

We Tell You the Good News

Acts 13:16-43

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If you go to a news website, or if you still read a print newspaper, and scan the headlines, you'll find a lot of bad news. You'll see war, violence, abuse, and their effects. You'll see stealing, lying, and various kinds of immorality. We might think, "We'll escape all that and watch the Olympics." But then we see bad news about Rio or about the behavior of some athletes. Wouldn't you like to have some good news?

To be fair, the news media do offer some good news. But it's often buried far down the website or on a back page or late in a newscast.

In the Scripture we're reading from Acts, the good news is front and center. Paul says to the people listening to him, "We tell you the good news" (verse 32). A little earlier he mentions "this message of salvation" that's been sent to us (26).

We can find a lot in Paul's message here. I'm going to focus on the good news that God is faithful, God forgives, and God sets us free.

The church at Antioch in Syria was led by the Holy Spirit to set apart Barnabas and Paul and send them on a preaching mission. Taking Barnabas' cousin John Mark, they traveled through Barnabas' home country of Cyprus. Now they're in the Roman province of Asia (modern day Turkey). Mark for some reason left them and went back to Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas continue inland and come to another city called Antioch in the region of Pisida.

On the Sabbath, they're at the synagogue and they're invited to share a word of exhortation. So, after the Scripture reading, Paul stands up and speaks. We've heard about Paul's preaching and teaching earlier in Acts, but this is the first time Luke reports what Paul said. In the middle of this message, he says, "We tell you the good news: What God promised our ancestors he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus."

The good news tells us that God keeps promises; God is faithful. The first part of Paul's message recounts God's action in Israel's life and God's

promises to the people of Israel. He hurries through the early history of Israel to get to King David.

David was a man after God's own heart who did God's will and served God's purpose in his generation. We know David had a lot of flaws and he sinned dramatically. But he kept seeking God. He trusted the promises God made to him. One of God's promises to David was that his descendants would always rule Israel. After exile to Babylon, it seemed that David's dynasty would disappear. But building on God's promises to David and about David, the Jewish people developed the hope and expectation that someday a descendant of David's would be their deliverer and ruler. This descendant would be anointed as king. The word "messiah" means "anointed one." That expectation was high by the time Jesus was born.

Paul announces that from David's descendants God has brought the Savior to Israel. And the Savior's name is Jesus. He fulfills God's promises. David wasn't just an ancestor of Jesus, but he's also a preview or foreshadowing of the kind of ruler the Messiah would be: one who trusts God and does God's will. Paul mentions John the Baptist as another witness, along with David, to who Jesus is. Jesus is "great David's greater son" and he's the "greater one" that John prepared people for.

The promises are coming true. God is faithful and trustworthy. The big demonstration of God's faithfulness is the resurrection of Jesus. The people rejected Jesus, put him to death, and buried him. But God raised him from the dead. The good news is that God's promises to the ancestors are fulfilled in Jesus' resurrection. David talked about God's holy one who would not see decay. David died, was buried, and stayed in the tomb. But David's descendant Jesus, who is God's Son, was raised from the dead and did not see decay.

Often when I send a sympathy card, I remind people of the great hope we have because God is faithful and that God's faithfulness is demonstrated in the resurrection of Jesus.

A God who chooses people and commits himself in a covenant with people and who keeps promises to people like David can be trusted. Jesus trusted and obeyed God even to his death. But God raised him from the dead. The God who raised Jesus from the dead can be trusted.

James Bryan Smith tells about taking his six-year-old son, Jacob, to an amusement park. Not many people were at the park that day, so they went from ride to ride without having to wait. They came to a ride Jim had never ridden before but he assumed it was fun. They got in their seats and were buckled in. Soon the ride started whirling and spinning, faster and faster, jerking them around and up and down. Jim held on to Jacob as hard as he could, afraid he might fly out of the seat. With white knuckles and gritted teeth, he prayed the entire ninety seconds for the ride to end. Jacob, meanwhile, was laughing and having a great time.

When they got off the ride, Jim saw that it was called The Scrambler, which was appropriate. Jacob said, "That was fun, let's do it again!" Jim thought, "No way! I'm the worst father ever! Please forgive me." They sat down on a bench and Jim asked, "Weren't you scared? That ride was pretty wild. Why did you get on a ride like that?" Jacob answered, "Because you did, Dad." Jim says that, right or wrong, that little guy trusted him. He says he's not worthy of such trust. Though he would do anything for his son and would never intentionally harm him, he, like all of us, is a limited and ignorant human being. In Jacob's eyes, however, being with his dad meant he was completely safe.

Jim says that illustrates why we need to understand that God is trustworthy. "The God Jesus reveals would never do anything to harm us. He has no malice or evil intentions. He is completely good."

My son got on a scary amusement-park ride with me that he should have been frightened of, but instead he smiled the entire time. Why? *Because of who was on the ride with him.* Throughout his entire life I have taken care of him. I have fed him, clothed him, bathed him, prayed with him, taken care of him when he was sick and provided everything he ever needed. Jacob trusted me without hesitation.

You and I are in a similar situation. The life we are living is at times scary but is also a great deal of fun. The key is to *remember who is riding with us.* There is not a single situation you and I will face that we must face alone. God is with us. God is out for our good. Even in the most painful of circumstances God is able to redeem it, for "we

know that all things work together for good” (Romans 8:28) for those who trust him. The least we can do is enjoy the ride. (*The Good and Beautiful God* 55-56, 69)

The good news is that God is faithful and trustworthy. The good news also tells us that *God forgives*.

