

## *Raising Up Jesus*

Acts 13:26-41

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It is so wonderful to be able to walk to the pulpit singing a hymn in my head after it's just been played for us. Thank you so much, Jaime. Praise to the Lord. I can't think of a better way to go into God's Word than with those wonderful words echoing in this skull. God is good.

We turn this morning to God's word in Act chapter thirteen. This is the first recorded sermon that Luke has given us of Paul. So we turn there to find what we will see—the beginnings of his ministry, his preaching ministry, and what would serve to be the core of Paul's preaching as we would see it unfold in the letters he would send to the churches. The entirety of the sermon is too long for both the reading but also the ability to then preach on that reading, so I will summarize the first portion, but we will land right in the middle of its most controversial section, to remind you that Paul is, relatively speaking, a new convert—but has also been made an apostle of the Lord, a man who was widely respected, who was a Pharisee of Pharisees. And so now he's preaching to a group of Jews and God-fearing Gentiles, much like Cornelius was. Now they're in the synagogue on the Sabbath, and he is preaching, and this is what he says:

“Brothers, sons of the family of Abraham, and those among you who fear God, to us has been sent the message of this salvation. For those who live in Jerusalem and their rulers, because they did not recognize him nor understand the utterances of the prophets, which are read every Sabbath, fulfilled them by condemning him. And though they found in him no guilt worthy of death, they asked Pilate to have him executed. And when they had carried out all that was written of him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb. But God raised him from the dead, and for many days he appeared to those who had come up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are now his witnesses to the people. And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus, as also it is written in the second Psalm,

“‘You are my Son, today I have begotten you.’

And as for the fact that he raised him from the dead, no more to return to corruption, he has spoken in this way,

“‘I will give you the holy and sure blessings of David.’

Therefore he says also in another psalm,

“‘You will not let your Holy One see corruption.’

For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep and was laid with his fathers and saw corruption, but he whom God raised up did not see corruption. Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone who believes is freed[a] from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses. Beware, therefore, lest what is said in the Prophets should come about:

“‘Look, you scoffers,  
be astounded and perish;

for I am doing a work in your days,  
a work that you will not believe, even if one tells it to you.”

This is the Word of God. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me?

Now, Lord, we ask, open your beautiful Word to us. Your eternal Word which is living and active. By your Holy Spirit, with the Word, we pray that you would go to the very deepest part of us as your creations, to awaken in us praise and thanksgiving because of your mercy and grace. But also we pray that by your same Spirit and this Word, may you also empower us to take the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ wherever we go and as we live, wherever it is that you lead us. For your glory and splendor we pray these things in the name of our prophet, priest, and king, Jesus Christ. Amen.

In Paul's first sermon we hear a God-focused, Christ-centered gospel, a gospel that is not about our action. Not about our doing. Rather, it is a sermon that is inviting us—as it was to those first hearers—inviting them and us to participate in the drama of God's redemption and to find our place in that drama today, this year, this moment, and to be able to recognize that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is to be for us the good news—together, death and resurrection—but not just for our own private enjoyment, but to be lived out in the world just as Paul was living it out in his calling and his work and in being a faithful witness to Christ. So it is for us. So, as you will see in the outline there, you will notice that there is the message, verses twenty-six through thirty-one, but then also the victory, verses thirty-two to thirty-seven, and then finally the imperative that Paul gives in verses thirty-eight to forty-one.

First, the message. Verses twenty-six to thirty-one. What he does, then, in verses twenty-six through thirty-one, is provide the message that is the answer, if you will, to the beginning of his sermon which begins particularly in verse sixteen. He stands up, and he's standing up in front of a group of Jews and those that are God-fearing Gentiles, and he begins to preach. And he says, “Men of Israel and you who fear God, listen to me.” And then these words:

The God of this people Israel chose our fathers and made the people great during their stay in the land of Egypt, and with uplifted arm he led them out of it. And for about forty years he put up with them in the wilderness. And after destroying seven nations in the land of Canaan, he gave them their land as an inheritance. All this took about 450 years.

