

Acts 13:38-43

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Paul explains that through faith in Jesus, anyone who believes will be forgiven of their sins and freed from the power of sin in their lives. Through Jesus we are seen as righteous in God's sight. Paul warns his listeners to believe, lest they suffer God's wrath toward those who scoff at Him. Paul's audience begs Barnabas and him to return a week later to preach again. Paul encourages the Galatians in their new faith.

Paul comes to the call to action for his audience, the moment where those who have listened to him have a choice to make, given the knowledge they now have from his teaching. Paul begins, *Therefore*, in light of everything he has explained—Jesus is the Son of God, He has fulfilled the Scripture's prophecies, He was crucified and resurrected from the dead—*Therefore*:

Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through Him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you and through Him everyone who believes is freed from all things, from which you could not be freed through the Law of Moses (v. 38-39).

Here Paul summarizes what Jesus accomplished, why he earlier called Him “Savior” and called his message “this message of salvation” (Acts 13:23, 26). Paul is speaking directly to these men and women: *let it be known to you*.

Understand this, know it, this is the point. It is *through* Jesus that *forgiveness of sins* is available. Paul says this *forgiveness of sins is proclaimed* to his listeners; the message is for them. That *through Him*, through Jesus, *everyone who believes is freed from all things* (v. 39).

The phrase *is freed* is derived from the Greek word “dikaiōō,” often translated as “justified.” Paul is saying that through faith in Jesus, our *sins* are forgiven. God wipes our slate clean. But this forgiveness is not a one-time action; our entire person is changed—*everyone who believes* in Jesus receives a spiritual healing that is so thorough that Jesus and His followers describe it as a new birth (John 3:3, 2 Corinthians 5:17). It is a gift, freely given. It is a gift that cannot be earned nor lost.

We are made just, we are made right in God's sight through the agency of Jesus's death and resurrection. Our crookedness, our fallen nature, our sinful disposition, our state of being totally lost—this is all fixed when we believe in Jesus. It is like a broken bone being set back into place and instantly healing.

We are like lost sheep brought back into the fold (Luke 15:2-7). We who were once hopelessly wrong are made right. Thus, from the point of believing and onward, we are freed from the power sin has over us, and now have the capacity to choose to walk in the justified life Jesus has given us (Romans 6:4-6).

Paul also makes note of what won't save anyone: *the Law of Moses*. This will be a theme in much of Paul's teaching and writing, and will attract many enemies who plague his ministry (as soon as a week from the preaching of this sermon—Acts 13:44-45).

The *Law of Moses* does not free anyone from sin or from our sin nature. Anyone trying to follow the *Law of Moses*, Jew or Gentile, cannot *be freed* from sin *through* it. Only belief in Jesus brings *forgiveness* of sin, being made just in God's sight. It is also through Christ that believers gain freedom from the power of sin. Further, every believer is sealed with the Holy Spirit and given the Spirit's power in which they can walk and overcome sin (Ephesians 1:13; Galatians 5:16).

Paul then warns his audience to not only hear but to believe. Since the *Law* cannot free them from sin, and since belief in Jesus brings *forgiveness of sins* and freedom from the power of sin to enslave us, Paul's listeners should *Therefore take heed*. To *heed* means to do, to act according to what has been spoken:

Therefore take heed, so that the thing spoken of in the Prophets may not come upon you:

'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.' " (v. 40-41).

Paul's warning comes with another prophecy from the Jewish scriptures: Habakkuk 1:5. In its meaning at the time it was written, Habakkuk was describing the coming invasion of Babylon; God had sanctioned an evil people (the Babylonians) to invade and conquer Israel, as punishment for Israel's sin and failure to obey the covenant it had made with God. This was according to the provisions of the covenant Israel had entered into with God (Deuteronomy 28:15-68).

Here Paul uses God's declaration to show how the forgiveness brought by Jesus Christ's death and resurrection is *a work* which God had accomplished which *scoffers will never believe*, even *though someone should describe it to you*.

Disbelievers and *scoffers* will not believe the great *work* God has accomplished because it does not fit into their expectations. Just as the *scoffers* and sinners in Habakkuk's day did not believe that Babylon would conquer Israel, they were proven wrong, and eventually had to *marvel* that God indeed allowed a pagan nation to punish His covenant people, and *perish* because they had mocked God rather than trust and obey Him.

