

# Acts 13:16-25

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*Paul preaches through the Hebrew scriptures (The Old Testament), tracing God's work and promises toward the Jewish People. God chose the Fathers of Israel, freed the Israelites and gave them the Promised Land, led them through judges and kings, such as David, a man who obeyed God. God brought a Savior to Israel from the line of David: Jesus. John the Prophet and Baptizer prepared the way for Jesus, preaching repentance and the greatness of the coming Savior.*

Having attended synagogue in the city of Pisidian Antioch in Galatia, Paul and Barnabas are invited by the local rabbis to speak any “word of exhortation” to the Jewish audience gathered there (Acts 13:15).

So *Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand*, he begins his sermon (v. 16). This sermon will begin with the Old Testament and walk his Jewish listeners through scripture to the present day, where he will share the good news that the Messiah had come to Israel and brought freedom and forgiveness from sin (Acts 13:38-39).

Paul greets his audience and urges them to pay close attention to what he will say:

*“Men of Israel, and you who fear God, listen (v. 17).*

The *Men of Israel* who are gathered there are, obviously, Israelites, Jews, who have built a life and community for themselves in Roman Galatia. But when Paul references *you who fear God*, he is addressing Gentile proselytes who are also in attendance to the synagogue that day.

After his sermon, he and Barnabas will be followed out of the synagogue by Jews and “God-fearing proselytes” (v. 43) who want to hear more of what they have to say. From this, we see some of the Gentiles in Pisidian Antioch had already converted to Judaism (“proselyte,” a non-Jew who becomes circumcised and follows the Mosaic Law). These are men who *fear God*, being thus far in their lives convinced that the God of Israel is the one true God (Deuteronomy 6:4-9), and have gone so far as to become culturally Jewish themselves.

Paul will reveal to this crowd what God has done for Jews and for Gentiles through His Son. All that he teaches is centered on the fact that God/Yahweh is the moving force in Israel's history. Everything happened due to God's direction, intervention, and sovereignty.

Paul starts at the beginning—the formation of Israel as a nation, which only happened through God's choosing:

*The God of this people Israel chose our fathers and made the people great during their stay in the land of Egypt, and with an uplifted arm He led them out from it (v. 17).*

Paul summarizes Israel's founding but gives credit to God at several junctures. *The God of this people Israel*, that is, "Yahweh," the One True God, *chose our fathers*, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (later named Israel).

God made a covenant with Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3). Abraham was no one special, just a man who lived in ancient Mesopotamia who believed God (Genesis 15:6). But God *chose* him, and his son Isaac, and Jacob, as patriarchs and progenitors of the nation of Israel.

God also *made the people* of Israel *great during their stay in the land of Egypt*.

To call the Israelites' experience in Egypt as *their stay in Egypt* is an understatement, for though the initial 70 family members were welcomed immigrants during a famine, over time the Egyptians made them into slaves (Exodus 1:5; Genesis 47:4-6, Exodus 1:8-14). But God *made the people* of Israel *great* during that time. He caused their population to multiply so significantly that it alarmed the Pharaoh, who feared they would overthrow him. At the right time, through Moses, God *with an uplifted arm* then *led the Israelites out from Egypt* (v. 17).

Paul points to God as the Chooser, the Sustainer, and the Rescuer of the Israelites.

He goes on, again framing the history of Israel through the actions and will of God.

*For a period of about forty years He put up with them in the wilderness* (v. 18). During the *wilderness* exile, God took care of Israel, and, as Paul phrases it, *He put up with them*. He tolerated them, He did not abandon them, despite their sin, their disobedience, their complaints, and their general lack of faith. Even though they had disobeyed and lost possession of their inheritance (to possess the Promised Land), God fully and miraculously cared for them, because they were His (Deuteronomy 8:3-5). This is consistent with God's promise, as God's promises are irrevocable (Romans 11:29).

The Israelites who were exiled in *the wilderness for a period of about forty years* lost out on entering the Promised Land, because they did not believe God would help them conquer it. Rather, they thought the Canaanites would kill them all. What they heard from God did not profit them because they did not mix it with faith (Hebrews 4:2). As a result, the first generation lost the opportunity to possess the inheritance of the land that had been granted them (Genesis 15:18; Hebrews 3:18-19).

This first generation of Israelites to leave Egypt was the same generation who saw God deliver them from Egypt, who saw the ten plagues of God, who walked across the parted sea and watched the waters close in behind them to drown the mighty armies of Egypt. They had seen God's presence as a pillar of smoke and fire, guiding them through unknown lands; they had eaten manna from heaven, food literally sent down from above to keep them alive.

