

SATURDAY'S ALRIGHT FOR FIGHTING

ACTS 13:44-52 MAY 20, 2020

In *The Dark Knight Rises*, Batman must face off against Bane to save the people of Gotham. He studies his opponent's background and fighting style, but in their first confrontation, he's nowhere near ready for his enemy. After toying with Batman for a bit, Bane says, "You fight like a young man with nothing held back. Admirable, but mistaken." In *Captain America: Civil War*, Cap and Iron Man are in a battle against each other. Iron Man's AI assistant, F.R.I.D.A.Y. implores with Tony, saying, "You can't beat him hand-to-hand!" After scanning Cap's fighting style, Iron Man is able to gain the upper hand in the melee, at least for a little while.

Paul was a man who frequently found himself in spiritual brawls. Not because he was looking to hurt anybody, he was on a mission of mercy. But, he was so often under attack and in the middle of serious altercations that, eventually, he described his entire life of faith as "fighting the good fight."

Already in the book of Acts we've seen him (a few times) in danger and in disagreement with the enemies of the Gospel. But tonight we'll see a spiritual street fight from start to finish. From it, we can learn about how we can carry ourselves as ministers of grace, bringing the Gospel to a world that might respond with aggression. And we'll find that, even when it seems like God's enemies get the upper hand, the Lord still wins, His Kingdom still advances, and we are still the victors.

In the last set of verses Paul and Barnabas had gone into Asia-Minor (known today as Turkey) and preached the Good News to a full synagogue in Pisidian Antioch. Some had believed, others wanted to hear more. So, they were invited back to speak again the following Sabbath.

Acts 13:44 - ⁴⁴The following Sabbath almost the whole town assembled to hear the word of the Lord.

We can be confident that Paul and Barnabas weren't just sitting around all week. Verse 42 tells us that many already had believed and were being taught. Now, as the next Saturday rolls around, Paul and Barnabas return, not to find a Jewish congregation, but just about *the entire city* there to hear what they had to say. This would've been *thousands* of people. They came, we're told, to "hear the word of the Lord."

This is significant. They didn't come to be entertained or see some gimmick. They weren't hoping to catch a glimpse of celebrity. Their hearts had been sparked by the *word of God*.

How had all these people heard about this meeting? Well, we know there were "God-fearers" in the audience the previous week. Those were Gentiles who were seeking God and were allowed to attend synagogue. It's probable that Paul and Barnabas had been busy preaching during the week. And the believers that had already converted were, no doubt, making quite a stir as they went into *their* Gentile communities, with changed lives, full of joy, telling people that there was a true and living God who had sent two heralds to the city to share a message of hope.

Faithful ministry, faithful evangelism, prioritizes the word of God over feelings or trends or pop culture. The way we outreach should be excellent and contemporary and well-crafted, but it's *God's word* that has power. We need to believe that.

As a quick application: If you ever suddenly find yourself in a situation where a bunch of people are listening to you, *find a way to give them the word of God*. That doesn't mean you need to recite an entire book of the Bible or have a Masters Degree in Theology. But give them God's word, because God's word never returns void.

Acts 13:45 - ⁴⁵But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began to contradict what Paul was saying, insulting him.

They were not only slandering Paul, but also blaspheming. Why? They didn't like that all these people showed up to hear what he might have to say. Envy and jealousy are so destructive to our lives and our communities. Proverbs tells us envy rots the bones.¹ James tells us that where there's jealousy you'll find disorder and every kind of vile practice.

There's a terrible unreasonableness about envy. The Jews live it out for us here. They didn't *care* about Gentiles. Gentiles were dogs, off-scouring. "But look at how *many* were there!" If you've been around small children you've seen this type of sin doing its thing. A little one is happily playing, then their brother comes to the toy chest, pulls out some little plaything that the first child didn't care less about 5 seconds ago, now it's war!

But, envy lurks at our door, day and night. Social media is an envy petri dish. We want to be careful. People going out to the story today are wearing masks, right? Well, when we wade into the bog of social media, get some personal *spiritual* protective equipment on and don't let envy get a foothold.

So, the Jews start insulting and slandering Paul. Luckily, Paul was a man of honor and integrity. Their accusations wouldn't stick. He wasn't a charlatan or greedy. He wasn't trying to get a following for himself. The Bible uses a term for this sort of character and it's to be *above reproach*. This is an idea that comes up a lot in Paul's letters, but David also speaks about it in Psalm 101:6. We can't keep people from slandering us, but we can keep those things from being true.

