

Acts 13:44-52

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Paul preaches in Pisidian Antioch again, with most of the city gathered to hear him. But certain jealous Jewish leaders interrupt him and slander him. Paul and Barnabas condemn these men, saying that if they will reject God's offer of eternal life, then Paul and Barnabas will preach it to the Gentiles. The Gentiles are excited to hear this, and many believe. The number of believers grows in that area, until the Jewish opponents organize a persecution that drives Paul and Barnabas out of town. But the new believers in Jesus in Pisidian Antioch do not abandon their faith. God sustains them through His Spirit, giving them joy.

One week earlier, Paul gave a sermon to the Jews and proselytes gathered in the local synagogue of Pisidian Antioch. In this Sabbath sermon, he showed God's work in the Old Testament, how God worked through Jesus, that Jesus was the Savior who had died and been raised from the dead, fulfilling all the prophecies of the Old Testament. He told those gathered that faith in Him resulted in the forgiveness of sins and the freedom from being a slave of our sin nature (Galatians 5:1, Romans 6:22).

The audience who heard him speak was so enthused by the gospel ("good news") that they invited Paul and Barnabas to come back the following Sabbath and preach again. The men and women who heard Paul wanted to invite others to come hear this message of salvation. Paul and Barnabas graciously comply:

The next Sabbath nearly the whole city assembled to hear the word of the Lord (v. 44).

The reception to the gospel message will not be so friendly on this *Sabbath*. Luke, the author of Acts, describes that *nearly the whole city* came to hear Paul speak. This gathering must have taken place in a location other than the synagogue, which would not have housed *nearly the whole city*. We can imagine Paul and Barnabas in the central marketplace, surrounded by a great crowd of people.

As Paul preaches, enemies emerge and begin to sabotage his effort to spread the gospel message:

But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began contradicting the things spoken by Paul, and were blaspheming (v. 45).

Throughout the New Testament, many authors like Luke and Paul refer to *the Jews* to reference a certain group of Jewish people. When writing that *the Jews* began disrupting Paul's sermon, Luke obviously does not mean all of *the Jews* present. Paul and Barnabas themselves are *Jews*. A week prior, after Paul's first sermon, many of *the Jews* apparently believed his message and followed him out of the synagogue, begging him to return to speak again (Acts 13:42-23).

Here in verse 45, as in much of the New Testament (John 10:24), *the Jews* represent certain Jewish leaders, who are often hostile to Jesus or His representatives and often stir up violence against them. That is what happens in this passage.

These Jewish opponents saw *the crowds*, they saw how many hundreds (or possibly thousands) of people were listening to Paul proclaim Jesus as the Messiah. Luke clarifies their motivation for wishing to silence Paul: these *Jews* were *filled with jealousy*. This was one of the motivations of Jesus's enemies among the group of Jewish leaders called Pharisees and Sadducees (John 11:47-48, Matthew 27:18).

These leaders watched the people listen to someone else and feared that they would lose their influence and power over them. Being filled with *jealousy*, they start arguing with Paul. They were *contradicting the things spoken by Paul*. It is inferred that these disrupters were interrupting his sermon. We can imagine them shouting out slander, perhaps accusing him of speaking falsely, or calling him a fool.

They also began *blaspheming*, meaning they spoke evilly about the gospel message of Paul and Barnabas, which means they are speaking falsely about God. During His ministry, Jesus was accused of being a servant to demons (Luke 11:15). These Jews may have said similar things. Paul was speaking truthfully about the scripture and about Jesus the Anointed One (Christ). The crowd was opposing, speaking untruly (*blaspheming*).

Paul and Barnabas match the fervor of their opponents, though not with evil words or insults. Luke says they *spoke out boldly* in response to these opponents (v. 46). Based on their reply, it seems that they were expecting this reaction from among the Jews sooner or later:

Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and said, "It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you first; since you repudiate it and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles (v. 46).

