

Acts

Acts 13:14-52 - History as it should have been written

The last verse in Acts 13:52 says “the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.” So what happened to make them that way?

It began when Paul and his companions arrived in Perga in south western Turkey, which was inland a bit but navigable by boat. “From Perga they went on to Pisidian Antioch,” verse 14, still in south western Turkey (so this was a different Antioch to the one in Syria that Barnabas and Saul had left from). It was rugged country, riddled with rampant paganism.

Again, the goal was to reach out to the Jews first, so “Paul and his companions entered the synagogue (in Pisidian Antioch) on the sabbath and sat down,” and “After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the synagogue rulers (following standard procedure to give guests the chance to speak) sent word to them, saying, ‘Brothers, if you have a message of encouragement for the people, please speak,’” verses 14-15. Encouragement was Barnabas’ speciality, but it was Paul who stood up to speak in his first recorded sermon as an apostle, and what he said was so powerful that the following sabbath “almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord,” verse 44. So what exactly did Paul say, and why did it have such an impact?

Well, Stephen’s history lesson about Israel in Acts 7 must have hit Paul hard, because his first job as the apostle Paul was to take his listeners through that **same history of Israel** - and for the same reason too, to sear into their brains that “the God of the people of Israel chose our fathers,” Acts 13:17. And why was that important? Because it got the point across that the story of Israel, from its very beginning, had been initiated and directed **every step of the way by God**. So there had to be a monumental reason for God doing that, and why he’d “made Israel prosper during their stay in Egypt,” and why “with mighty power he led them out of Egypt,” and why, verse 18, he then “endured their conduct 40 years in the desert” as well.

It was all based on a promise he’d made, that Israel would inherit the land of Canaan (verse 19). And God backed up that promise with action: he “overthrew seven nations in Canaan” over the next 10 years or so, which - added to the 40 years the Israelites spent in the wilderness and the 400 years they spent in Egypt - “took about 450 years” in all (verses 19-20).

But why is all this important? Because it forms the basis of **history as it should have been written** in our history books. Because if it wasn't for God's power, love and faithfulness in choosing Abraham, creating the nation of Israel from Abraham's descendants, sticking to his promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob ("our fathers" in verse 17) and keeping the nation of Israel alive, despite how badly they behaved, we humans wouldn't have a history worth writing about at all.

And why is that? Because - continuing in Paul's history lesson - after "God gave Israel judges until the time of Samuel the prophet" (verse 20), and after he gave Israel a king of their own (21), and after he made David their king (22), it was from "David's descendants that **God brought to Israel the Saviour Jesus**, as he promised (in 2 Samuel 7:12-13)," **verse 23**.

So Jesus didn't just appear out of nowhere. He was **totally tied in with the history of Israel** too, because that's what all this history of judges, prophets and kings was for: it was all heading to one end and one purpose, to the existence of Jesus the promised descendant of David (Matthew 1:1).

And why was the existence of Jesus so important? Because Jesus was Israel's "Saviour" (Acts 13:23). It's what John the Baptist had been sent to the Jews to make clear too - which Paul mentions next because, to the Jews in these far off provinces, John was still the big hero due to the huge impact he'd had in Judea (verse 24). But John had spoken of one **much greater coming after him in verse 25**, "whose sandals I am not worthy to tie." The point being, that **everything in the history of Israel and the Jews pointed to Jesus**.

So what we've got from Paul's history lesson in eleven verses so far is God directing the entire history of Israel - the only history worth noting - toward this one end, to provide Israel with a Saviour, who was so much greater than John the Baptist and his ministry of repentance and water baptism.

And again, why was this important? Because, as Paul goes on to say in **verse 26**, "Brothers, children of Abraham AND you God-fearing Gentiles, **it is to us that this message of salvation has been sent.**"

In other words, we are now **living** what all that history in the Old Testament was leading up to. We are living what the only important history **worth** writing about was pointing to. We are living in the time promised to Abraham and David when we can experience **what Jesus being our Saviour means**. So we are now writing in **OUR** lives the only history worth noting on this planet, which is **how the salvation Jesus made possible unfolds in real human lives**.

