



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

A Long Story Punctuated by an Exclamation

Acts 13.16–41

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Introduction

Trends are worthy of our attention, but generalizing them can cause problems, as our cultural ambivalence about history illustrates. On one side, we see examples of ignorance and indifference about the past. For example, after the 2012 Grammy Awards featured Paul McCartney, one of my sons saw multiple social media posts wondering “who this McCartney guy is” and if he had ever done anything else in the music business. But as a culture, we are also fascinated with genealogy sites like Ancestry.com and TV shows where celebrities go in search of their family’s past. There seems to be some longing to break out of our live-for-the-moment existence and find a context for our lives.

Although I’ve met some church people who don’t see its importance, the Bible always tilts in the direction of knowing history. Even as the biblical story continues its progress, the writers remind readers of past events in God’s history with his people (cf. Pss 103–107). They knew the past had meaning for both the present and future. In fact, although we talk about Bible stories, plural, in truth, it tells just one. It begins with Abraham (Gen. 12.1–7); is fulfilled in the last days, the era in which we live (Acts 2.17; Heb 1.2); and will be ultimately completed in “the new heaven and new earth” (cf. Rev 21.1). Telling and teaching the significance of that story is what the earliest preachers did when they preached the gospel, as Paul’s sermon in Pisidian Antioch illustrates.

Setting and Audience

Antioch of Pisidia was the fifth stop on Paul’s first missionary trip (Acts 13.13–15). One of several cities in antiquity named Antioch, it was named by a Seleucid king in one of the dynasties that succeeded Alexander the Great; their capital was in Syria. By the 40s and 50s AD, it was ruled by the Romans and had the status of a colony. Its religious climate was diverse and included a temple to the Anatolian god Men Askaenos (paganism); a large temple platform probably associated with emperor worship; and a large Jewish population (Polhill, 2008, 2110).

Because of the Jewish presence, it is no surprise that Paul and Barnabas found a synagogue where they could attend a service. Present were native-born Jews, God-fearers (v. 16), and “devout converts [σεβομένων προσηλύτων, *sebomenōn prosēlytōn*] to Judaism” (v. 43), with “Gentiles” (ἔθνος, *ethnos*) nearby (vv. 46–48). Following the custom of synagogues at the time, they invited Paul and Barnabas to speak (v. 15).

Paul Preaches the Story (13.16–41)

Paul began his sermon with a review of the history we read in the Old Testament (13.16–25). He recounted Israel’s beginning as a nation (vv. 16–17) and reminded his hearers of the troubles their ancestors had experienced after their liberation from Egypt (v. 18). He then recalled how they conquered the promised land, the struggles they had in faithfully living in the land, and how they finally asked for a king, a position first filled by Saul (vv. 19–21). He also reminded them that the promises were focused on King David and his descendants (v. 22), emphasizing that Jesus and the events surrounding his entry into the world are not a different story, but the culmination of the story with which they were so familiar (23–25).

Having reviewed the familiar, he told them how the story had culminated in the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus (13.26–37). Notable in his telling is that he saw himself and his hearers as part of the story. Both the native-born Jews and the God-fearers were heirs, not just of David, but ultimately of Abraham (vv. 26, 36–40). But their Jewish brothers in Jerusalem ca. 30 AD had not understood that Jesus was the story’s fulfillment and had condemned and handed him over to the Roman governor Pilate to be put to death by crucifixion (vv. 27–29). But “God raised him from the dead” and he appeared to his followers who then became witnesses to the events (vv. 30–31).

This was “the good news” that he was bringing to them: “*that what God had promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus*” (v. 32). Paul emphasized that this was expected in their Scriptures (vv. 33–35; citing Ps 2.7; Isa 55.3; and Ps 16.10). In other words, it was all part of the story. And as Peter had done in Acts 2.22–35, Paul said that those texts could not refer to David, but only to Jesus “whom God raised up” (vv. 36–37).

In verses 38–41, he explained what the story meant for them: forgiveness was being declared (v. 38) and those who believed it were acquitted from their sins (“freed,” from δικαιοῶ [*dikaioō*]; translated “justified” in CSB, ESV note; “made right” in NIRV), an acquittal that was not possible under Moses’s law (v. 39). The story was complete and should be acted upon, a point Paul emphasized by quoting Habakkuk 1.5 as a warning to anyone inclined to reject it (vv. 40–41).

What It Means to Be Part of the Story

First, as people who are also spiritual heirs of the promise and story of its completion, we are part of something bigger than any other movement, crusade, or cause. Think of its duration, developed in a plan Paul will say elsewhere predates the world itself (Eph 3.11). God made a promise to Abraham and brought it about despite all the twists, turns, and failures that occurred. Just think of its scope, unlimited by boundaries, ethnicity, or eras (Acts 13.42, 44, 47): the thousands of Israel are welcome; the millions of the Americas—all the Americas—are welcome; the billions of Africa and Asia are welcome. Think also of its accomplishment: the

moral standards of Moses’s law could not bring the solution to the ultimate problem that the good news of Jesus brings.

Second, we are part of a story in which God never gives up. We see this, of course, in his persistence from Egypt through the judges, kings, resistance to the prophets, and incarnation of Jesus. But don’t miss Paul’s clinching point: death, our last and greatest enemy, has been defeated (13.36–37; cf. 1 Cor 15.26).

Therefore, third, we are part of a story that culminates with hope and life. Take note of the fact that as they preached the good news, neither Paul nor any other New Testament preacher ever concluded his presentation with the crucifixion; death is neither new nor good. Instead, they always went on to emphasize Jesus’s resurrection, not just as the basis for a hope of an afterlife, but as the hope for forgiveness and freedom itself. It is significant that forgiveness is not mentioned in Paul’s sermon until after he mentions the resurrection (13.38–39). Good news requires us to believe and preach all the gospel, that “Jesus our Lord ... was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (Rom 4.24–25). Without the entirety of that message, there is no hope for forgiveness, no real end to the story, no exclamation.

Conclusion

The story Paul told in that first century Pisidian Antioch synagogue is the story we celebrate every Lord’s day. It is the story of God’s plan and his unrelenting effort to see it work out right. It is the story of how he fully identified with us so that we can become like him. It is the story of how he overcame the one thing we can never conquer—and defeated it forever.

Acts 13 goes on to tell us that it’s possible to miss the wonder of that story, to scoff, failing to see that God is doing an unbelievable work in which we can participate (13.41). It also says that it is a story that can be met with rejoicing, hope, and eternal life (13.48). It thus presents us with a choice for how we will respond: Will we believe? Will we repent? Will we enter new life through baptism?

Works Cited

John B. Polhill. 2008. “Study Notes on Acts.” *ESV Study Bible*. ed. Lane T. Dennis. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

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