

✠ *In the Name of Jesus* ✠

It is an exciting time in the early years of the Christian Church. It's now been about 20 years since Jesus rose from the dead and ascended to heaven and kept his promise to send the Holy Spirit. Pentecost brought only the first wave of believers into the Church. More and more Jews keep joining.

But not everyone loves Jesus or his followers. When persecution scatters the believers from Jerusalem, those ordinary Christians, people just like you, start telling their new neighbors about Jesus, and soon congregations are popping up all over the Holy Land. Much to the surprise of Jewish believers, Gentiles have been clinging to Christ as Savior too. More recently Christianity has spilled over the border to places like Antioch in Syria. Syrian Antioch is the place where believers are first referred to as Christians, "little Christs." A year or two ago, Barnabas, one of the pastors of the church in Antioch, traveled to Tarsus, and brought back a teacher named Saul to help with ministry in Syrian Antioch.

This is the time before the New Testament will be written down, so the Holy Spirit is still speaking directly to some of Jesus' followers. One day the Holy Spirit instructs the church at Antioch in Syria, ^{13:1}"Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." Soon Barnabas and Saul are on their first missionary journey.

I assume they tell people about Jesus wherever they go. But when the Holy Spirit leads Luke the doctor to write down the Book of Acts, he reports on only six places of this journey where the gospel finds a home in the hearts of people. Today's sermon text comes from the second of those six places. Ironically, this town bears the same name as the place they were sent out from: Antioch, but in Pisidia.

When Saturday comes, Barnabas and Saul (now going by the name Paul) go to synagogue. Perhaps they have been in town long enough to converse with local Jews about the Holy Scriptures. Or maybe people find out that Paul studied under the well-known rabbi Gamaliel. Something has happened, because those who are in charge of the synagogue now invite Barnabas and Paul to speak a message of encouragement for the people.

Paul preaches a wonderful sermon. He points the assembly to Jesus as the long-promised Messiah. He explains that, even though Pilate executed Jesus, God raised Jesus from the dead, as promised in Holy Scripture. Paul proclaims at the pinnacle of his sermon: ³⁸"Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is [being] proclaimed to you. ³Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses." In other words, salvation comes to us by God's grace, not by our good deeds. Paul closes his sermon with a warning not to reject this message.

Do you know what happens? The people invite Paul and Barnabas to come back on the next Saturday and tell them more. Luke mentions that some of the worshipers are Jews and some are Gentile converts to Judaism. Many of these worshipers don't want to wait until next Saturday. These folks keep walking and talking with Paul and Barnabas, who of course urge them to continue in the grace of God. In other words, "Stay with Jesus and don't trust in your own goodness."

For reasons known only to the Holy Spirit, Luke does not report what happens on Sunday or Monday or Tuesday or the rest of that week. We are simply plopped down outside of the synagogue doors to witness a wonder. Are you ready?

⁴⁴*On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord.* Ah, so now we can figure out what has happened during the week. Paul and Barnabas have been talking to people about Jesus. The listeners have told their friends. Almost everyone knows that Paul will preach another sermon about forgiveness for all through Jesus' death on the cross, and they are eager to hear this welcoming news.

Those who normally worship the Lord in this synagogue are pleased to see how many of their neighbors have come. "Where is everyone going to sit? Or even stand? Oh, let's move worship outside today so we can accommodate everyone who wants to hear the good news." Right?

Sadly, no. Luke reports: ⁴⁵*When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and talked abusively against what Paul was saying.* What gives? Are they jealous because Paul the new guy is popular? Are they upset because they aren't going to be able to sit in their favorite pew with plenty of elbow room? No. Apparently they have been mulling over all week what Paul preached last Saturday. "¿Forgiveness for all sinners who trust in Jesus, apart from keeping the laws of Moses? No! Let these people honor the Lord as the giver of the law on Mt. Sinai! If they want to be close to God, let them be circumcised and let them keep the law!" Ah, so these people are jealous for the Lord and his honor. They are sincere in their blasphemy of this new message. But they are choosing not to see what was revealed through prophets like Isaiah (43:19) in the Old Testament: the Lord is doing something new. He is surpassing the old covenant, setting it aside in favor of his favor, grace, and mercy in Christ (Jeremiah 31:31, Hebrews 7:18 & 10:9). But many of these listeners from the previous Saturday prefer thinking of themselves as good on their own.

