

The Gospel As It Was Meant To Be Heard
Pastor Larry Kroon
Wasilla Bible Church
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At some point I'm convinced that everyone should give the gospel a fair hearing; that before they dismiss it out of hand, before they even accept it in enthusiasm, they need to give it a fair hearing. And by that I mean they need to hear it the way it was meant to be heard. It's not enough to simply hear the gospel the way sometimes we Christians package it, so that it's attractive to the trends and the moods of our time. Likewise, it's not enough to listen to the gospel the way sometimes it's misconstrued by critics that just wanna discredit it. It's vitally important, I'm convinced, that we hear the gospel the way it was meant to be heard in scripture. We hear it for what it is, an announcement—an announcement that at this time, at this circumstance, in this condition, you have the opportunity to leave the rebellion and enter in to God's glorious kingdom. This time, this place, this condition—you have the opportunity, because of Jesus Christ, to get free of the chronic rebellion that has gripped mankind from the beginning, and enter into the freedom, and the wonder, and the glory of God's rule and His kingdom in Jesus Christ.

That's the gospel the way it was meant to be heard. And today I want to make sure we hear it that way. And so we're gonna go into the book of Acts, chapter 13; the book of Acts, chapter 13, verses 15 through 41. It is a gospel message. In fact, it is the first message we have recorded that was delivered by the Apostle Paul. We know he had preached before this, but this is the first example we have of the Apostle Paul, the greatest preacher of the New Testament era...this is the first example we have of one of his sermons, where he preached the gospel and he presented it the way it's meant to be heard. And we're gonna walk through that today.

Let me set the historical situation for you just a bit so you have a sense of where we are in the book of Acts, chapters 13-14. We are ten years after Jesus Christ has been crucified, and buried, and rose again. And He's returned to heaven, but He's commissioned His followers to go out and tell others about Him, to give testimony to the reality of Jesus Christ, the risen Lord of all. And they have spread out. And as we come to Acts chapter 13 and 14, they've spread up the coast of the Mediterranean, up the east coast of the Mediterranean there; they have spread up there and they have reached the city of Antioch. And there a church has been established. And that church is where the Apostle Paul is.

And he is gonna be sent out from there with a friend, or partner, named Barnabas. And they're gonna go south to the island of Cyprus, and then they're gonna go north from there, and they're gonna make their way across the ocean and up inland, a hundred miles inland, to another city that had the name Antioch, only they called this one Pisidin Antioch. So you got Syria Antioch and Pisidin Antioch. And they make their way to that city. It's a central city in the Galatian region of Asia Minor, which we would now call Turkey. It was a city established by the Romans. It had a mixed population of Roman military, Roman government individuals, and then they had people from that region that were there; and there were Jews there that had been scattered in the centuries before, out of Jerusalem, in the great Diaspora and the exile. So there was a Jewish population and there was a Roman population. There was a local population. And this was a high country town; it was about three thousand feet above sea level. It was a hard journey to get there from the sea coast, about a hundred miles through the mountainous terrain where there was a lot of bandits.

Paul at this time was very sick, very sick; the thought was that he might even die as he made this journey. But he's there in Pisidin Antioch. And it's there that he goes...which was their pattern, he and Barnabas...they would first go to the Jews, because they were the ones who had been looking for the Messiah. And so they went to the synagogue, the place of worship where the Jews were, and there they began to preach. And we'll pick up what Paul does there in verse 16 of chapter 13, where we have Paul, we're told, stood up... The synagogue service has been going, they've read some scripture, they've said some prayers, and the synagogue leaders look at these two men that have come in. And Paul is obviously dressed like a rabbi, a traveling teacher. And they look at them and say, 'Do you have any words of encouragement for our people?' They didn't get a lot of traveling teachers often, and so they asked Paul to teach. And he stands up, in verse 16. We're told that he says

Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand, he said, "Men of Israel, and you who fear God, listen."

And now he begins to give his message. He says...and I'm gonna read just a few verses here so you can get a feel of the flow of his message as he starts in. And he goes like this. He says

“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. For a period of about forty years He put up with them in the wilderness. And when He had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, He distributed their land as an inheritance—all of this time took about four hundred and fifty years.

“After these things,” Paul goes on as he talks to these Jewish individuals, he says

After these things He gave them judges, and Samuel the prophet. Then they asked for a king, and God gave them Saul the son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, for forty years. And after He removed him He raised up David to be their king, concerning whom He also testified and said, “I have found in David the son of Jesse, a man after My own heart, who will do all My will.”

