



# Central Peninsula Church

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## The Sermon That Brought Them Back

SERIES: *Acts: The Rest of the Story*

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This morning we resume our study of the book of Acts. Remember Acts is a continuation of the gospel written by Luke. I've called this series "The Rest of the Story" because Luke says at the very start of Acts that his gospel was all about what Jesus *began* to do and teach, which means that Acts is all about what Jesus *continued* to do and teach. But we say Jesus is gone in the book of Acts; he's in heaven. Well, the only difference is that what he did before he did in person, but what he does in Acts and even now he does through us. It's the rest of the story. He's still at work, but his method is different. Now he works through us.

And remember what Jesus told his disciples before he left. He said that the Holy Spirit would come upon them and they would be his witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. We've seen in Acts 1-12 how that began to be played out. We've seen how the gospel spread like wildfire throughout Jerusalem, and then into Judea and Samaria, just as Jesus said. We've seen how it began to dawn on the early apostles, albeit reluctantly, that this message of hope was not just for Jews but for all people everywhere.

Now in Acts 13 we came to another turning point in this story. It takes place not in Jerusalem but in Antioch. Antioch became sort of the new hub for the spread of the gospel. It was the capital of the Roman province of Syria. It had about 300,000 people living in it and was very diverse. In A.D. 47 Paul and Barnabas, along with their helper John Mark, were sent out from Antioch on what we call the first missionary journey. They would take the gospel first to the island of Cyprus and then they would sail north to the mainland of Asia Minor. They would continue north into the Roman province of Galatia. Then they would retrace their steps and sail back to Antioch about a year later.

This morning we'll look at just the first part of that journey; at a story that contains the first recorded sermon of Paul. Paul had preached many messages before, but this is the first of which we have a record. I feel for Paul here because I remember well preaching my first sermon almost 30 years ago. I thought I did well, but I later found that I enjoyed the whole experience much more than my listeners did! Paul had a better start than I did, so much so that in v.44 it says, "**The next sabbath almost the whole city gathered together to hear the word of God.**" That's what you want as a preacher. You want a sermon that brings them back. This was a powerful message,

which we need desperately to recover, and we'll look at that message today.

### I. Paul and his friends travel from Cyprus to Pisidian Antioch.

So Paul and his friends set sail from Cyprus and head north to Asia Minor, which is modern day Turkey. They land in a city called Perga and look what happens. **"Now Paul and his companions put out to sea from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia; but John left them and returned to Jerusalem. But going on from Perga, they arrived at Pisidian Antioch, and on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down. After the reading of the Law and the Prophets the synagogue officials sent to them, saying, 'Brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say it'"** (vv.13-15).

Sometimes when we hear a text like this we have to read between the lines. There are a couple of things that tell me that this was a very difficult and stressful time for Paul and Barnabas. First of all, John Mark, Barnabas' cousin, left them. Later, Luke says he "deserted" them. We don't know why he left, but many have speculated that he was homesick, or that somehow he wasn't getting along with Paul. We don't know but it had to cause considerable stress to Paul and Barnabas. Later, it would even be the cause of disagreement between them. So this had to be hard. The hardest thing that I've encountered in ministry is when relationships among leaders go sour. I think the enemy sees this as a kind of playground. If he can cause mistrust and division at the top, he can bring an entire ministry to a standstill.

Another thing that tells me this was a hard time is the fact that they seemed in a hurry to leave Perga and move on to Pisidian Antioch. Why didn't he preach in Perga? Something Paul says in his letter to the Galatians may explain this. When Paul wrote Galatians he was writing to the very people he would be preaching to in this passage. He says, **"You know that it was because of a bodily illness that I preached the gospel to you the first time"** (Gal. 4:13). Well, this was the first time. So Paul was sick. Most likely, Paul's illness forced him to travel on to the cooler climate of Pisidian Antioch, which was 3500 feet above sea level. We don't know what his illness was; some think malaria, others think a chronic problem with his eyes. This had to be a very trying time for Paul.

What's interesting is that in the midst of that hardship

and stress they go into the Synagogue on the Sabbath and are given a golden opportunity to preach the gospel! Paul's sermon that day would eventually shake the whole city. But I don't want you to miss that this opportunity came amidst great stress and difficulty. It's safe to say that Paul felt considerably weakened by all of these events. He probably second guessed himself. Was there something more he could have done to keep John Mark around? Had he failed him? Later Paul came to learn that his own sense of weakness and inadequacy was actually an asset. He would say things like **"When I'm weak, then I'm strong"** (2 Cor. 12:10). When he prayed for easier times he heard the Lord say to him, **"My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness"** (2 Cor. 12:9).