And then what he's doing is he's unpacking the history of Israel. The reason for that is the first thing that Paul wants to make clear in his sermon to those who are hearing is this: that the message first and foremost is that Jesus is Israel's Messiah. He is the fulfillment of all that had come before, which in very short order, he unpacks the history with very broad strokes—of Israel's choosing, Israel's rebellion, Israel's rebellion, God's faithfulness and grace and mercy—and then he announces this message in Jesus Christ. What he is announcing particularly is not just that Israel's Messiah has come, but rather that Israel's Messiah is Jesus. This would have been an extremely volatile message for Paul to announce. Not because the idea of a Messiah was foreign to them—they believed in a Messiah. The problem is not even particularly that he uttered that Jesus was the Messiah, but notice what he does—he weds that Jesus is the Messiah not to avoid the cross but *because* of the cross, Jesus is the Messiah for Israel. That was the volatile message, because Paul is claiming that Jesus is God's sent one—God himself—that that God, Jesus Christ, was crucified. Paul says it in these words when he says to them: “And though they found in him no guilt worthy of death, they asked Pilate to have him executed.” He says, “The rules, *your* rulers, in Jerusalem, did these things.” That would have been a very difficult message for them to hear, because God's Messiah was crucified. Why would Israel crucify its own Messiah? It is scandalous.

But then, not only does he demonstrate that Israel's Messiah was crucified—he then says these words in verse thirty: “But God raised him from the dead, and for many days he appeared to those who

had come up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are now his witnesses to the people. And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers.” So not only is Jesus’ death a demonstration that he was Israel’s Messiah; his resurrection is the final declaration that all that God had promised to their forefathers finds its fulfillment, finds its climax, finds its glory and splendor, in the person of Jesus. When he says that, he’s beginning to go into what would be for Paul the central message of all of his letters; that Jesus died and was raised on the third day. There were messiah/messianic types who had come before Jesus—messianic types who, in fact, claimed to be the leader of God’s people, the one sent by God—and even those who lost their lives as a result. But when Paul unites together these two twin truths without diminishing either one but holding them together—the death of Jesus Christ and the resurrection of Jesus Christ held together as Israel’s Messiah—there begins the groundwork of all that Paul would go and do in the rest of his letters. If you go, as I know my predecessor in this pulpit did so, he would always tell you—“who you are in Jesus Christ and the imperative of being in Christ.” And so the reality is, in all of Paul’s letters, over and over again these twin truths—his death and resurrection—and for Paul it began right here in the earliest days of his ministry in the first recorded words of his sermon; he’s laying his trajectory. But in so doing, when he says these words, “And we bring you the good news of what God promised to the fathers,” he is announcing that this message is not only that Jesus is Israel’s Messiah; he is the hope of the entire world. The implications for Paul of Jesus’ death and resurrection has and finds its power not in the church alone; finds its splendor and beauty not just in those who believe; but that Jesus’ death and resurrection causes a ripple throughout all human history and in every single facet of life—in every relationship, in every thought, word, and deed, in all of the implications of what it means to be in relationship with the living God. There is no way, Paul says, that we can have a relationship with the living God except through this One who came as Israel’s Messiah, who would then be the hope of the entire world. His death; his resurrection.

What does that mean, then, for us? When he announces this message, when we receive this message as we ought to, and we must contemplate it, we must decide, “Where am I in relationship to this Messiah, this one?” And then once you’ve made that decision, if you believe by faith that Jesus Christ came and he died for you, what are the implications of what you do with that? Is it to be like a treasure that you polish and clean but you keep in a safe that only you know the pass code to, and you bring it out for your own private need? Or is it to be lived out in the rest of life not as a treasure to be polished and hidden, but a treasure to be announced? That the weakness of God in the death of Jesus Christ is my hope as a broken, sinful human being. And that my only hope is that God came down and he died for me. That has implications for our work; it has implications for how we understand all that we have. If all that God was, and Jesus, in coming to the cross, emptied himself of his glory and took the form of a servant, and he has been given authority in heaven and on earth—and if God did that in Jesus Christ, what implications does that have for us and our gifts, our talents, our time, our hobbies? We offer it. If my Savior came to do this for me, then my work and my play is an offering of sacrifice.