As God's chosen people, it was the right of the Jews to receive the *word of God* before the rest of the world, indeed, it *was necessary* for them to hear the gospel *first*. Jesus ministered similarly, coming as a Messiah to Israel, even though He would ultimately be rejected (Matthew 15:24).

Paul and Barnabas tell their opponents with some sarcasm that *since* they *repudiate* God's word and *judge* themselves *unworthy of eternal life*, then they will be left to themselves. They will have their way, and be allowed to reject the gospel.

Paul and Barnabas will leave them alone. They have rejected God's gift of salvation from sin through faith; they do not want this offer of *eternal life*. If these Jewish leaders do not want to hear *the word of God*, then, "*Behold,*" says Paul, "See! Pay attention. *We are turning to the Gentiles*. We will bring God's word to those who want it." As with Jesus, it appears that the decision of the Jewish leaders is attributed to the whole, even though many individual Jews still came to faith.

Paul and Barnabas explain that they knew that ultimately the Jews would reject their message, because God had already told them that their ministry would be for the sake of the rest of the world—*the Gentiles*.

Paul and Barnabas continue, again citing a passage from the Old Testament scriptures: *For so the Lord has commanded us,*

*'I HAVE PLACED YOU AS A LIGHT FOR THE GENTILES,
THAT YOU MAY BRING SALVATION TO THE END OF THE EARTH.'* ” (v. 47).

Here they quote Isaiah 49:6. The full quotation is,

“He says, ‘It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant
To raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of Israel;
I will also make You a light of the nations
So that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

In this “My Servant” prophecy, God is clearly speaking to His Messiah, promising the full restoration and redemption of all peoples. The “My Servant” prophecies show the Messiah as a suffering servant, which reflects Jesus’s first arrival to earth, where He came to serve (Matthew 20:28).

But this passage emphasizes that God sent the Messiah to all peoples, not just the Israelites. Paul and Barnabas rightly apply it to themselves as apostles of Jesus (Acts 14:4, 14). Apostles were delegates, ambassadors of a greater authority. Paul and Barnabas were acting on behalf of their king, Jesus, to spread His good news of salvation. God sent Jesus to die for the entire world, because of His love for the world (John 3:16).

The Gentiles in the audience for this debate are overjoyed to hear that this message of salvation through faith in the Jewish Messiah is available for them as well:

When the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed (v. 48).

This seems to shut down the Jewish opponents that day. The *Gentiles* hear Paul declaring that this message of salvation is for them, and they begin *rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord*. While the Jewish opponents had tried to silence and humiliate Paul, it did not prevent the *Gentiles* from receiving the message of the gospel and believing in it.

Luke writes that *as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed* in Jesus that day (v. 48). This brief sentence shows the paradoxical tension between God’s sovereignty and the free choice God gives to humans. God *appointed* those who *believed* to receive *eternal life*. But the people heard and chose to believe, exercising their God-given will. The ways of God are paradoxical to us, but not contradictory, because God is a person, and not bound by human logic. [For more, read our article “Founding Paradox.”](#)

God has *appointed* people to believe in His Son and receive *eternal life*. The Greek words translated *eternal life* are “aionios” and “zoe.” “Aionios” means “for the duration of the age.” In Romans 16:25, “aionios” is translated “for long” in the phrase “for long ages past.” The Young’s Literal Translation consistently renders “aionios” as “age during.”

“Zoe” is one of several Greek words translated to English as “life.” For example, “psuche” is often rendered “life” and generally refers to our physical being—about half the time “psuche” is translated as “soul.” “Zoe” generally refers to the quality of life experience. It can refer to the capacity to experience life as well as the actual experience of life. It can also refer to an

experience here in this life on earth or an experience of life after death. Context determines the application.

In this instance, those whom God has *appointed to eternal life* would by context necessarily include being born again, and receiving the gift of eternal life (John 3:3). This new spiritual birth is received by having sufficient faith to look upon Jesus, hoping to be delivered from the poisonous venom of sin (John 3:14-15).