I wonder, have you learned that lesson? It's a hard one, for sure. Do you wonder why God allows you to go through such heartache and anxiety and pain? Why can't things just go right for once? I've been asking those very questions this week. I've had one of those weeks where my own faith has really been tested; where I've wondered what God is doing; where I've doubted myself and even him. But have you noticed how much more dependent upon him you are in a weakened state? Have you noticed how much more pliable you are in his hands? We're always trying so hard to be strong, to bring all our strengths and assets to the table, but Paul says, **"If I'm going to boast, I'll boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me"** (2 Cor.12:9). We wonder sometimes why we don't experience more of the Lord's power in our lives. Well, here it is. We're too busy trying to do it ourselves. But then the Lord graciously moves in and strips us of those things we normally rely on—our health, our friends, money—and we learn once again to cast ourselves upon him.

## II. Paul preaches the gospel in Pisidian Antioch.

This brings us then to this great sermon of Paul's in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch. His purpose, of course, was to convince these Jews that Jesus was the Savior of the world. His message would address the question of why these Jews should become followers of Jesus. It's a good question. They had their religion. It seemed to be working for them. They were in that synagogue because it meant something to them. Why should they switch their allegiance to Jesus? It's a good question. Why should anyone?

I've recently spoken with a person who is asking those very questions. He said, "I believe in God. But why should I believe that Jesus is the only way? Why should I believe THAT when there are so many people in our world who grow up with other religions? That's all they really know. How do they know any better than just to believe in what they've been raised with?" It's a good question. What do you say to that? Well, that's the kind of thing Paul addressed in this sermon to these Jews. Bear in mind if he

was talking to a different group he would have put it differently. But the core of what he would say is the same.

**A. The story of Jesus is God's story:** Like all good sermons this is a three point sermon. The first point Paul makes for them is that the story of Jesus is God's story. For the Jews, of course, God's story was the story of what we call the Old Testament. So Paul wisely starts there. He wants to show that Jesus didn't just show up out of the blue. He was part of a story that God had been writing and fulfilling for many years. The story of Jesus is God's story. Look what he says.

**"Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand said, 'Men of Israel, and you who fear God, listen: 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. 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. After these things He gave them judges until 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. After He had removed him, He raised up David to be their king, 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.'" From the descendants of this man, according to promise, God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, after John had proclaimed before His coming a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. And while John was completing his course, 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'" (vv.16–25).**

On the one hand, this may seem to us a rather boring recital of Old Testament history. But it's different. Most history books center upon certain people, people who have done certain deeds, great or terrible things. People like Hitler or Ghandi, Washington, Stalin, Churchill, outstanding personalities, people with power and charisma who leave their mark upon an age. Or sometimes history books just center on events. What happened? When did it happen? Why did it happen? But not this history. Notice that this history doesn't center on people or even events but on God. It's God who is working. Someone has said that "History is His-Story." If we could read history as it really was, it would read like this.

Paul points out a rapid succession of 11 different things God did: God chose Israel from all the people of the earth. God made them great in the land of Egypt. God led them out of Egypt with an uplifted arm. God put up with them in the wilderness for 40 years. God destroyed the seven nations of Canaan. God distributed their land as an inheritance. God gave them judges until

Samuel the prophet. God gave them Saul when they asked for a King. God removed Saul as King and raised up David. And then, finally, God brought Israel a Savior, Jesus, as promised. It's kind of like a machine gun telling of history with the last shot being the coming of Jesus as Savior. It all culminates in the coming of the Lord Jesus himself, which was announced by John.

Now think about all this. Paul is saying, "History is all about God. God is the main actor in the unfolding of events, in the rise and fall of kings and nations, even in the circumstances of your lives." Remember that Paul is talking to unbelievers here. He's trying to get them to believe in Jesus. So he helps them see that all that has taken place in their history has been setting the stage for Jesus. Jesus is the culmination of all God's work in history.