What I am trying to show in some little bit of detail and application is fleshing out a wonderful quote that I came across this week. It’s from a Scottish pastor, and he writes this—his name is George MacLeod, and he says:

I simply argue that the cross be raised again at the center of the market place as well as on the steeple of the church. I am recovering the claim that Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves; on a town garbage heap; at a crossroad of politics so cosmopolitan that they had to write His title in Hebrew and in Latin and in Greek ... and at the kind of place where cynics talked smut, and thieves cursed and soldiers gambled. Because that is where He died, and that is what He died about. And that is what churchmen ought to be, and what churchmen ought to be about.

And that is: the cross doesn't find its place alone, among and in the body of Christ and our worshipping community, but the cross of Jesus Christ—and I will add to it, as I will later, the *resurrection* of Jesus Christ—is to be taken to the center of the marketplace as you go, wherever you go. And to pray, “Lord, what implications does the cross and resurrection of my Savior have for this workplace? For this relationship? For this time?”

But he gives not only the message, he also demonstrates the victory. Here Paul goes into what would be, and what we read from 1 Corinthians 15, the lynchpin: the raising up of Jesus. That is the victory of Jesus. In verse thirty-two through thirty-seven, he mentions the resurrection not once, not twice, but three times in side of a few short verses. Four times for the whole passage. The resurrection, the victory of Jesus over sin and death, is absolutely vital. He does this first by explaining the victory of Jesus first as fulfillment. Notice what he does—he cites two Psalms: Psalms 2 and Psalms 16. He says, “And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus, as also it is written in the second Psalm.” And then he gives the vindication for what he just talked about; Jesus' execution as God's son. Now he vindicates by showing that Jesus is the fulfillment of Psalm 2, Psalm 16, what are known as the Christological Psalms.

It's very clear that those to whom he was preaching did not see that connection, but for Paul, it is absolutely vital. Why? It's because of this. He was a Pharisee; we've discussed this before. The Pharisees believed in the resurrection. They believed that resurrection was quite real, but they believed that resurrection would only happen at the end of time when God would come and make all things new. They believed that. What they refused to acknowledge, and what they had such a hard time swallowing—and now Paul, a Pharisee of Pharisees, is preaching with his own lips—is that God didn't raise the dead at the end of time, but God has raised Jesus in the middle of time. Because the Pharisees understood this: that when God would raise the dead, it would have implications for every human being. That isn't to say that every human being would enjoy infinite bliss with the Lord, but that resurrection was real, and what God would do in one he would do for all. And so here they were understanding, as Paul is explaining the implications of what he is saying, that the fulfillment of God raising up Jesus from among the dead meant that Jesus is the leader, that what God has done in Jesus he will do in us. Crucial for Paul. He places resurrection, first and foremost—when he's quoting Psalm 2 and Psalm 16, he isn't just trying to show off his Biblical knowledge—he's placing resurrection right smack-dab in the middle of Judaism. He's saying, “This should not surprise you! This is what God said to you in the Psalms which were read all the time among the worshipping Jews. ‘You are my son; today I have become your Father. I will give you the holy and sure blessings promise to David. You will not let your Holy One see decay.’ ” And if this is in fact what God has done in Jesus, he's not showing that the resurrection is contra-Judaism, but rather, that it is the fulfillment of what was always promised.