But since it says God *appointed* those who believed to eternal life, it also follows that the appointment includes the experience of eternal life. This concept is validated throughout scripture, that God appoints each of His people to an inheritance, but leaves it to them to make the choice to possess that inheritance. The Old Testament provides the picture of the nation of Israel being told to cross the Jordan River and possess the land that God had granted them through Abraham over four hundred years prior (Genesis 15:18).

The New Testament book of Hebrews elevates this Old Testament picture as representing the New Testament reality that each believer is granted an inheritance to reign with Christ, and participate with Him as one of “many sons” whom He desires to share His “glory” of restoring humanity’s design to steward the earth (Hebrews 1:5, 8, 13, 2:9-10, 3:18).

Apparently the Jewish opponents retreat for a time to regroup, while Paul and Barnabas are able to continue to preach the gospel for an unspecified period:

And the word of the Lord was being spread through the whole region (v. 49).

Given the opportunity, unopposed, Paul and Barnabas preach *the word of the Lord* as far as they can into *the whole region*. It is possible that some of the new believers were helping *spread the word of the Lord* to their friends, family, and neighbors in the *region*. The gospel is spreading through this city and its surroundings, and is being met with *rejoicing and glorifying* of God for His news that faith in His Messiah makes all who believe right and without sin in God’s sight.

A church, an assembly of believers, is forming. Pisidian Antioch is probably one of the churches to which Paul wrote the Letter to the Galatians, as it is in the region called “Galatia” (Galatians 1:1).

However, the Jewish opponents to the Gospel return, with greater numbers and a successful plan to drive Paul and Barnabas away from that *region* of the world:

But the Jews incited the devout women of prominence and the leading men of the city (v. 50). Since Jews did not associate much with Gentiles unless they were proselytes or God-fearers, it could be that these *devout women of prominence* and *leading men of the city* were also members of the Jewish community in Pisidian Antioch. However, since there is a time gap in Luke’s narrative, it could also be that it took a measure of time for the Jewish opponents to engage with people they had not previously engaged with closely to sway them.

In any event, the opponent *Jews* went to the most respected *women* and *men* and *incited them* against Paul and Barnabas. Their aim is clear, and it is the same aim had by those who opposed

Jesus; to induce the Gentiles to use force in order to protect their own power within the community of Jews.

We can assume they mounted a typical political campaign and stoked fear and outrage in the minds of the most influential of their society. These *devout women* and *leading men* helped to organize a campaign to permanently get rid of Paul and Barnabas: they *instigated a persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district* (v. 50).

Luke does not give any more details other than that a *persecution* was *instigated*, resulting in driving Paul and Barnabas out of the *district* of Pisidian Antioch.

But Paul and Barnabas shook off the dust of their feet in protest against them and went to Iconium (v. 51).

Iconium is nearly 100 miles southeast of Pisidian Antioch, so the *persecution* of Paul and Barnabas *out of that district* was apparently quite thorough. We can infer that they spread the gospel for quite a radius. This is validated by the fact that Paul's letter to the Galatians was addressed to a region, Galatia, rather than a particular city.

In response to this mistreatment, Paul and Barnabas *shook off the dust of their feet in protest against* their opponents. Jesus commanded this same response in His disciples when He sent them out to preach about the coming Kingdom of Heaven,

“Whoever does not receive you, nor heed your words, as you go out of that house or that city, shake the dust off your feet.”
(Matthew 10:14)

This corresponds with Jesus's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount where He instructed His disciples not to waste time and effort giving corrective wisdom to people unwilling to listen. He called corrective wisdom “holy,” and instructed His followers not to give it to people who will attack you in return (Matthew 7:5-6). The idiom *shook off the dust of their feet* carries the ironic idea that “I don't want the dirt from that city making me unclean.” It carries the notion of cutting relations and moving on to the next venture: “If you don't want our help, we will stop offering it and move along.”