There are really two competing views of history. One view says that history is cyclical; it just goes round and round with no definite beginning or end. History is seen as meaningless; an idiot's tale. Shakespeare put it this way: "A poor player struts his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more...It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." Is that what you believe? History is an idiot's tale? That view leads to despair. I could never have made it through this week with that view of life. But the other view says that history is going somewhere. Things that happen have purpose. History has a goal, which was established in eternity by God himself. That's the Christian view. That's the view Paul has here. Paul says God writes the script and Jesus is the key player on the stage. That view says that my life and your life has meaning and purpose; that view leads to hope.

**B. The story of Jesus is God's story of salvation:** The first point of this sermon is that the story of Jesus is God's story. But what kind of story is it? If God is the One writing this story, what's he trying to accomplish? The answer to that is salvation. The story of Jesus is God's story of *salvation*. We saw that in v.23 where Paul introduced Jesus as "a Savior." Paul goes on and expands on that. In v.26 he says, **"Brethren, sons of Abraham's family, and those among you who fear God, to us the message of this salvation has been sent."**

He calls this "a message of salvation." Then he explains, again in terms these Jews could understand, how the death and resurrection of Jesus accomplished this salvation. **"For those who live in Jerusalem, and their rulers, recognizing neither Him nor the utterances of the prophets which are read every Sabbath, fulfilled these by condemning Him. And though they found no ground for putting Him to death, they asked Pilate that He be executed. When they had carried out all that was written concerning Him, they took Him down from the cross and laid Him in a tomb"** (vv.27–29). People wonder why if Jesus was the promised Messiah that the Jews didn't accept him when he came. Paul gives two reasons. First, they didn't recognize him. They didn't see him for who he was. They were misled by superficialities about him. They

looked at his trade, his background, and saw that he was but a carpenter's son. He had no money and no influence or standing in society. He wasn't taught at a great scholar's feet. He held no political clout. So they wrote him off. He lived the most remarkable life ever, but they never saw it. They didn't recognize him. A lot of people are blind in that way today.

The second reason is that they didn't recognize the Scriptures. Here were people who had heard the words of the prophets read every Sabbath in the synagogue. They knew many of them by heart, but they didn't understand them. The reading of the Scriptures had become just a religious rite, a perfunctory, routine performance gone through every Sabbath. People went and did their thing in the synagogue, and then went home again. That was all there was to it. There are people like that in church today. And that was the reason why they missed the coming of the Savior. And so, as Paul says, they condemned him to die.

But the thing we must see here is that once again God was writing the script. Paul says that in killing him they were fulfilling Scripture. It would seem that God had lost control and that the evil had won the day, but Paul says this was all part of the plan. They were just carrying out "all that was written concerning Him." For example, Isaiah the prophet had written of the Messiah, **"He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed. All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; But the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him"** (Is. 53:5-6). Jesus wasn't a victim; he was fulfilling God's purpose to die for our sins.

But death couldn't have the last word in his life. Look what Paul says next.

**"But God raised Him from the dead; and for many days He appeared to those who came up with Him from Galilee to Jerusalem, the very ones who are now His witnesses to the people. And we preach to you the good news of the promise made to the fathers, that God has fulfilled this promise to our children in that He raised up Jesus, as it is also written in the second Psalm, 'YOU ARE MY SON; TODAY I HAVE BEGOTTEN YOU.' As for the fact that He raised Him up from the dead, no longer to return to decay, He has spoken in this way: 'I WILL GIVE YOU THE HOLY and SURE blessings OF DAVID.' Therefore He also says in another Psalm, 'YOU WILL NOT ALLOW YOUR HOLY ONE TO UNDERGO DECAY.' For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep, and was laid among his fathers and underwent decay; but He whom God raised did not undergo decay"** (vv.30–37).

God is still the primary player. He raised Jesus

from the dead to show that he was the Son of God. He appeared to many witnesses. Once again, this was all written in the Scriptures they read every Sabbath. He quotes several Psalms which really don't make any sense if they were talking about David. How could David say of himself, "You will not allow your Holy One to undergo decay" when he himself was decaying? Because David was speaking prophetically of Jesus.

And then he says something that would have hit these people like a thunderbolt. **"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"** (vv.38–39). Remember what I said: the story of Jesus is God's story of salvation. Well, what kind of salvation are we talking about? You can be saved from a lot of different things. Some people tell stories of how they were saved from financial ruin. Others tell how they were saved from poor self esteem. What does Jesus save us from?