That first generation of Israel had arguably seen more direct supernatural actions from God than any other people in all of history, save for the disciples of Jesus, and yet they did not have faith that God would help them conquer the Promised Land (Hebrews 4:2). So they were made to wander the *wilderness*, and God *put up with them* (Joshua 5:6).

Moving on to the generation that did conquer Canaan, Paul once more points to God as the reason this was accomplished:

*When He had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, He distributed their land as an inheritance—all of which took about four hundred and fifty years* (v. 19).

The *seven nations in the land of Canaan* include those ruled by the Hivites, the Girgashites, the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Jebusites, the Perizzites, and the Hittites. God was always the one leading the Israelites into battle during the Canaanite conquest and ensuring their victory (Joshua 1:9, 6:2, 6:20, 11:6).

God is often called “The Lord of Hosts” in the Old Testament. In Hebrew, “Hosts” is “Sabaoth,” which means “armies.” It refers to the angelic armies of heaven, whose commander is the Lord God. The phrase describes His might and power as He leads His army to defeat His adversaries (Amos 5:16, 9:5, Habakkuk 2:17).

There are many memorable battles where Israel was outmatched, yet prevailed because of God’s power. Israel’s greatest defeats were due to disobedience to God (Joshua 7:1-5, 10-12, Deuteronomy 1:41-46). It is God’s choosing, not based on Israel’s military merit, that determined the outcome of their battles. As David would declare in defiance of the blasphemy of Goliath the Philistine, “for the battle is the Lord’s and He will give you into our hands” (Samuel 17:47).

After God delivered the Promised Land to the Israelites, Paul says *He distributed their land as an inheritance* (v. 19) (Joshua 18-19). The *land* was divided up among the twelve tribes of Israel, *as an inheritance*, a promised possession from their Suzerain (Ruler) God. This was promised to Abraham, as God granted the land to his descendants as a reward for Abraham’s obedience in leaving his home and relatives (Genesis 15:18). The second generation possessed their inheritance by showing faith in Him by entering the Land, what the generation before them failed to receive because of their lack of faith (Hebrews 3:16-19).

Paul estimates the events he has just described—the choosing of the patriarchs to the possession of the Land—as having occurred over a period of *about four hundred and fifty years* (v. 19). ([See the choosing of the patriarchs on the timeline](#))

He continues:

*After these things*, after the conquest and possession of the Promised Land, God *gave* the Israelites *judges* to maintain justice and protect the land (Deuteronomy 16:18). These *judges* were used by God and His favor was with them, mostly in securing their possession of the Promised Land from the many enemies surrounding Israel (Judges 2:16-18). God was still Israel’s King, and the judges were His servants carrying out His will.

But eventually the people of Israel became discontent with this system. The period of the judges lasted, as Paul teaches, *until Samuel the prophet* (v. 20). *Samuel* and his sons were the last judges of Israel (1 Samuel 7:6, 8:1). This was the period of self-governance, where the people were assigned by God to follow His laws and choose their own judges. When the people asked for a king, God said they had rejected Him as king to rule over them (1 Samuel 8:7).

When *Samuel the prophet* grew old he appointed his sons to be judges over Israel, and they proved to be corrupt and oppressive. The Israelites desired to be like all other nations, who had kings, and reasoned that a king would be more beneficial to them rather than living as a self-governing nation based upon the rule of law, private property, and consent of the governed, as God had designed Israel to be.

*Then they asked for a king, and God* honored their request. He knew they would one day desire a human king (Deuteronomy 17:14-15). However, the people did not wait for God's timing, they chose their own timing.

So God granted their request, but warned them that in asking for a king they were asking to be oppressed (1 Samuel 8:18). However, the people did not listen and insisted on having their way. So, as God often does, He judged them by giving them what they asked for (Romans 1:24, 26, 28).

He chose their king for them, through *Samuel the prophet*, and gave them *Saul the son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, for forty years* (v. 21). Again, Paul is detailing how God is always at work throughout the history of Israel. *Saul the son of Kish*, a Benjamite, was picked out by God to be king, and his reign lasted *for forty years*. But Saul, though he began as a righteous king, ultimately disobeyed God, and God raised up a new king.

Paul continues his synagogue sermon and says,

*After He [God] had removed him [Saul], He raised up David to be their king* (v. 22) (Samuel 16:1, 12-13).