Luke ends this passage with this positive statement:

And the disciples were continually filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit (v. 52). It is most likely that by *the disciples* Luke is referring to the new believers in Pisidian Antioch, rather than Paul and Barnabas. In the following chapter, Luke uses separate terms to distinguish between Paul and Barnabas/new believers. Luke refers to the missionary team as “the apostles” on two occasions (Acts 14:4, 14), and calls a group of new believers *disciples* in several instances; one in which Luke writes that they “made many disciples” (Acts 14:20-22).

This final verse, then, seems to be showing that despite the Jewish elite driving the traveling preachers out of town, those who had believed in Jesus in Pisidian Antioch were not frightened or discouraged by the *persecution*.

Luke is saying that they continued in the faith, that they *were continually filled with joy*; their new love and faith in Christ was a source of ongoing gladness and excitement. Better still, they were *continually filled* also *with the Holy Spirit*. To be *filled* with the *Holy Spirit* is to walk in fellowship and obedience to the Spirit. The Gentile believers were indwelt by the Holy Spirit upon their new birth when they believed (Acts 10:44). But being filled by the Spirit is something that requires a walk of faith.

We can see this in Paul's letter to the Ephesians, where he exhorts them to "be filled with the Spirit." Paul's instruction on how to proceed to be "filled with the Spirit" is to speak to fellow believers in spiritual songs, verbally express a thankful attitude, concentrate on the best interest of others, and focus on pleasing God rather than men (Ephesians 5:18-21).

Although Paul and Barnabas, the men who had introduced the Galatians to the gospel, were driven out of town, *the Holy Spirit* came to dwell in all their hearts, to give them power to walk in faith (John 14:16-18, Acts 2:38, Romans 8:14). We see that they tapped into that power and were indeed *filled* with the *Spirit*, living lives of thanksgiving while seeking to please the Lord.

The *Jews* of Pisidian Antioch will plague Paul and Barnabas for the remainder of their missionary journey in Galatia. These Jewish opponents will follow Paul from town to town, rabble-rousing and adding a great deal of difficulty and suffering to his ministry and personal wellbeing. But Paul and Barnabas will endure it all, undeterred.

Paul mentions his experience in Pisidian Antioch to his protégé, Timothy, years later, as an example of a persecution from which God rescued him, concluding that, "Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:10-12).

For Paul, every moment of pain for Jesus's sake is worth it. As he reminds the Roman believers in his letter to them, regarding suffering for the gospel,

"For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us."
(Romans 8:18)

The "glory that is to be revealed" which Paul refers to is the "glory and honor" of being restored to our original design to reign as stewards of the earth, in harmony with God, nature, and one another (Hebrews 2:5-10). Jesus invites all His children to overcome suffering, as He overcame, and promises to share His throne with them as a reward (Revelation 3:21).

Paul states this directly in Romans 8:17. He first asserts that God is unconditionally the inheritance of all who believe, as every believer is God's child. To be born into God's family is a gift received by faith. It is a gift that is irrevocable, as are all of God's gifts (Romans 11:29). Then in the last part of the verse, Paul asserts that only those who "suffer with Him" are "fellow heirs with Christ."

Jesus inherited rulership over the world (Matthew 28:18, Hebrews 1:8). Those who suffer rejection from the world and continue to walk in faith, seeking to serve others and please God, will be greatly rewarded. Their experience of "eternal life" will be greatly enhanced, through their obedience of faith (1 Corinthians 2:9).

Biblical Text

⁴⁴ The next Sabbath nearly the whole city assembled to hear the word of the Lord. ⁴⁵ But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began contradicting the things spoken by Paul, and were blaspheming. ⁴⁶ Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and said, “It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you first; since you repudiate it and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. ⁴⁷ For so the Lord has commanded us,

**‘I have placed You as a light for the Gentiles,
That You may bring salvation to the end of the earth.’ ”**

⁴⁸ When the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed. ⁴⁹ And the word of the Lord was being spread through the whole region. ⁵⁰ But the Jews incited the devout women of prominence and the leading men of the city, and instigated a persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district. ⁵¹ But they shook off the dust of their feet in protest against them and went to Iconium. ⁵² And the disciples were continually filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.