Luke reports: ⁴⁶*Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: "We had to speak the word of God to you first.* The Lord singled out Israel and set his affections on you. He wants us Jews to hear this message because he loves us. But *Since you reject it and do not consider* [lit.

“judge”] *yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles.* We are going to focus our attention on them for the rest of our time in this city because they want to learn more about Jesus.

⁴⁷*For this is what the Lord has commanded us: “I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.”*

Oh, now that’s an interesting quotation from Isaiah 49:6—well I think it’s interesting, but you might have to fight to keep your focus for the next 75 seconds of grammar talk. In our English translation of the sermon text, this verse sounds like the Lord is saying: “I have made all you Christians a light for the Gentiles so that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.” Wait a minute! Is Paul playing fast and loose with God’s Word? If you know this Bible passage from Isaiah, you realize that the heavenly Father is speaking to the future Messiah: *“It is too small a thing for you [singular] to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you [singular] a light for the Gentiles, that you [singular] may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.”* That passage was spoken to the coming Messiah. How can Paul make it sound like the Lord is commanding all his people [plural] to be a light for the Gentiles, to bring salvation to the ends of the earth?

Well, actually, Paul knows that these words were spoken to the future Messiah.

We can tell because of how he quotes Isaiah in our sermon text: ⁴⁷*This is what the Lord has commanded us: “I have made you [singular] a light for the Gentiles, that you [singular] may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.”*

See? Paul knows this verse was spoken to the coming Messiah. But Paul also knows that the risen Lord Jesus laid this mission onto his followers: *“You will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth”* (Acts 1:8). So, dear friends, it’s also true of you. Isn’t this exciting? It’s as if the Lord Jesus is saying, “As my Father made me a light to the Gentiles, I HAVE MADE YOU A LIGHT to the Gentiles. It is so fulfilling to see people receive faith in me (Jesus) and to grow in that faith, I want you to be part of my plan to save the Gentiles. Help people see that just like you, they too are sinners. Then give them news of my forgiveness.” **What about the Jews, Lord?** “Oh, yes, I love them too! I want everyone to have my free gift of full forgiveness. I want everyone to be saved from sin. Only those who judge themselves unworthy of my gracious gift lose out.”

Luke reports: ⁴⁸*When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.* The Lord had chosen them from eternity for eternal life. Now he brought them to faith through the gospel. In case you’re wondering, no, the Lord does not appoint anyone for eternal separation from him.

Only people can choose this path away from God for themselves. Unfortunately in our day, lots and lots of people are choosing this path, even after they stand in front of the congregation and promise to remain faithful to Jesus and his Word for the rest of their lives. They get distracted from God's Word by the busyness of life, or they get tired of hearing how much they need Jesus because of their sins, or they let themselves be taken captive by a temptation, and when they fall into temptation, they don't feel like listening to God's Word or being near him. Let us be a light also to those who used to walk with us. God wants them to be saved too.

And let's keep spending considerable time and effort and money to reach out to our neighbors with the news about Jesus. Perhaps the Lord will allow us in our day to see what Paul and Barnabas saw in and around Pisidian Antioch. They stayed for about six months, because ⁴⁹*The word of the Lord spread through the whole region.* Wouldn't it be awesome if, because of you, the Word of the Lord spread through our whole region?

⁵⁰*But it wasn't smooth sailing. The Jews incited the God-fearing women of high standing and the leading men of the city.* They spread bad reports, maybe even false reports, but definitely propaganda. Perhaps they bemoaned how there used to be such peace between the Jews and Gentiles. But when that Paul and Barnabas came to town, they really

offended the leaders of the synagogue. It's not good for these outsiders to stir up such trouble. So *They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region.* The persecution came through the magistrates of the city. This was not a mob action. We don't hear about any violence. ⁵¹*So Paul and Barnabas did as Jesus had instructed his apostles: they shook the dust from their feet in protest against them and went to Iconium, about 80 miles away.*

Did all this trouble dampen the spirits of Jesus' followers in Antioch? No way! ⁵²*The disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.* The light of Jesus cannot be snuffed out by persecution or trouble or illness or even death. We can snuff it out by not keeping our confirmation vow. We can snuff it out by engaging in the most dangerous sin ever—despising God's Word. But let's never do that. Let's make weekly worship and daily Bible reading our highest priority. Dear confirmands, that's how you'll make it through these next eight years, the most spiritually dangerous years in your life.

May you always consider the message about Jesus to be your greatest treasure. May you always be filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit. May you fulfill your calling by shining on others, because our God says, I HAVE MADE YOU A LIGHT.