

GRACE TO GRACE

ACTS 13:13-43 MAY 13, 2020

Texas Lt. Governor Dan Patrick was in the news last week after making an unusual announcement. He declared that he would pay the \$7,000 fine and take the place under house arrest for Dallas salon owner Shelley Luther. Luther had been jailed for violating her state's stay-at-home order.¹

There are a lot of layers to that story and, like everything these days, people are arguing about everyone's motivation in the situation. But, as a *story*, the Lt. Governor's move was certainly unusual. And that's why it was a headline. It's just not the sort of thing that is regularly done. That's the kind of gracious action that makes the news.

Paul and his companions had left Antioch to go to the island of Cyprus, then to Asia Minor, bringing with them a story of grace. It was the message of salvation through Jesus Christ. They were taking this message to pagan Gentiles, whose temperamental gods were just as paranoid and debased and violent as the worst of humankind. The believers were *also* taking the Good News to the Jews of these regions, who were under the ruthless gladius of Rome.

To all these needy, beggared people, God sent the Christians with a message of grace. The true story they were telling is that God is *full* of grace and has made a way that anyone, anywhere, can be saved from the guilt of their sin.

This is a message that makes the news. This isn't some little article buried deep in the Homes & Styles section of the paper. This is front-page material, as shocking as it is important. Tonight we see the story told in a Turkish synagogue, not that God had pardoned *one* criminal or committed *one* act of generosity, but that, from generation to generation, He has been acting with powerful, inexhaustible grace toward the most undeserving of creatures. He doesn't do so for political points, but because of His lavish love toward us, even when that love is met with resistance and rebellion.

God's grace, in all its immeasurable richness, is on full display in Paul's sermon in Pisidian Antioch. But first, we have to get there.

Acts 13:13 - ¹³ Paul and his companions set sail from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia, but John left them and went back to Jerusalem.

It's clear that Dr. Luke is leaving a lot of incidents out when it comes to this long missions trip. But one detail he records is that John Mark, their assistant, left the group and returned home to Jerusalem. We don't know *why* he left. We *do* know that this decision will have long and lasting consequences later on when Barnabas suggests bringing John Mark on another trip. Luke doesn't tell us the *why*. We can only see what happened next - and that's that Paul and Barnabas continued onward. I'm guessing things were a little harder. Certainly it could have been very discouraging to lose a member of the team, but Paul and company pressed on. What they *didn't* do is act like some of these high-strung musicians who refuse to perform if their green room isn't stocked with the right color of M&Ms or anything like that. No pouting. No quitting. The labor force may have dropped by a third, but there was still a field that needed harvesting. And they kept at it.

¹ <https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/07/us/shelley-luther-supreme-court-jail-release-trnd/index.html>

Acts 13:14 - ¹⁴They continued their journey from Perga and reached Pisidian Antioch. On the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down.

Different Antioch. The one they had been sent *out of* was in Syria. This one is in Turkey. We note that the guys behaved in a calm and cordial way in each place they visited. There's nothing ostentatious or self-important about their behavior or attitude.

Acts 13:15 - ¹⁵After the reading of the Law and the Prophets, the leaders of the synagogue sent word to them, saying, "Brothers, if you have any word of encouragement for the people, you can speak."

There you have the Apostle of Grace in attendance and the leaders of the synagogue ask, "So, do you have anything to say?" Boy, did he! On a devotional level there's a lesson for us: We want to be people who have something to say about the Lord. Not a meme. Not clichés or buzzwords, but something *encouraging*. What does that mean? It doesn't mean we just say things to make people *feel* good, that's never what Paul did. Instead it means to deliver the kind of truth that will not only comfort and console those who need it, but also *exhort* them to some sort of action. In this case, the action of turning to God. As Christians we will do well to remember that speaking encouragement doesn't mean to *coddle* people, but to lovingly build them up and urge them toward Christ. And God, in His grace, has made available to us everything we need to do that work.

Paul answers their question with a multi-exemplified explanation of the grace of God, made available again and again to the people of Israel throughout their history.

Acts 13:16-17 - ¹⁶Paul stood up and motioned with his hand and said: "Fellow Israelites, and you who fear God, listen! ¹⁷The God of this people Israel chose our ancestors, made the people prosper during their stay in the land of Egypt, and led them out of it with a mighty arm.