Likewise, many Jews scoffed at Jesus and rejected Him as Savior, including some of the people of Jerusalem and their leaders, as Paul described earlier in Acts 13:27. Paul implies that *scoffers* who reject what God has done through Jesus will receive some sort of temporal punishment, just as the Israelites in Habakkuk's day did. This is why he warns his listeners to *take heed* and believe, so that they may avoid this punishment: so that *the thing spoken of in the Prophets may not come upon you*.

This fits with warnings the Apostle Peter, John the Baptizer, and Jesus Himself gave to those who rejected God's Messiah. When preaching at Pentecost, Peter urged the Jewish people to repent so that they might, "Be saved from this perverse generation!" (Acts 2:40) and in the following chapter, that if the Jewish people would "repent and return" then their sins would be forgiven, and Jesus might return and inaugurate His reign over the world and begin "the restoration of all things" (Acts 3:20-21).

This infers that had the Jews of that first generation received Jesus and believed in Him, He would have returned and set up His kingdom on earth. But because they rejected Him, Jerusalem was conquered and its temple destroyed stone by stone, as Jesus had predicted (Matthew 24:2). In his letter to the Romans, Paul asserts that Israel's failure to believe in Jesus created a windfall for the Gentiles, giving many generations time to be born again and enter His kingdom (Romans 11:22-23).

Peter mentioned the negative consequence of failing to heed Christ's message by quoting Moses from Deuteronomy 18:18-19, "And it will be that every soul that does not heed that prophet shall be utterly destroyed from among the people" (Acts 3:19-23).

Peter's warning to the Jewish people to be saved from their current, straying generation is an exhortation that they be saved from punishment reserved for that literal, current generation of Jews on earth. The nation had rejected God's Messiah, even though individuals had accepted Him. It seems that the rejection of the nation's leaders played an outsized role in the conclusion that Israel had rejected Jesus.

Just before His death and resurrection, Jesus pronounced a comprehensive condemnation against the Pharisees, the scribes, and the city of Jerusalem for persecuting God's prophets, stating that guilt and desolation will come upon that generation (Matthew 23:35-39). God often judges nations by giving it corrupt leaders.

This condemnation against Israel and its leaders is in line with the covenant made between God and the Jewish people. When establishing the covenant, God stipulated that He would bless obedience, and curse disobedience (Deuteronomy 28:1, 15). One of the curses promised for disobedience was that God would send a foreign invading army to attack Israel and lay siege to its cities (Deuteronomy 28:49, 52).

Jesus hinted at what the judgement for the current generation will be, while He and His disciples are departing from the Temple:

"Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, not one stone here will be left upon another, which will not be torn down."
(Matthew 24:2)

A generation by Biblical metric is forty years, just as the Israelites were exiled in the wilderness for forty years so that the old generation (everyone 20 years old and up) would die off, so that a new generation could enter the Promised Land (Numbers 14:28-29).

After Jesus's prophecy, God gave the Jewish people 40 years to repent of the corrupted Judaism and of killing the Messiah. Jesus began His ministry in 30 AD. Forty years later, the Roman general Titus will attack Jerusalem in 70 AD and demolish the Temple. According to the historian Josephus, Titus killed over a million Jews during the siege and ransacking (Deuteronomy 28:49-50, 52).

This was likely the immediate and physical manifestation of the "wrath to come" about which John the Baptizer was warning the Jewish people (Matthew 3:7). It was a temporal wrath, a judgement that would be felt here-and-now for a specific offense. God's wrath is poured out in

many case-by-case occasions, due to the specific sins of specific generations or people (to name a few examples: the Flood–Genesis 6:17-18, the Wilderness Exile–Numbers 14:28-29, the Babylonian Exile–Ezra 5:12, or the handing over of individual people to the destructive natural consequences of their sinful desires–Romans 1:18, 24, 26, 28)

This seems to be what Paul is referencing, though he would not yet have known the specifics of the coming wrath that was predicted. He would know only that the Messiah and the Apostles have warned against it.

Jesus may have revealed this coming wrath to Paul as well (Galatians 1:11-12, 2 Corinthians 12:1-5). Given that Paul quotes Habakkuk, it seems he has a general idea of what might come to those who scoff and reject God. Paul and his listeners knew the context of Habakkuk's prophecy which he quoted: the coming invasion from Babylon and the destruction of Jerusalem. Like Babylon, Rome will destroy Jerusalem only a couple of decades after Paul's sermon here in Acts 13.

