad news in order to show them the good news – Jesus saves!

Real quick, in **verse 42**, we find one more witnessing principle from the **people in Paul's crowd who want to know more**. They beg Paul and Barnabas to come back the next Sabbath and teach them more. They probably have questions and want to hear more about Jesus. Many may be uncommitted still. So what do “lights” do? They offer to meet again and answer questions.

Lights respond obligingly to questions.

Questions comes with seeking truth and every witness is going to be asked questions. Sometimes the questions are good, gospel-centered questions that help them understand the gospel and should be addressed immediately. But many times, and you know this if you've done much witnessing, the questions can become immense distractions – like spiritual warfare questions intended to take you off topic into something irrelevant. So here's what I recommend when that happens:

1. **Thank** the person for the question.

2. **Congratulate** them for having questions. You might say, *“That’s a great question...”*
3. Ask permission to **set the question aside for a few minutes** or until you finish explaining the gospel. *“... but can I answer after?”*

After you finish explaining the gospel, the question might not be an issue anymore. You also might give a brief answer to satisfy their curiosity and get back to the central issue: justification. If you don’t know the answer to their question, admit that and ask if you can get back to them on it. Or you might say, *“I could answer that, but if you give me some time to think, I could give you a better answer.”* Asking to get back to them another time also gives you another opportunity to share!

In sum, we know that everyone will spend eternity somewhere based on their acceptance of or rejection of the gospel. We have to keep that reality in mind as we go about our daily lives and interact with others and seek to reconcile people to God (2 Cor. 5:20). I think sometimes we’re so afraid of the reactions that we don’t share at all. But I want to remind us that not everyone will oppose the gospel. Many people simply haven’t heard a clear gospel presented and they need to hear the good news!

I’ve forgotten the details, but I can’t help but think of a story I heard about a high school girl on the school bus who courageously told her friends the good news about Christ. You know what her friends said, *“How long have you known about this?”* Raised in church, she said, *“Well, I guess I always have.”* They replied, *“And you’re just now sharing this with us? What took you so long?”* You know, I cannot help but feel the same way. I grew up in the Catholic church. But you know what I heard? Work for it. Do the religious works. Do the sacraments. Be a good person. Go to the confessional. And cross your fingers hoping your time in purgatory is short. It wasn’t until after high school when God placed believers in my life who gave me a Bible and shared the gospel with me that I finally understood – Jesus paid it all and offer Me His perfect righteousness in exchange for my sin so I could be justified. What a privilege we have of being lights, sharing this amazing, freeing, destiny-changing good news with others. We are lights. Lights shouldn’t be afraid of darkness. By nature, light isn’t overcome by darkness. Light overpowers darkness. So let your light shine! Put it on a lampstand! Don’t hide it.