And then he makes this statement, and this is the heart of his message. This is kinda the central thrust of his message. This is the thematic statement. He says this...

From the descendants of this man,

...of David, from the descendants of this Israelite king named David...

...according to the promise, God has brought to Israel a Savior named Jesus.

That’s the central theme...of the sense...of the sermon, and when we read it after that intro some of us may be a little bit lost. He’s speaking to a group of individuals who grew up with all the Old Testament stories. They knew about the exodus; they knew about the judges; they knew about Saul, and Samuel, and David. And this was a Jewish audience, so they could identify with what he was talking about. Some of us may not have that heritage. We may not have grown up around those Old Testament stories. And when he starts talking about those things, we kinda, ‘What in the world is this about?’ And he talks about this special promise, of a descendant of David, and we’re saying, ‘What’s that?’

And so what I thought I’d do is back up just a second and give you a little more background. And this time we’re gonna call it the Biblical Situation. I’ve given you the historical situation—they’re on this mission journey, and it’s about ten years after Christ, and Paul’s preaching. But there’s a biblical situation we need to be aware of as he preaches. And I’m gonna use two words to give you a key to this biblical situation, the reality that the Bible speaks of that lies behind this message and these Old Testament stories.

And the first word I’m gonna give you is ‘rebellion’...the word rebellion. That’s the biblical perspective that lies behind what Paul’s talking about. You see, early, early, early in human history, man rejected God’s rule. Mankind said, “We will go our own way.” They rejected God’s rule. Now, they still oftentimes want His protection; they want His care, they want His provision. But humanity draws a line when it says, ‘God wants us to do this. God says we must do this. God rules us.’ We draw a line and we say, ‘No, we’re gonna go our way.’ And it’s from the earliest pages of human history; it’s a chronic condition of humanity, and each and every one of us are born into that rebellion and are part of it. It doesn’t always take the form of open defiance. There are not many who just take the attitude of the aggressive atheist that says there is no God, or the moral anarchist that says there’s no right or wrong. It seldom takes the form of open defiance. It usually takes the form of a passive resistance, both culturally and individually.

You see, as rebels...as those who are resistant to the rule of God...we will often talk of God and we will speak of God, and we will go through worship of God. We will build whole religions dedicated to God—but it is God as we define Him. It is the God that we conceive of. It is God the way we think He ought to be. In early times people fashioned their gods into little idols. And they would make intricate ones, some of them would make sloppy ones out of wood, some would make ornate, huge ones out of gold. They would make idols and call them their gods. Modern man doesn’t do it that way. What we do is form our ideas about God; some of them are small and sloppy, some of them are rich and vibrant and expansive and imaginative. But they’re our ideas about who God is, what He’s like, what He should do, and how we should relate to Him. It’s God as we define Him. It’s not open defiance; it’s passive resistance. It says, “God, we’re not gonna let You tell us who You are, and what matters to You, and how to relate to You. We’re gonna tell You what You should be like, and how You should relate to us.”

Moral law...you'll seldom find a person that takes a complete anarchist view towards morality. They can't get there logically, and they can't live there practically. We all, at some point, will talk about things being right and wrong, fair or not fair, good or bad. The thing is, we do it on our terms. That's passive resistance. We determine for ourselves what is right, what is wrong. Nobody else tells us. We'll determine what are the just consequences when wrong is done, and what are the fair rewards when right is done. We will decide whether what we've done is really right or wrong. We'll be the evaluator of that, and we'll be the evaluator of how serious it is. We will be both our own lawgiver and our own judge. Some of us are very moral with that, some of us are very lax with that; but across the whole spectrum it's law on our terms. That's the rebellion, and it's been there from the beginning of human history. Mankind has said, 'God, we do not want You to rule us.' And by the way, that's why we have the world we have today. We've said, 'God, keep Your hands off. Come when we want Your protection; come when we want Your provision; but don't try to rule us.' That's why we have the world we have today.

There's a second aspect to that biblical situation, another word. We've got the word 'rebellion', and if you don't read the scriptures with that in the background you can't understand the scriptures. But there's a second thing you need to understand as you go through the scriptures. If you're gonna hear the gospel the way it's meant to be heard, you need to pick up on the word 'redemption', of 'deliverance'. And that was the promise that God had made—that in the midst of that human rebellion, in the midst of all that resistance to His rule, whether it's aggressive or whether it's passive, He is going to choose a people...in fact, He chose a people, the people of Israel. And out of that people He is going to raise up a savior, a leader who would take and He would lead...this leader, this savior would lead people back in to God's kingdom. He would rescue people from the rebellion and bring them under the rule of God.