The spiritual reality is clear: believe in Jesus and find life, or scoff at Him and perish (John 3:18). Jesus Himself gave the simplest and clearest illustration of faith leading to life and rejection leading to death:

“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.”
(John 3:14-15)

In this passage from the Gospel of John, Jesus was referring to an episode in the Jews' wilderness wanderings, where they were dying from venomous snake bites. God told Moses to make a bronze serpent and tell everyone that whoever looked upon the metal snake would not die from the venom.

God healed everyone who had faith in God's promise to simply look at the bronze serpent, hoping to be delivered from the venom (Numbers 21:4-9). Just so, that is all that is required to receive forgiveness of sins for anyone anywhere: enough faith to look upon Jesus, hoping to be delivered from the deadly venom of sin.

Paul's sermon ends with this call to believe in Jesus as well as the warning to those who do not *heed* this call.

Those in attendance at the synagogue that day were amazed by Paul's teaching:

As Paul and Barnabas were going out of the synagogue, the people kept begging that these things might be spoken to them the next Sabbath (v. 42).

Those Jews and proselytes who had heard Paul's sermon wanted him to come back to the synagogue a week later, and teach the same message on the *next Sabbath*. It sounds as though these people believed, and probably wanted to bring their friends and family with them to ensure that they heard the same *things* from the same teachers.

They were *begging* Paul and Barnabas for a follow-up message about the Messiah, about His death and resurrection, and the forgiveness found through faith in Him.

Not only were there demands for Paul and Barnabas to return to the synagogue and teach again, but many of their audience eagerly went out with them to learn more:

Now when the meeting of the synagogue had broken up, many of the Jews and of the God-fearing proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas (v. 43).

The *meeting* had ended, yet a large portion of the audience was so set on hearing from Paul and Barnabas again that they *followed* them out of the synagogue, both *Jews* and *God-fearing proselytes* (*proselytes* were Gentiles who had chosen to follow God and the Mosaic Law). Paul and Barnabas walked with these men and women gladly, and kept teaching them, *speaking to them*, and *urging them to continue in the grace of God* (v. 43).

The fact that Luke, the author of Acts, writes that Paul and Barnabas were *urging* these *Jews and God-fearing proselytes* to *continue in the grace of God* indicates that these people believed in Jesus. They had accepted all that Paul taught as true, and had put their faith in the Messiah for the forgiveness of their sins. Thus, Paul and Barnabas were encouraging the new believers to follow-through with this faith, to grow in it; they had begun a journey *in the grace of God*.

The word *grace* means God's favor. This Greek word ("charis") is translated "favor" in Luke 2:52, speaking of Jesus growing in "favor" ("charis") with both God and with man. Receiving the free gift of being justified in God's sight is receiving God's grace, which is His favor upon us through the death and resurrection of His Son on our behalf (John 3:16). But receiving that gift is just the beginning of being a new creation in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Scripture exhorts each believer to walk in obedience to God. The Bible tells us that God grants His favor ("charis") to those who are humble and walk in His ways (1 Peter 5:5). In this respect, God's favor is based on His own judgement of our deeds, which He will judge according to His own will (Hebrews 4:12). Even when God is judging our deeds, it is still a matter of God's mercy because there is no standard by which God can be held (2 Timothy 1:18). God is existence itself, and is His own standard. Therefore, all favor that comes from God is a matter of His mercy and is appropriately referred to as *grace*.

Although God cannot be held to any standard, He makes clear to us what He approves. He approves and rewards faithfully walking in His ways (Hebrews 11:6). Paul here begins for these new believers what was one of his constant themes—the continuing and the finishing of that journey of faith and obedience, resulting in the great rewards promised by God (1 Corinthians 9:24-27, Philippians 3:13-14, 2 Thessalonians 3:13, 2 Corinthians 4:16-18, Galatians 5:25, 6:9, 2 Timothy 4:7).

Biblical Text

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,

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⁴² **As Paul and Barnabas were going out, the people kept begging that these things might be spoken to them the next Sabbath. ⁴³ Now when the meeting of the synagogue had broken up, many of the Jews and of the God-fearing proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas, who, speaking to them, were urging them to continue in the grace of God.**