We don't always trust and obey God. Like ancient Israel, we reject God's rule and ask for a king like Saul. Like the people of Jerusalem, we fail to recognize Jesus for who he is and we reject him. In our own ways, we participate in and contribute to the world's bad news. We call this lack of trust, this disobedience, these acts of indifference or cruelty or self-centeredness sins. But, Paul says, "My friends, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you" (38).

God provides forgiveness of sins through Jesus—Jesus, who is God with us; Jesus, who shows us a life with God; Jesus, who died for us; Jesus, who was raised from the dead. Can we trust God to be faithful to forgive? Can we believe that God no longer holds our sins against us when we trust in Jesus? A little later, Paul and Barnabas will urge these people "to continue in the grace of God" (43). Grace is the basis of forgiveness. Grace is the fountain of forgiveness. God is faithful and full of grace.

There's a story about Fiorello LaGuardia, who was the mayor of New York City during the worst days of the Great Depression and all of World War II. New Yorkers called him "the Little Flower" because he was only five foot four and always wore a carnation in his lapel. He was a colorful character who used to ride New York City fire trucks, raid speakeasies with the police department, take entire orphanages to baseball games, and when the New York newspapers were on strike, he would go on the radio and read the Sunday funnies to the kids.

One cold night in January of 1935, the mayor turned up at the night court that served the poorest ward of the city. LaGuardia dismissed the judge for the evening and took over the bench himself. Within a few minutes, a tattered old woman was brought before him, charged with stealing a loaf of bread. She told LaGuardia that her daughter's husband had deserted her, her daughter was sick, and her two grandchildren were

starving. But the shopkeeper, from whom the bread was stolen, refused to drop the charges. He told the mayor, "It's a bad neighborhood, your Honor. She's got to be punished to teach other people around here a lesson."

LaGuardia sighed. He turned to the woman and said, "I've got to punish you. The law makes no exceptions—ten dollars or ten days in jail." But even as he pronounced the sentence, the mayor was already reaching into his pocket. He took out a bill and tossed it into his hat saying, "Here is the ten dollar fine which I now remit; and furthermore I am going to fine everyone in this courtroom fifty cents for living in a town where a person has to steal bread so that her grandchildren can eat. Mr. Bailiff, collect the fines and give them to the defendant."

So the following day the New York City newspapers reported that \$47.50 was turned over to a bewildered old lady who had stolen a loaf of bread to feed her starving grandchildren. Fifty cents of that was contributed by the red-faced grocery store owner. Some seventy petty criminals, people with traffic violations, and New York City policemen, paying fifty cents apiece for the privilege, gave the mayor a standing ovation.

Brennan Manning says, "What an extraordinary moment of grace for anyone present in that courtroom!" (James N. McCutcheon, "The Righteous and the Good," in *Best Sermons* 238-39; quoted in Manning, *The Ragamuffin Gospel* 91-92).

Good news: God is faithful. Good news: God forgives. And, good news: *God gives freedom*. Paul goes on to say that through Jesus, "everyone who believes is set free from every sin, a justification you were not able to obtain under the law of Moses" (verse 39). When we believe, when we put our trust in God through Jesus, God deals with our sins by forgiving them, no longer holding them against us. And God sets us free from our sins. They no longer control us or define us. Some translations use the word "freed" here. The Greek word is "justified." Justification is God setting us right, putting us right with himself, restoring us to a right relationship with himself. Forgiveness is part of that. But it's not just about being pardoned; it's about being released, set free to live a new way.

The Disney movie *Aladdin* came out when our kids were young. We saw it in theaters and watched the video many times. The young man

Aladdin finds a magic lamp and becomes the master of the Genie in the lamp. The only way the Genie can be set free is if his master wishes him free. Aladdin is given three wishes and promises to use one to set the Genie free. After using two wishes in much adventure, romance, and defeating the bad guy, it looks like Aladdin will use his final wish to become a prince so he can marry Princess Jasmine. But, instead, he wishes the Genie free. The Genie's shackles drop off and the lamp that had been his prison falls powerless to the ground. The Genie is amazed at this selfless act and is full of joy at being released from bondage: "I'm free! Free at last!" In sequels, Genie and Aladdin continue to be friends and share many adventures together.

We can't get free on our own. But Jesus doesn't have to "wish" us free. He is able to set us free by his life, death, and resurrection. God's Spirit makes that freedom real in our lives and we join our Lord in the adventure of new life.

Paul concludes with a warning. He tells the people not to be like ancient Israel when they refused to believe what God was doing. He doesn't want them to be like the people of Jerusalem more recently who rejected Jesus. The message of salvation has been sent to us and the good news is for us. There's an urgency about responding to it. Rejecting it means disaster, but receiving it means knowing a faithful God, being forgiven and free.

Jim Smith tells about meeting a pastor from England named Carl and asking him how he became a Christian. Carl said that when he was growing up he seldom went to church. He was very close to his father, but when Carl was fourteen, his father died in a tragic accident. This shattered Carl's life. To numb his pain, he started getting into fights at school and soon was abusing alcohol. Nothing seemed to make him feel better.

When Carl was seventeen a friend invited him to what Carl thought was a party, complete with binge drinking. So he agreed to go. It turned out to be a "Christian house party," which is common in England and is more like a retreat. People go to a big house and hang out for a few days of conversation, worship, and recreation. By the time Carl found out, it was too late to turn back. After the first two days he still felt bitter toward God.

But during a time of worship on the final day, Sunday morning, he heard a distinct voice that said, "I am your Father. Come to me." Carl said he immediately began to sob, and for the first time since his father died his heart began to heal (*The Good and Beautiful God* 63-64).

Do you hear God's invitation in the good news? Don't ignore it, but come to the Lord and continue in the grace of God who is faithful, who forgives, who gives freedom.