David was a man of great faith and obedience to God (1 Samuel 17:45-47). David fit God's requirements for the man who should be ruler over Israel: *concerning whom He also testified and said, 'I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after My heart, who will do all My will.'* (v. 22) (1 Samuel 13:14).

David put all of his trust in the Lord throughout his life (Psalm 27:1, Psalm 9:1). He was in line with God's will; he did what God commanded him to do, he worshipped God, he wrote 73 psalms all centered on God. David was a man who wanted the things God wanted, *a man* in line with God's heart., and he did *all* of God's *will* as shepherd, warrior, and king (1 Samuel 17:34-37, 1 Samuel 18:7, 2 Samuel 5:17-21).

Saul continues to build the case for Jesus in his synagogue sermon. Comparing the heart of Solomon, David's son, to his father David's heart, the author of 1 Kings wrote, "his heart was not wholly true to the Lord his God, as was the heart of David his father" (1 Kings 11:4). Solomon sinned and became an idolator. Although David sinned, he returned to God, and never broke faith with God nor worshipped anything but God.

Later in 1 Kings, David is remembered for his faithfulness to God in all matters, save for the grievous sin where he exploited Bathsheba and murdered her husband, "because David did what was right in the eyes of the Lord and did not turn aside from anything that he commanded him all the days of his life, except in the matter of Uriah the Hittite" (1 Kings 15:5).

David was a forerunner of Jesus the Messiah (Ezekiel 34:23-24), except he was still a sinful man; despite his near perfect faithfulness, he still fell short. Jesus on the other hand knew no sin (2 Corinthians 5:21).

It was to David and one of David's heirs that God promised to establish a forever throne:

“When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.”  
(2 Samuel 7:12-13)

Continuing his sermon to the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch, Paul references this promise from God: *From the descendants of this man David, according to promise, God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus* (v. 23).

From there, Paul turns his sermon to the Gospel (“good news”) of Jesus. He transitions from God's work in the Old Testament to His recent work through Jesus, His Son. Jesus was one of the *descendants of David* on both His mother's side and His adoptive father's side (Luke 3:23-38, Matthew 1:1-17). Paul is telling these men and women that God has now kept His *promise* by bringing to *Israel a Savior* (Numbers 23:19). This *Savior* is *Jesus*.

Having declared *Jesus* as the *Savior* whom God promised would come, Paul details the events leading up to Jesus's death and resurrection, beginning with *John* the Baptizer, who prepared the way for the *Savior*:

*after John had proclaimed before His coming a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel* (v. 24).

John had *proclaimed* the coming of the Messiah, and was preparing Israel for this arrival of the Promised One sent by God. John called the Jews to a *baptism of repentance*. *Baptism* is a washing through immersion, through completely dunking one's body under water to come up clean. The Jews practiced many forms of baptism as a ritual for purification.

This was a new sort of baptism to show *repentance*. *Repentance* is to change one's mind into a new direction.

This *baptism of repentance* was specifically geared toward providing an outer demonstration of an inner reality: a change of heart. John was teaching: “Turn from your old ways. There is about to be a complete change of who is in charge.” Crowds of people from all over Jerusalem and Judea took part in this baptism.

The people John baptized wished to be prepared for the coming of Heaven's kingdom. That was what John *proclaimed*: the message of repentance through immersion into water as a sign of new commitment to God and His approaching kingdom ushered in by God's Anointed One (Messiah).

Paul highlights the difference between John, a faithful prophet, and the greatness of the Messiah:

*And while John was completing his course, his ministry, he kept saying, 'What do you suppose that I am? I am not He. But behold, one is coming after me the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to untie.'* (v. 24-25).

John the Baptist was forthright in telling the crowds that he was not the Messiah: *I am not He. I am not God's anointed Savior*. John described the Messiah whom he was preparing Israel to receive as someone so great that he (John) was not worthy to *untie* His sandals.

John was loved by many of the people of Israel. Some thought he might be the Messiah, which is why he publicly denied it. Thousands of Israelites listened to him, repented, and were baptized by him. Even Jesus said he had achieved greatness beyond all other men (Matthew 11:11).

But to emphasize how great the Messiah was, John said of himself that he was so lowly compared to him, he could not perform the smallest servant's task of removing His sandal (Matthew 3:11).

In the telling of Paul's synagogue sermon, Paul is showing his audience how God was at work through John the Prophet and Baptizer to get Israel ready for their Savior, but is quoting John's own words to emphasize to these Jews in Pisidian Antioch how great Jesus the Savior was, surpassing even the most upright and obedient man, such as John.

### **Biblical Text**

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