The Exodus is a *major* theme in the Bible. We find it all over both Testaments, in narrative, in poetry, in prophecy. It makes sense because the exodus story demonstrates so much of God's character and work. It speaks of His power over the greatest of world empires. It shows Him preparing and preserving the deliverer. It shows us God appealing to people that they might be saved and some people choosing to exercise faith in what He's said. It shows us God mobilizing all of creation for His purposes and how He uses human servants to accomplish His work. It shows us that blood is required for atonement and God's wrath against sin. But we also see His great long-suffering and that anyone is allowed into the family of God.² It shows us that the Devil will try to counterfeit and come against God's plan but that nothing can stand against the Lord. It shows us that, even when walking in victory, God's people will have to endure difficulty and suffering. The Exodus is a big deal.

Unfortunately, despite all that God did on their behalf, the *people* still responded in sinful ways. To read some details of their resistance to the Lord, check out Ezekiel chapter 20, which catalogs their failure to embrace the grace of God. Paul touches on it briefly in verse 18.

Acts 13:18 - ¹⁸And for about forty years he put up with them in the wilderness;

"Put up with them" is putting it kindly. What God "put up with" was idolatry, both in Egypt and in the wilderness. Rebellion against God *and* His deliverer. Resistance against the statutes He gave. He put

² Exodus 12:38

up with their constant complaints, their immorality with the Moabite women, the way they profaned the Sabbath³ and how they, ultimately, *refused* to go into the Promised Land. And yet, the Lord poured out grace upon grace throughout it all. They had everything they needed. Even their clothes didn't wear out.⁴ And the Lord kept making promises to them for their blessing and their benefit.

Acts 13:19-20a - ¹⁹and after destroying seven nations in the land of Canaan, he gave them their land as an inheritance. ²⁰This all took about 450 years...

In grace, God drove out nations much stronger than the Israelites. God gave them vineyards they didn't plant and cities they didn't build. Even while two and a half tribes said, "Meh. We'd rather stay over here." Even while they continued to worship other gods they had brought from Egypt.⁵

Acts 13:20b - After this, he gave them judges until Samuel the prophet.

If you want to talk about the immeasurably good grace of God, turn to Judges. In those chapters are some of the foulest histories of man's dealing with one another. And yet, though God was ignored and rejected over and over by tribe after tribe, He kept sending heroes to save His people. Heroes filled with miraculous power to set the Israelites free from their captivity. Judge after judge after judge, bringing God's grace with them until the time of Samuel, the last judge, when God started to do something new. That new thing was kicked off, not because the people had some great *revival*, but because they were *resisting* the Lord once again.

Acts 13:21 - ²¹Then they asked for a king, and God gave them Saul the son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, for forty years.

The Lord consoled a heartbroken Samuel, saying, "They haven't rejected you, they've rejected *Me*." This rejection is second only to when the Jews asked for Barabbas to be freed instead of Jesus. Saul, in the end, was not cut out for the job. But, at the outset, he was, in some ways, the *best* man in the nation. Tall and strong and willful. But what could the best man do to compare with the power and wisdom of God, their King? When Saul came to power, the army didn't even have swords to fight with! When the giant stepped forward, Saul cowered in fear. This was what the people chose *instead* of having a Heavenly King, who could make the Red Sea part and stop the sun in the sky. But *even for Saul*, God gave grace. He filled him with the Holy Spirit. He gave him victory. He brought him with and honorable servants. More and more grace in the face of obscene rebellion.

Acts 13:22 - ²²After removing him, he raised up David as their king and testified about him: 'I have found David the son of Jesse to be a man after my own heart, who will carry out all my will.'

The *removal* of Saul was even an act of grace. By the end of his reign, he had shown himself to be a terrible leader. He was willing to kill his own son to make one of his insane executive orders seem legitimate. He was tormented by fear and demonic activity and jealousy. Replacing Saul with David was like pulling out a dead and rotten tree and instead planting a great, mature fruit tree. This action was not only so that a toxin could be removed from Israel, but so that the Lord could send *yet another* deliverer. David, the giant slayer, the sweet psalmist. A king who wasn't afraid to have those

³ Ezekiel 20:13

⁴ Deuteronomy 29:5

⁵ Joshua 24:14

who were discouraged or desperate or in debt in his company. This was a man who showed the world the heart of God. God, who strengthens the weak and revives the spirit.

