

Easter 5
May 2, 12010

Acts 13:44-52
153-141-167/165-168

“The Word of the Lord Spreads”

- I. It runs into rejection and opposition.
- II. It fills believers with joy and the Holy Spirit.

Dear Christian friends,

As we’ve studied these Scripture readings from Acts – have you noticed something about them? They all have a MISSION EMPHASIS. A **few weeks ago** Peter and the apostles were set free from jail by an angel and told, **“Go and tell the people the full message of this new life.”** After Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus God said, **“This man is My chosen instrument to carry My name to the Gentiles.”** Last week we saw Paul do just that as he shared a **“message of encouragement”** about our Good Shepherd. These verses also have a **clear mission emphasis**.

That mission emphasis is ONLY NATURAL during this Easter season. Holy Week and Easter are the HEART of our Christian faith. It is the GOOD NEWS that Jesus died to **take away** our sins and rose to **give us** eternal life in heaven. That gospel is not something we can SELFISHLY KEEP to ourselves. The gospel is ours to BELIEVE – and to SHARE.

These readings from Acts also make clear that **mission work** is often hard, frustrating work. Results are often SLOW IN COMING and not what we EXPECTED or **wanted**. Yet mission work DOES WORK! **“The Word of the Lord spread through the whole region,”** Luke reports. As “THE WORD OF THE LORD SPREADS” 1)it runs into rejection and opposition and 2)it fills believers with joy and the Holy Spirit.

I. It runs into rejection and opposition.

These verses pick up on last week’s sermon. Paul and Barnabas were on their first missionary journey and have stopped in the city of PISIDIAN ANTIOCH in **south central** Turkey. There in a **local synagogue** Paul had preached a **“message of encouragement”** about Jesus. That sermon had ended with VERY PROMISING RESULTS. **“As Paul and Barnabas were leaving the synagogue, the people invited them to speak further about these things on the next Sabbath. Many of the Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who talked with them and urged them to continue in the grace of God.”**

It was now a WEEK LATER – **“the next Sabbath.”** **“The Word of the Lord”** had spread like WILDFIRE through the city. It was a STANDING ROOM ONLY crowd for this service. The **members** of this synagogue had probably never seen SO MANY people **packed** into their church. **“Almost the whole city had gathered to hear the Word of the Lord.”**

Just IMAGINE if **“almost the whole city”** of Fox Lake gathered here today to **“hear the Word of the Lord.”** We’d be thrilled, right? **Thrilled** that so many people had come to hear God’s Word. **Thrilled** that it REALLY DID PAY to invite our neighbors to church. **Thrilled** that we had such a GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY to **share our Savior** with so many people - and it wasn’t even Christmas or Easter!

That’s not what happened in Antioch. LAST WEEK the people liked hearing about God’s **love** and **forgiveness** and **faithfulness** in Jesus. But this week THINGS WERE DIFFERENT. **“When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy.”** All these strangers in church – GENTILES NO LESS! They couldn’t come to church before but **somehow** NOW they can! The Jews were SO UPSET that they **“talked abusively against what Paul was saying.”**

What went WRONG? Think if a few Mexicans came to St. John's. We'd be thrilled, right: It would BE PROOF we're reaching out to "**other**" people and not just being stubborn Germans. But what if next week say 150 Mexicans came to church and as they're walking into church they're **talking Spanish**. Isn't this getting a LITTLE RIDICULOUS? This is St. John's – **not San Juan!**

Let's say some OBVIOUSLY POOR people came to church. We'd be thrilled, right? It would BE PROOF we were reaching out to "**others**" and not just being a **white, middle class** church. But **what if** MORE AND MORE poor people came to church. Their children started going to our school – but they can't really carry THEIR FAIR SHARE of the cost. **Maybe** there'd be so many of them we'd need another teacher. WHO is going to cough up the money for that??

"They were filled with jealousy." Their problem really wasn't with Paul or the crowds. It was with God and **His Word**. They were ***"contradicting"*** and ***"rejecting"*** God's LAW which proclaims all people EQUALLY SINFUL and heading to hell. It doesn't matter if you're **Jew/Gentile** – **rich/poor** – **white/Hispanic** or have **purple polka dots**. ***"ALL have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."*** They were ***"contradicting"*** and ***"rejecting"*** God's GOSPEL which proclaims Jesus is the Savior of ALL people. It doesn't matter WHO a person is or WHAT they've all done – Jesus ***"is the atoning sacrifice not only for our sins, but for the sins of the whole world."***

God's Word still runs into opposition. People ***"reject"*** God's commandments as **hopelessly OUT OF DATE**. God can't possible expect us to live holy lives all the time. There's no way God would ever SEND ANYONE to hell. People ***"reject"*** the gospel. That God's Son died to pay for our sins is BARBARIC. To believe only Christians are going to heaven is NARROW-MINDED and **bigoted**. People want to change God's WORD **rather than change** their sinful ways or wrong thinking. And it's NOT JUST people **out there**, is it? Our own sinful natures like to ***"contradict"*** and ***"reject"*** God's Word. We have our excuses for our **pet sins** – AS IF God should make exceptions for us. We like to treat God's Word as a BUFFET – we get to pick and choose what we **believe** or how we'll live.

