

Acts 13:42-52 - The Gospel Rejected & Received

Although the response at the synagogue was favorable, with Paul being asked to preach again, the Jews turned against him the next Sabbath when a large group of Gentiles showed up. Paul responded by turning to the Gentiles, a pattern he would continue in every city he visited: beginning with the Jews, then turning to the Gentiles when opposition forced him from the synagogue. Repeatedly in Acts we see that God's grace plays the crucial role in the advance of the gospel. When the Gentiles hear the gospel, we read that **"as many as were appointed to eternal life believed"** (v. 48). Even belief in the gospel is a gift of God's grace. The reference in verse 47 to Isaiah 49:6 shows that the gospel going to the Gentiles was God's plan all along. Acts 13:46 is perhaps the official marker of the apostles turning to the Gentiles.

Acts 14:1-18 - The Church at Antioch

Acts 14:5-7 recounts the culmination of opposition as Gentiles and Jews incited their rulers to stone Paul and Barnabas. By God's grace, our missionaries learned of the plot and fled to the cities of Lyconia, Lystra, and Derbe. When the persecution reached a point where their ministry could no longer proceed, they left that area. Verse 7, however, reminds us of the singular vision which possessed Paul and Barnabas. They knew what God had called them to do, and nothing would stop them.

The response to the healing of the paralyzed man in Acts chapter 3 differs greatly from the response of the crowds in Acts 14. In Peter's case, his audience was Jewish. In Paul's case, however, he performs this miracle in front of a Gentile audience. The crowd fails to understand what Paul has done and they begin to think that the miracle demonstrates something about Paul rather than something about God. The Gentile audience thinks that Barnabas and Paul must be gods (v 11-13). The crowds have confused the message with the messenger. Luke records the response of Paul and Barnabas in verse 14: "When [they] heard of it, they tore their garments." When a person tore their garments, they did so as an act of abject humiliation. At this moment, Paul seizes upon this providential opportunity to clarify the gospel. When the crowds confuse the message with the messenger, they distort the entire gospel.

Acts 14:19-28 - Returning to Antioch

Luke compresses the history in order to keep the narrative moving. He leaves out certain details that he, and ultimately the Holy Spirit, have deemed unimportant. Luke indicates that there is a group of disciples with Paul—no doubt new believers who have come to Christ through Paul's ministry—and that Paul survives the stoning and re-enters the city. The next day, his body bruised and broken, Paul, along with Barnabas, departs for Derbe, preaches the gospel and sees many people repent and believe (v 20-21). Once they return to Antioch of Syria, Paul and Barnabas encourage their sending church and tell them of the glorious testimony of God's saving power (v 27). They recount the power of the gospel as it has spread throughout the Mediterranean world. Paul and Barnabas suffered. They could have returned defeated and broken, angry and frustrated that such calamity would befall faithful servants of Christ. Instead, they recognized the glory of suffering. They were counted worthy to suffer for the gospel. God used their suffering as a glorious testimony which strengthened the church of Christ and saw new believers won to the family of God. Indeed, your testimony can produce the same fruit. When you endure suffering and

tribulation, you have no idea how God will use your story to encourage others. The testimony of God's suffering saints nourishes the faith of all God's people.

Acts 15:1-35 - The Jerusalem Council - Gospel Freedom

Along with the rising persecution from outside the church, there are some within the church who begin speaking against Gentile believers who do not adopt Jewish customs. The Jerusalem council is convened to decide whether non-Jewish believers must submit to all the requirements of the law of Moses, especially circumcision, in order to be accepted as members of the church. After much debate, Peter stands up and asks, "Why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?" (v. 10). The law informed God's followers about how to walk in integrity with him, but it never provided the power to obey it; instead, it only revealed the inability of God's people to live up to God's perfect righteousness.

In the Bible, graceless religion is presented as an intolerable burden that only brings discouragement and despair. When Peter refers to the law as a "yoke" that no one is able to carry, he is echoing the words of Jesus, who declared, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matt. 11:28–30). God favors the weak and burdened, not the spiritually proud. Jesus embraces the meek and the broken—the ones who feel swamped with heavy burdens. It is no small thing that he spent so much time with those considered the spiritual losers of his day.

Through their system of sacrifices, the people of Israel were to look forward to the sacrifice that was coming, the true spotless Lamb who would take away their sins forever (John 1:29). Instead, they attempted to attain righteousness through fulfilling the law's commands, which only served to place them under the yoke of guilt-driven slavery.

The law binds, but the grace of Jesus frees (Gal. 5:1). As long as we attempt to save our conscience through acting right, we will find ourselves bound to the taskmasters of guilt and fear: Have I done enough? Is God pleased with me now? True freedom from guilt comes only when we recognize the boundless and undeserved love that God has poured out on us through his Son. Jesus has done enough for God to be pleased with us. Peter insists that both Jews and Gentiles are saved only by the grace of the Lord Jesus (Acts 15:11). Because God has clearly chosen to include people of all nations in the new community of Christ, the old restrictions that served to set Israel apart, such as circumcision and dietary laws, no longer apply.

If circumcision is unnecessary for salvation, then why are restrictions (vv. 20, 29) given at all? Here we see an example of the principle of respect for the "weaker" brother (cf. Romans 14; 1 Corinthians 8). The counsel to respect dietary restrictions was intended to demonstrate love and respect for the Jewish Christians. Because of their background, Jewish Christians would have struggled to share a meal with Gentiles who seemed to flaunt traditional Jewish dietary customs (cf. Acts 15:19–21). The Jerusalem council aims to avoid such potentially divisive offense by instructing the Gentiles not only to abstain from obvious sin ("sexual immorality") but also to accommodate the sensitivities of their Jewish brothers and sisters. The response of the Gentile believers—joy—shows that they hardly view these requirements as burdensome (v. 31). As Christ laid down his freedom for their sake, so they find joy in laying down their freedoms out of love for others.

Questions for Group Discussion

1. Read Acts 13:44-52. How has Paul and Barnabas's reception changed from the previous Sabbath? Why are some of the Jewish leaders filled with righteous indignation, and why are the Gentiles thrilled? What would some of the implications of this passage be for our church and community today?
2. When you share the gospel with someone, they might recognize that if they believe in Christ, it will divide them from their family or friends. How might you walk them through that difficulty?
3. What theological confusion do you sense or meet in your community or culture? How do you need to adapt the way you explain the gospel, in order to help people understand what you are saying?
4. James and the others work out in Acts 15:6-21 the double principle of no needful circumcision on the one hand and no needless *offense* on the other. The Gentiles who have believed in Jesus do not have to be circumcised; that is, they do not have to become Jewish in order to become Christians. They are not in a separate category when it comes to salvation. But the Gentile Christians are to be encouraged not to offer needless slaps in the face to their as-yet-unbelieving Jewish neighbors. They should keep well away from various rituals involved in pagan worship, including the drinking of blood, ritual prostitution and other shameful elements that were assumed to be practiced in at least some temples some of the time. If anyone thinks that this is some kind of compromise, it is not only a compromise which stands here in Scripture itself, but it is one for which James himself argued on the basis of Scripture. Why are Christians so often reluctant to accept a both/and compromise and instead often insist on an absolute either-or result when there is a dispute? What makes that difficult? How can you proactively seek to discuss doctrine with other Christians, in a way that strengthens and encourages both them and yourself?
5. What did you learn this week about the different ways that Paul and Barnabas suffered for the gospel?