And then he goes beyond anything that anyone could ever have imagined. Isn't that what he says at the end of the passage? If someone had told you, you would find it hard to believe, because not only is Jesus' victory over sin and death a fulfillment of what was promised; it is a vindication of God. For God so loved the world that he gave. If Jesus is not raised, then God is a fool. We are fools without the resurrection of Jesus. But in raising up Jesus, all that he said and did—all that he uttered, his silence before his accusers, his willingness to heal on the Sabbath, his desire to touch the unclean and make them clean, his love for men, women, and children, being seated with sinners and tax-collectors, all the many myriad accusations now—through the resurrection Jesus is vindicated, and God's love is shouted through the universe. This is the Lord whom you insulted, whom you crucified, whom you rejected. And yet God so loved, he then also loved the Son to raise him up, to never see decay, and then vindicated the name of Jesus.

The victory of Jesus is not only seen in the fulfillment, is not only seen in the vindication—it is also just this. Do you see how Paul explains this in simple fact? It's just simple fact. He says, "Listen, Jesus was crucified. You all know that." And in our day, as Nabeel Qureshi said last Sunday night when we had the gathering to hear this man's coming to faith from the Islamic faith, as a Muslim to becoming a Christian—one of the things he says and he realized: even the most liberal of scholars and the most liberal seminaries and colleges and universities recognize one real fact: Jesus was crucified. But the *resurrection* is where everyone part ways. But here, for Paul, in the earliest sermon—the first sermon we have recorded by Paul—notice what he does. He simply says, "Listen. He raised him up." Verse thirty-seven: "But the one whom God has raised did not see decay." And he talks about how, in fact, he has appeared to many witnesses, and these witnesses were ones who knew him. He appeared to many. And there he's simply saying something that is so scandalous, again. Not only is the crucifixion of Jesus scandalous, but the idea that God would not only die, but then be raised, but then appear to people and draw them to himself, was mind-blowing. And yet Paul simply states it as fact, and in so doing, invites them to go and talk to the witnesses! We are hearing the witnesses. This is, for us, the victory of Jesus.

But then he also gives this one reality: there is no way to explain the change of Paul's heart, the change of hundreds of peoples' lives, and now far more than just a few hundred; at this point in the ministry of Paul, now we've seen *many* turning to Christ, hearing this very same word of the death and resurrection of Jesus. If nothing proves the resurrection of Jesus, then the impact and reality that Jews were turning to this one as Messiah proves it. There is no other explanation other than that the resurrection happened. There is no other way to explain their conversion. Because why? What is for many of you, if you are a Christian, and for me—this becomes so second nature, but I don't know when the last time it was you had a conversation with someone who completely does not believe, even someone who is completely rebellious to the faith, to tell them in very simple fact that Jesus Christ was the Son of the Living God, he was crucified on a cross outside of Jerusalem, and on the third day he was raised from dead to life. And watch their face reaction. They'll shake their head, they'll roll their eyes, and be like, "I can't *believe* you believe that." I want to tell you, the fact that God's son Jesus was the Messiah, and the fact that God's son was crucified, the fact that God's son was then raised from the dead, was about like me telling you *I'm* the Messiah. It was as unbelievable to anyone before that time as if I told you, "Yes, I'm God's son. I'm the Messiah of the entire world and I was raised from the dead, oh, about thirty years ago. Follow me." Right. That would have been exactly their response. Because it was so unexpected, so unbelievable, there was no other way to explain Paul's sermon and the impact of early Christianity in the conversion of thousands other than this really happened. The victory of God over sin and death.

Then, there is the imperative. Verses thirty-eight to forty-one. Now this imperative is implied. He doesn't say, "Do this. Don't do this." But it's there. Verse thirty-eight, he says, "Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you." The first imperative is implied in just that first verse, verse thirty-eight; he says *believe*. I want you to *know*. Why does he want them to know? Because he's calling them to belief. What is he calling them to belief in? The forgiveness of sins. Now, here he's speaking and preaching to a group of Jews, and he's saying, "All that stuff I talked about, the rebellion of our fathers, can find forgiveness as well as your rebellion—forgiveness in Jesus. God's victorious, vindicated son, the Messiah of the world."