Here he tells us. First, he mentions forgiveness of sins. Our sins are wiped away. They're no longer held against us. That's a wonderful part of salvation. But I have to tell you that wasn't what would have really blown away those Jews. What would have shocked them was what Paul said in v.39 that **"through him everyone who believes is freed from all things, from which you could not be freed through the law of Moses."** That was the shocker! The word "freed" is a bit misleading. A better translation is "justified." He really says, "Every one that believes is justified from everything from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses." To be justified means to be made acceptable to God. That would have stunned them. These Jews honored the Law of Moses; they thought the Ten Commandments were everything. They were trying their best to live up to them, though many of them realized that they were failing. But they still thought that the way to God was to obey, in other words, to try their best to be good. But now Paul comes and says that they'll find acceptance by God in that way. You can't be accepted by God on the basis of trying to be good. The Commandments won't help you a bit; they'll condemn you, because you'll not fulfill them no matter how hard you try! But Paul says, God has found a way to accept us even though we can't be good enough ourselves, and that way is through Jesus. And all you have to do is believe in him. It's not about trying hard to be good. It's about faith. It's about trust. It's about saying yes to the promise.

**C. The story of Jesus is God's story of salvation for all who believe:** This is hard for us to get! I run across people all the time, even those who claim to be Christians, who say "That can't be, I've got to do something. The only way God can find me acceptable is that I must make myself acceptable." But it will never be

that way. You can't make yourself acceptable to God by trying to live a good life. It's difficult to believe. But that's the radical character of the gospel! And that's really the final point of Paul's sermon: the story of Jesus is God's story of salvation *for all who believe*. You can't have it both ways. You have to choose whether you'll try to gain acceptance through being good or through simply believing in Jesus. That's why he adds these words in vv.40-41. **"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.'"**

I don't think those words were spoken harshly; I think they were spoken in sadness. Paul is saying here that when you hear this incredible word of grace—that God loves you, he accepts you by virtue of nothing that you've done, but by what Christ has done for you—that is a moment of crisis in your life. You can either accept it and bask in the glory of that love, or you can reject it and turn away. But, if you reject it, you'll find yourself in danger. You're in danger of destroying yourself, and of being destroyed, because only God's grace can rescue man!

Now you would think that Paul would press for a decision right there and then. But look what happened next. **"As Paul and Barnabas were going out, the people kept begging that these things might be spoken to them the next Sabbath. 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"** (vv.42–43). You can call this a successful sermon because people wanted to hear more. It's always good when people want to come back and hear you again the next week. As a matter of fact, that's a sign that God's grace is at work in their lives. That's why they tell them to "continue in the grace of God." As far as I know, these people had yet to take that crucial step of faith, but the fact that they want to hear more means that God's grace is at work. It's like being caught in a wave. It carries you along and eventually delivers you on the sandy shore. These people were being carried along by God's grace, but had yet to be delivered; had yet to be saved. And we'll see how that happened there in that city next week.

But we see here that as utterly crucial as this decision of faith is, sometimes it takes time. I recently met with a man who is a scientist. He believes in God but has yet to give his life to Christ. He's struggling to reconcile faith with his scientific background. I always love to meet with people like that because it always shocks them when I don't discount their questions; I don't give them canned answers. These are good questions and I encourage them to ask them and find out answers. I usually find that the Christian faith has been misrepresented to them as something that requires a

denial of scientific facts. I try to get them to see that science is important; it has a place, but science can't answer all of our questions. Science can't fill the deepest needs of the human heart. It can't meet this need for love and acceptance. It can't meet this need for purpose and meaning. So we talked and I asked him to come back so I could give to him something to read that would help him along. I found a book for him and he came and picked it up. I think I could urge him just as Paul urged the people of Pisidian Antioch to continue in the grace of God. If he does that, that wave of grace will soon deliver him.

## **CONCLUSION**

Why should he believe in Jesus? Why should anyone become his follower? Because the story of Jesus is God's story. It's God's story of salvation for all who believe. I wonder where you find yourself in that story? Maybe you choose not to believe. Maybe you're still not sure. You're drawn to what you've been hearing; you're still riding that wave and you just want to come back next week and hear more. Or maybe your time has come. Today is the day you will say yes to the offer of God's forgiveness and acceptance through Jesus Christ.

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