Paul shows us the ONLY GOD-PLEASING WAY to **deal with opposition** to God's Word. We hold firmly to the Word. We don't give an inch to our **sinful natures**. We don't compromise with the WORLD. When it becomes clear we aren't GETTING ANYWHERE we **move on**. ***"We had to speak the Word of God to you first,"*** Paul explained to these Jews. ***"But since you reject it we now turn to the Gentiles."*** It HURTS to close a mission or to remove people as members of the church. We understand what they are DOING TO THEMSELVES. They are rejecting God's Word of **forgiveness** and **eternal life** in Christ. They are choosing hell over heaven – the devil over God.

Spreading God's Word can be FRUSTRATING and **discouraging**. But that's really only half the story – **unfortunately** the half we usually focus on. But there's more. AS THE WORD of the Lord spreads...

II. It fills believers with joy and the Holy Spirit.

Luke wraps up what happened in Antioch – ***"the disciples were filled with joy and the Holy Spirit."*** That doesn't mean everything was a GLOWING SUCCESS as the world defines success. But as promised God's ***"Word did not return empty."***

God gave us His Word to FILL US with the ***"joy of salvation."*** The joy of **Christianity** is not God's promise of an EASY or GOOD life here on earth. It's not the ABSENCE of pain or **problems**. THROUGH His Word God fills us with the joy of the **gospel** – the joy of being at peace with God.

In His Word God doesn't ignore or DOWNPLAY our sins and sinfulness. It's just the opposite! **With His law** God SHOVES our sins in our faces and makes us face up to what we've done. God confronts us with our sins and **says**, 'I should send you to hell for the **way you've treated Me**. But I have GOOD NEWS for you. I have '**so loved the world that I gave My only-begotten Son that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life.**' IN HIS WORD God proclaims that we "**are worthy of eternal life**" – NOT BECAUSE of anything we've done but because of what Jesus all did in our place. That is the JOY of the gospel. The JOY of **knowing** that God gives us the credit for Jesus' perfect life. The JOY of **knowing** that Jesus shed His blood on the cross to "**cleanse us from all sin.**" The JOY of **knowing** that Jesus' innocent death on the cross has fully paid for every single one of our sins. The JOY of **knowing** that Jesus rose triumphant from the dead and promises us eternal life in heaven the very moment we die. The JOY of **Christianity** is the JOY of having Jesus as our Savior – the joy of forgiveness full and free – the joy of eternal life in heaven.

We can't separate that joy **from God's Word**. ONLY the Bible reveals God's love for us and shows us all Jesus did to save us. That's why we need to REGULARLY HEAR God's Word. That's why it's SO SAD when people won't read the Bible or come to church. They're cutting themselves off from the JOY of the gospel.

"When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the Word of the Lord." How do we "**honor**" God's Word? 1)By accepting and treating it as GOD'S Word. **In the Bible God** PERSONALLY SPEAKS to you and me. We "**honor**" God's Word 2)by believing whatever it says – whether it's talking about Jesus as our Savior – or how God created this world – or what Holy Communion really is – or church fellowship or **the role** of men and women in the church, etc. We "**honor**" God's Word 3)by gladly hearing and learning it. The way we use - OR DON'T USE - God's Word shows how much we **really value** the gospel. If I'm not hearing God's Word **faithfully** then OBVIOUSLY Jesus doesn't mean very much to me.

We also honor God's Word BY SHARING it with others. God's Word fills us with a **joy** we JUST CAN'T KEEP to ourselves. Go back to "**almost the whole city gathering**" at that synagogue. Go back to "**the Word of the Lord spread through the whole region.**" HOW did it spread so fast? Paul and Barnabas DIDN'T KNOCK on every door in Antioch in one week. They didn't set up a FANCY program or slap up billboards all over town. These JOY-FILLED **simple Christians** just had to tell other people. "You won't believe what **we heard** in church last week. You just have to come with me next week. We HAVE A SAVIOR! We can be sure God **loves** us – that we're **forgiven** – that we're going straight to heaven when we die." Remember these people WERE NEW to the Christian faith. They didn't know everything or have all the answers. But that didn't stop them for sharing what they did know. NOT EVERYONE listened to them or came with them. **Some** MADE FUN of them. But that didn't stop them. Their joy was IN THE GOSPEL. They were living proof that God's WORD WORKS.

Spreading God's Word is THE WORK of the Church. Yes, it does run into opposition and rejection. But it ALSO FILLS believers "**with joy and the Holy Spirit.**" Amen.

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