He goes further in calling them to belief; he says, "Through him, everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses." What is he asking them to believe in? He's asking them to believe in what John Calvin called "double grace"; that is justification, being declared righteous, but also being made new. Both. Here's what Calvin said particularly: "Christ was given to us by God's generosity, to be grasped and possessed by us in faith. By partaking of him, we principally receive a double grace: namely, that being reconciled to God through Christ's blamelessness"—that's justification—"we may have in heaven instead of a Judge a gracious Father; and secondly, that sanctified

by Christ's spirit we may cultivate blamelessness and purity of life." See, when Paul says, in these words, "through him, everyone in him is justified, made blameless through Jesus Christ"—that's the first grace. The second grace is this, when he says, "You are justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses." Meaning, they understood the law of Moses as the pathway to righteousness, the way to do, the way they ought to be, the way they should be, the way they ought to order their lives—it was incredibly comprehensive in every aspect of life. There was a way of being very moral, but not completely sanctified and made new. It was impossible, which is why God gave the sacrificial system. But Jesus came not only by his blamelessness to justify us, but to make us new—to sanctify us in a way that the law and our obedience never can, never could, never will. As one writer summarizes Calvin, he says, "As Calvin makes clear, in union with Christ we receive two distinct yet inseparable gifts: justification, in which we are declared righteous before God as ones who are clothed with Jesus Christ, and sanctification, the gift of a new life, a new creation, which manifests itself in Spirit-empowered gratitude." Thanks be to God, Paul calls them to believe. Thank you, Lord, that your Son died for me.

But it isn't just, of course, in his death that he's calling them to, but also a belief in the resurrection:

"Beware, therefore, lest what is said in the Prophets should come about:

" 'Look, you scoffers,  
be astounded and perish;  
for I am doing a work in your days,  
a work that you will not believe, even if one tells it to you.'"

It is this, not only to believe in what Jesus came to do, but to beware of pride and disbelief—that God did more than just die for us; he was also raised for us, which is how we receive the Spirit, which is how we receive the empowering work of Jesus Christ, because he's no longer in the grave. He is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. After he appeared to many witnesses, after he promised the outpouring of his Spirit, the church is manifesting that. But may I borrow from the earlier quote, that Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles, but rather, in the midst of a cosmopolitan place among many languages at a crossroads. So Jesus and his resurrection took place. Not because he stepped out of the tomb when they came looking for him; it's because he was already out of it. He appeared to the earliest disciples on the road to Emmaus. He appeared to them between two cities: Jerusalem and Emmaus. Something like seven to ten miles west, north-west, of Jerusalem.

On that road there was a pool or a place where you could find healing waters, it was believed. Here Jesus comes as living water, to appear to his disciples, and do you remember what he did on that road? He went back to the Old Testament and showed them that he was the fulfillment of all that was promised, teaching them about himself in the law, the prophets, the psalms, that he is the message, the person of the living God, Jesus Christ, victorious over sin and death—not so that we can keep the cross and the reality of the resurrection a private and varnished thing, but a thing on display. To take the resurrection, that if God is restoring us, desiring to make us his precious treasure, to empower us to live through Jesus Christ—that means if all the nations are an inheritance of our God, everything you do and touch is an inheritance of the Lord. Therefore, ought we not to pray, "How does this office that I work in, this home, this neighborhood, this decision—what does, Lord, the resurrection teach me about the power of the living God and what you are doing and how I ought to live?" That way, we are not trying to hold it for ourselves, but as with Paul, display it to the world. The raising up of Jesus Christ for our salvation and the restoration of all things for his glory. Let's pray.

Now, Father, we ask you, come, enable us to believe. We thank you for the warning to be aware of our own pride and our own disbelief, and Lord, we ask you for mercy and grace to help us in the midst of our unbelief. Lord, help us to receive the person and work of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins, and a

whole new life. A life that is characterized by taking the cross and resurrection in our living bodies in this life wherever it is we go. In your matchless name we pray. Amen.