Acts 13:23 - ²³“From this man’s descendants, as he promised, God brought to Israel the Savior, Jesus.

More grace. More promises. To David, God made another covenant. A set of agreements that He was binding Himself to, not because David *deserved* it, but out of grace. God was doubling down on His policy, knowing all that the people had done before and all the resistance that still lay ahead. And yet, grace kept flowing from heaven to earth, not shrinking, but *widening* in scope and range.

As Paul continued his sermon, he spared the audience a reminder of the 400 years of rebellion under the kings after David and then the 400 years between Malachi and Matthew. Instead he leaps all the way to Someone greater than Moses or Joshua or Samuel or David, to Jesus, the Savior of the world. Never was there a leader more selfless, a judge more heroic, a prophet more discerning, a king more good than Jesus Christ, our Lord. He *is* the ultimate gift of grace, given by God to us.

Acts 13:24-25 - ²⁴Before his coming to public attention, John had previously proclaimed a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. ²⁵Now as John was completing his mission, he said, ‘Who do you think I am? I am not the one. But one is coming after me, and I am not worthy to untie the sandals on his feet.’

God didn’t send this Gift unannounced. All of human history had been leading and pointing to the arrival of the Messiah. The Lord even sent a forerunner to announce His coming. John the Baptist explained that this next Deliverer was not some temporary strongman or political figure. He was the Lamb of God who would, once for all, solve the problem of sin for those who repent.

John said that Jesus was “*the One*.” American cinema is *full* of sagas about “the one.” Whether it’s Neo in *The Matrix* or Harry Potter or John Connor, or even Po in *Kung Fu Panda*, we all know this theme about the “one” who is unlike all the rest. The “one” who can bring lasting peace to the broken system or finally destroy the greatest of enemies. That yearning deep within is not just for screenwriters. It is the eternity in our hearts drawing us toward *The One*, Jesus Christ. The One who came and lived and died and rose again. The One who was and is and is to come.

Acts 13:26 - ²⁶“Brothers and sisters, children of Abraham’s race, and those among you who fear God, it is to us that the word of this salvation has been sent.

Paul puts himself and his audience in the story now. God had spent long centuries sending warriors and prophets and seers and judges and shepherds. Now He was sending fishers of men. Spiritual field workers, to continue the work.

In passing, we note Paul’s ever-present distinction between real, ethnic descendants of Abraham, the Jewish people, who God has not forsaken or forgotten. His plan and promises to them *will* be fulfilled, just as He has said they would for thousands of years. His grace for them has not expired.

Acts 13:27 - ²⁷Since the residents of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognize him or the sayings of the prophets that are read every Sabbath, they have fulfilled their words by condemning him.

It was hardness of heart that led to the rejection of Christ. They had seen the things He did. They knew the Scriptures which prepared them for His coming. Yet, out of *rebellion* they refused Him.

Acts 13:28-29 - ²⁸ **Though they found no grounds for the death sentence, they asked Pilate to have him killed.** ²⁹ **When they had carried out all that had been written about him, they took him down from the tree and put him in a tomb.**

God knew, from the beginning, what would happen. Jesus Himself had predicted and parabled all about it. This makes His grace all the more potent, His love all the more compelling.

Acts 13:30-32 - ³⁰ **But God raised him from the dead,** ³¹ **and he appeared for many days to those who came up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are now his witnesses to the people.** ³² **And we ourselves proclaim to you the good news of the promise that was made to our ancestors.**

The cross, the tomb and the resurrection are the climax of God's grace. Not the *end*, for God still pours it out for us day after day. But there, in eternity past, as God looked through the ages at the rebels of earth, He thought, "How can I save them?" The answer: The cross. The resurrection. What a strange and terrible price to pay. Who would have suggested it? In what human meeting would anyone have signed off on this plan? And yet, like the Mandalorian would say, "This is the way."

All of this, as Paul rightly pointed out, is *good* news! As Christians we never want to forget how *good* our God's grace is. How *good* the message of the Gospel is.

Acts 13:33 - ³³ **God has fulfilled this for us, their children, by raising up Jesus, as it is written in the second Psalm: You are my Son; today I have become your Father.**

God's promises are fulfilled *by God*, fully and on His own. We benefit from them, and He may use human beings as vessels for His purposes (that, by itself, is another example of His grace), but it is *His* power and *His* ability which accomplish all these things.