And that's what Paul's talking about as he introduces this gospel message. In that rebellion God had made a promise that there would be redemption, there would be a savior who would come and He would be a descendant of the great king David. And the Israelites spoke of Him as the Messiah; and He would come and He would lead people out of that rebellion, out of that resistance, into the freedom and the wonder of the kingdom of God. And that's the background as Paul introduces his message.

And then, when he comes to his thesis, when he comes to his central idea, when he comes to the point that everything revolves around, he makes it very clear that according to that promise—that promise of a Messiah who would lead us out of the rebellion—God has brought to Israel a savior named Jesus. That's Paul's central message—the One who can lead us out of the rebellion has been given according to promise, and His name is Jesus. For Paul, that wasn't theological abstraction. It wasn't spiritual exploration. It wasn't religious philosophy. It was a historical fact: the savior has been sent!

He goes on from there as he goes on with his message and he explains that those who were in Jerusalem when that Messiah came, and the rulers of that city, rejected that Messiah. They asked Pilate that He be executed and He was. He was put to death; as the text goes on Paul describes that. The Messiah was rejected, He was put to death; and then he comes to the glorious statement, the wonderful statement,

"But God raised Him from the dead."

'God raised Him from the dead. He's not dead. He's been exalted as King over all.'

Then, following up on that, he comes up with two 'therefore' statements. He quotes some Old Testament psalms to show how this is what the prophets talked about would happen. And then he makes two statements, kinda therefore statements, as he gets down to the conclusion of his sermon. And the first one is this; verse 38, he says "Through Him," through Jesus...he says "Therefore through Him," because God has raised Him from the dead, therefore

"...forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you."

Forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. In other words, what he's saying is all the things that you did wrong in your rebellion have been forgiven. In other words, Paul stands in front of this group of people who are part of the rebellion and he announces to them that there is amnesty, and everything they've done wrong can be wiped off their record. He says, 'I proclaim to you forgiveness through this One named Jesus.'

Then he goes on and he adds another statement. He goes on and he adds another statement, and that one is this:

"...and through Him everyone who believes is freed..."

...and the term actually is the term 'justified'...

"...from all things, which the Law of Moses could not set you free from [or 'justify' you from]."

And a little different idea here than forgiveness...the idea of being justified, it's the idea of being set right. And so the sense is 'You know, I can announce forgiveness to you, that your past has been wiped clean, and I can also announce to you that you can be set right with God, that you can be given full citizenship, full standing, in God's kingdom. You can be set free of all the consequences and all the problems that you had as a sinner, as a rebel. You can have right standing with God—forgiven, justified through this One named Jesus.' That's the announcement. And again, it's not religious philosophy, it's not spiritual exploration. It is an announcement. Jesus is alive! You can be forgiven and you can have right standing with God.

The important...when he talks about 'through Him'...because in the last part of this verse he says, 'You know, this is stuff that can't happen through the Law of Moses. It won't work for God just simply to give you the rules and say "Live 'em." You won't get it done. The Law of Moses cannot set you free from your rebellion. It cannot wipe your record clean, and it cannot set you right with God. It takes a person, and that person is named Jesus.' That's the announcement.

Gotta be very careful right here, 'cause the very next words Paul comes to, the very next thing he says to his audience as he preaches that—an announcement of forgiveness and justification, that you can leave the rebellion behind and enter into the kingdom—he says, "Take heed." So he tells his audience just as I would tell you right now, this moment...be careful here. And he goes on and he says, 'Don't be like those who the prophets spoke of.' And he refers to the prophet Habakkuk who, as he gave prophecies about things that sounded strange to people, and began to explain things that God was doing, they're saying, 'I'm not so sure about that. That sounds strange.' And the people that were listening, some of 'em began to mock him. They began to scoff at it. They were saying, 'You know what? That doesn't make sense. God doesn't work that way. We think He's workin' another way.' And Paul says, 'Be careful of becoming a mocker here. Be careful of being a scoffer here. Listen to this the way it was meant to be heard, and think carefully about it. Don't just scoff at it, dismiss it, and walk away.'