And that's why we've been given the Holy Spirit, to enable us to be living witnesses to that. And if we ask "But why us?" - it's because "The people of Jerusalem and their rulers **did not recognize Jesus,**" **verse 27.** The one group of people who were supposed to know what their history was all about - that every bit of it was leading up to a Messiah coming to save Israel - not only didn't recognize Jesus as the Messiah, they even "condemned" him, which is exactly what the prophets in the Old Testament **said they would do** - in scriptures the Jews read in their synagogues every Sabbath too (verse 27).

Worse still "the (Jewish leaders) carried out all that was written (in the Old Testament) about Jesus" - including his undeserved death (verse 28). "But God raised Jesus from the dead, and for many days he was seen (by his disciples) and **they are now his witnesses to our people,**" **verse 30-31.**

So God again, in his faithfulness, kept the promise of salvation to Israel alive, and this was the "good news" Jesus' disciples were now witness to, **verses 32-33,** "that **what God promised our fathers (Abraham, David, etc.) he has fulfilled for us by raising up Jesus.**" Unfortunately, the Jewish leaders missed that too, even though the raising of Jesus was in their Old Testament scriptures as well, three of which are quoted by Paul in **verses 33 to 35,** one of which, Psalm 16:10, clearly states, "You will not let your Holy One see decay."

And why was that important? Because all human bodies decay after death, "But the one whom God raised from the dead did not see decay," **verse 37,** which clearly **set Jesus aside as "the Holy One."** So when Paul says in **verse 38,** "Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that **through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you,**" we can take it as certain we are totally forgiven by God for everything we've said, thought and done, because it's done "through Jesus" - whose body never decaying in the grave proved he truly was **the salvation-bringing Messiah** that all those prophecies and promises in the Old Testament were pointing to.

History as it should have been written, then, would have centred on the raising of Jesus to prove Jesus is our Saviour, because **the first great gift in the salvation Jesus made possible - is forgiveness.**

In the history of our own lives forgiveness is the most important thing that ever happened to us. It's the most important thing to happen to the whole world too, because forgiveness unlocks the door to **the second great "good news" salvation gift that Jesus made possible.** And that's **justification, verse 39,** that "Through Jesus everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses."

This was staggering news that the Jews and Gentiles in Pisidian Antioch had never heard before. All they knew was “Judaism” (verse 43) and the law of Moses (verse 39), which stirred Paul in **verse 41** to quote **Habbakuk 1:5**, that “I (God) am going to do something in your days that you would never believe, even if someone told you,” because here in Antioch it was actually happening. For the first time in these people’s lives they were hearing that **justification means being fully accepted by God, requiring nothing from them**, because God had taken care of all that through Jesus.

And for those of us now who believe that, God then sets about **writing the history of our lives the way it should have been written too** - which will sound impossible at times, because words like guilt, condemnation, rejection, and anxiety don’t appear in our story. Filling the pages instead are God’s grace, mercy, love, freedom, and healing from all the damage, hurt and scars we’ve picked up from thinking that life now and forever depended on us.

That’s why Paul and Barnabas “urged them (in Antioch) to **continue in the grace of God**,” **verse 43**, because grace was now the time of history they were living in. And it was so eye-opening to those people that many of them “invited Paul and Barnabas to speak further about these things on the next sabbath,” **verse 42**. But there were also Jews “filled with jealousy” in **verse 45**, who “talked abusively against what Paul was saying.”

So Paul simply quoted their own scriptures, that the understanding of salvation had been given to the Jews first (verse 46) to be “a light for the Gentiles (verse 47), that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth (Isaiah 49:6).” God meant the Jews to be the first to be “appointed for eternal life (verse 48),” but if they rejected it the apostles had God’s total permission to “turn to the Gentiles” instead (verses 46-47), an opportunity the Gentiles in Antioch leapt at and honoured in **verse 48**.

No wonder “the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit” in **verse 52**, because the seed of God’s amazing grace had been sown and it was already changing the lives of those who believed it. But what did Paul use to sow that seed in the first place? It was **the history of Israel, because it has been history’s greatest demonstration of God’s grace**, in how God faithfully stuck to his promises spanning thousands of years so that through Jesus, **Israel’s Saviour**, all us Gentiles too could be forgiven, relieved of our guilt, know we are loved and totally accepted by God, and be healed by him now as well.

No wonder “the word of the Lord spread through the whole region,” because this was history as they’d never heard it explained before. It was history as it should have been written - for the rest of us to experience too.