Paul cites Psalm 2, showing how Bible prophecy demonstrates that the flow of history is under God's charge. Therefore, we should keep ourselves interested in those prophecies which tell what is yet to happen in God's gracious plan.

Acts 13:34-37 - ³⁴ **As to his raising him from the dead, never to return to decay, he has spoken in this way, I will give you the holy and sure promises of David.**^u ³⁵ **Therefore he also says in another passage, You will not let your Holy One see decay.**^v ³⁶ **For David, after serving God's purpose in his own generation, fell asleep, was buried with his fathers, and decayed,** ³⁷ **but the one God raised up did not decay.**

These were true and literal promises and they will be truly and literally fulfilled, as truly as Jesus was raised from the dead. Not just the promises to Jesus, but to David and to Abraham and to the nation of Israel. These promises are holy and sure and God will not only bring them to pass, but has, through His astounding grace, included *us* in them!⁶

⁶ Galatians 3:29

Acts 13:38 - ³⁸Therefore, let it be known to you, brothers and sisters, that through this man forgiveness of sins is being proclaimed to you.

This is the biggest issue. What can a man do to deal with his sin? If a person was walking around during the bombing of London in the fall of 1940, something like “campaign finance reform,” or “school choice” wouldn’t really seem all that important, right? We need to have more of that mindset when it comes to people who are about to enter a Christless eternity. Sin must be dealt with. And if a person refuses to come to Jesus as Savior, they will be brought before Him as Judge.

Acts 13:39 - ³⁹Everyone who believes is justified through him from everything that you could not be justified from through the law of Moses.

By *faith* Abraham was made righteous. By *faith* the people were spared from the Death Angel on the first passover. By *faith* David defeated the Giant. This first audience of Paul’s, these Jewish individuals, thought that by following their interpretation of the Law they could earn God’s favor. All the while, God was freely pouring out His grace to deliver them. The Law could only condemn them. It couldn’t justify them. But the Lord made the way so that any and all of them could be saved.

Acts 13:40-41 - ⁴⁰So beware that what is said in the prophets does not happen to you: ⁴¹Look, you scoffers, marvel and vanish away, because I am doing a work in your days, a work that you will never believe, even if someone were to explain it to you.”

As with each example from Moses forward, we see there was a choice to be made. Would the people believe God, turn to Him, and live in His grace or would they go their own way? The same choice was set before this group and is set before all listeners today.

Acts 13:42-43 - ⁴²As they were leaving, the people urged them to speak about these matters the following Sabbath. ⁴³After the synagogue had been dismissed, many of the Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who were speaking with them and urging them to continue in the grace of God.

Some made the choice. Paul told them, “having faced the grace of God and embraced the grace of God, now *continue* in it.” How were they to do that? Well, that’s what Paul would spend time explaining to them, but he also *exampled* it for them. Look at his grace toward these Jews. Or his grace toward John Mark. He didn’t try to ruin John Mark’s life or make sure he never got another ministry job again.

Rather, he behaved like God had, so many times over. Showing love and graciousness, even toward those who resisted him. But he didn’t *compromise* or quit when the going got tough. He continued in the tradition of David, who we’re told in verse 22: was “a man after [God’s] own heart and who [carried] out all [God’s] will.” That’s how a person continues in grace. The same grace that flows from heaven day after day, sending hope and help and everlasting life to all who will receive it as a gift.

Abraham and Moses and David and Samuel and Paul are gone from the scene. They’re home in glory, worshipping before the Throne of Grace. Now we continue in their place. We are the people God is raising up to do the work and deliver the message.

A few years ago there was a Colorado man who had won \$1.9million in the lottery. But he didn't find out for 5 months.⁷ The state wasn't about to track him down so they could pay out. In fact, Americans forego about \$2billion in unclaimed prize money every year.⁸

God has awarded the greatest prize to those who will believe. But *He* takes the initiative to tell them about what He has done. We are assistants in that effort. We have the privilege of proclaiming the matchless grace of God. As we do so, we should do it *graciously*, mimicking our Lord and the many that have come before us, to the praise of the glory of His grace.

⁷ <https://www.insideedition.com/man-didnt-realize-he-won-nearly-2-million-lottery-until-5-months-later-42473>

⁸ <https://www.foxbusiness.com/features/the-lotterys-hidden-secret-billions-in-unclaimed-prizes>