A man by the name of Francis Collins...he's one of the leading geneticists in the world today...is the individual who is responsible for mapping out the human genetic code...an amazing scientist. He tells of how he became a Christian. He was raised in a home that didn't believe in God. He was never sent to church, never sent to Sunday School, never told about Jesus, never told the Old Testament stories, never talked-to about sin. And if anybody ever talked about something like we're talking about today, they would have dismissed it as ridiculous. The only time he remembers church is when his parents decided he needed to learn some music. And so they sent him and his brother as young boys to the local Episcopalian church and they put them in the boys' choir there. And they told them, "Learn to sing, but don't pay any attention to the words." And that's exactly what he did. He learned to sing, and he thought the words were nonsense.

Through his college years he became pretty prideful about his intellect. He was very brilliant. And it was kinda the trendy thing to do, was state you're an atheist and he did that. But then he got into medical practice and he was in North Carolina. And there was just a lot of good, common, Christian folk that he was taking care of. And he said it used to impress upon him as he'd be at the death bed, at the sick bed, there was a peace about these people. And there was a sense about them that there was a real God. And he'd notice that. And it was such an impact on him that he began to pay attention to it, and track it with people. And he realized that 'There's somethin' here that's goin' on.' And he didn't totally dismiss it because they were so serious about it, and they were so attentive to it, and it had such fruit in their lives. And he said it really hit home one day when he was talking to a woman that was struggling with her health, and it looked like she may die, and everything else. And they were talking about this reality of a God, and she finally looked at him and she says, "Well, what do you think about God?" And he finally found himself kinda stammering and kinda struggling to put some ideas together and explain himself. And he just...he says, "You know, I realized I'd never seriously thought about God."

So he began to. He was a very careful, meticulous scientist; he came to the conclusion there must be a God. Not only that—he was surprised, as he began to be very careful and think things through. He was surprised to find that he also became aware of, and recognize, there's a moral code. There's a right and wrong; a right and wrong, a moral code that he, himself, acknowledged and had debated with other people. And he says, "You know, not only is there a God, there must be a right and wrong." Unfortunately, he recognized he didn't often do everything he said was right, and he wrestled with that.

This went on for over a year in this young man's life. And then he describes this, and I wanna read it to you. He knew there was some sort of God out there. He knew there was such a thing as right and wrong. He says,

“But I found it difficult to build that bridge toward God, to connect, to relate, to have any sense of reality. There was a distance between us. The more I learned about Him, the more His purity and holiness seemed unapproachable, and the darker my own thoughts and actions seemed to be in that bright light. I began to be increasingly aware,” he says, “of my own inability to do the right thing even for a day. I could generate lots of excuses, but when I was really honest with myself pride, apathy, and anger were regularly winning my internal battles. I had never really thought of applying the word ‘sinner’ to myself, but now it was painfully obvious that this old-fashioned word, one from which I had previously recoiled because it seemed coarse and judgmental—that word ‘sinner’ fit quite accurately.

He says,

“I sought to engineer a cure by spending more time in self-examination and prayer, but those efforts proved largely dry and unrewarding, failing to carry me across the widening gap between my awareness of my imperfect nature and God's perfection.”

In essence he's saying, 'I was trapped in my own rebellion, and I couldn't get to God,' and a new set of rules weren't gonna help. He says,

“Into this deepening gloom came the person of Jesus Christ. During my boyhood years, sitting in the choir loft of a Christian church, I really had no idea who Christ was. I thought of Him as a myth, a fairy tale, a super hero, a “Just So” bedtime story. But,” he says, “as I read the actual account of His life for the first time in the four gospels, I met Jesus Christ.”

And with Jesus he was set free from his chronic rebellion and entered into the wonder, and the glory, and the mystery of living under the rule of God.

Hear this correctly, the way it's meant to be heard. I announce to you today, this time, this place, that you can leave the rebellion of your heart behind, and you can enter into the wonder, and the mystery of God's kingdom simply through Jesus Christ. That's no religious philosophy; that's no spiritual exploration that I'm coming back and describing to you. That's reality rooted in Jesus Christ.

Let's stand.

If you're sittin' there today and you're wondering, “Ok, I wanna explore this more. Where do I go with it,” I wanna encourage you to do one of two things. If you wanna explore this a little more, give it more careful thought, and you'd like to do that immediately, then Jim Eller will be up here right after the service. I encourage you to come up and chat with him. If you'd say, “You know, I've got some questions I'd like to explore and I'd like to ask somebody about,” I'm gonna encourage you to go on the internet, go to our website, www.wasillable.org, and write a message to Ashley Brown, and just say, ‘Here's my question. What's goin' on? What's happening? Give me more information about this Jesus, and being reconciled with God.’ And Ashley will begin to dialog with you about it. He'll give you some direction on the questions you may have.

[Congregation sings blessing song.]

Amen. Go in His grace.