At the same time, we can't always keep people from *contradicting* what we preach about Jesus Christ. Anything can be contradicted. That's why there's still a *Flat Earth Society*. So, what did Paul do when they hit him with these slanders and contradictions?

Acts 13:46 - ⁴⁶Paul and Barnabas boldly replied, "It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you first. Since you reject it and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, we are turning to the Gentiles.

It's not always about arguing proofs and logic. The Jews weren't fighting because they didn't have proper evidence. We've already seen that it was a *heart* issue. They were jealous, not uninformed.

Biblical Christianity has great reasons, great evidence, great logic, great wisdom, because it's *true*. But, sometimes our ministry isn't about *proving*, it's about *preaching*. Here's what I mean: It would do no good, in *this* situation, for Paul to start a long lecture about the reliability of Isaiah and a 50 point seminar proving *logically* that Christ was the Messiah. Because, for his opponents that day, it wasn't a problem in the mind, it was a problem in the heart. When Nicodemus came to Jesus, we see a man wrestling with a problem in his *mind*. And the Lord reasoned with him *and* preached to

¹ Proverbs 14:30

him, right? By the end of the Gospels we see Nicodemus is convinced. He's there with Joseph of Arimathea anointing Jesus' body for burial.

In our fight analogy, this isn't a fencing match, where things are controlled and regulated and dignified. Paul and Barnabas are, figuratively, being mugged. They had been *invited* to come and share, but instead were being assaulted by these guys. But Paul and Barnabas don't shrink. They respond with boldness. But they don't counter with a defense of themselves, They don't respond in kind, slandering the Jews. They share the hard truth that these people are in sin. They've heard the Gospel, they are standing against it, and therefore there's really nothing left for them to talk about.

Boldness was a characteristic that the first Church was concerned about it. It's something that they prayed for. It's something that *described* the way they lived. What does it mean? Boldness, in the Christian sense, means to speak in an honest and straightforward way, without fear. It *doesn't* mean going around without tact or not filtering anything. It means being willing to say what needs to be said, even when it's difficult.

As ambassadors for Christ, sometimes we have to deliver difficult messages. Sometimes we need to lovingly but honestly tell people they're in sin. Like our fellows here, we should embrace the boldness of the Spirit and not shrink.

Now, after the attack from the Jews, Paul and Barnabas counter with a powerful set of statements. First: why was it necessary that the word of God be spoken to the Jews first?

We must never forget that the physical descendants of Abraham, through Isaac, were and are God's chosen people. In God's order of things, it was the Jew first, then the rest of the world. One reason is because, whether Israel would receive the Messiah would determine when the earthly Kingdom was going to be established. And so, as Jesus said in Mark 7, the Lord had to go to the Jews first. But, from the beginning of their time as a nation, God explained that, as part of His outpouring of love, the Jews would be forever a special people in His plan. Even today, the Jews are God's chosen people. *Within* the Church, when it comes to *salvation*, there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free. But God still has a plan for the ethnic children of Abraham. A plan that we recognize as being on hold right now, but will engage again once the Church is removed in the rapture.

Second we read, "Since you reject it and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, we are turning to the Gentiles." They didn't get offended at the personal insults. They stayed on balance and said, "What you're actually doing is pushing away God's offer of everlasting life."

You've heard of people acting as their own attorneys in a trial. Paul said, "In this case, you're acting as your own *judge!*" And they had decisively rejected God's mercy and justification.

When he says they were "unworthy" of eternal life, that doesn't mean that they didn't live up to some standard. There is *none* righteous, no not one. It's *God* who makes us worthy. Jesus said those who believe Him and follow Him and obey Him are worthy of Him.

Acts 13:47 - ⁴⁷ For this is what the Lord has commanded us: I have made you a light for the Gentiles to bring salvation to the end of the earth."

Paul isn't trying to sucker punch them here. He's not saying this out of spite. To be sure, this is a tense situation and some hard things are being exchanged, but we remember Paul's undying love for the Jewish people. But, despite how much he wished they would be convinced, he was faithful to

follow the orders that had been given to him by his King. He said, “God has commanded us. We’re trying to help you, but now that offer is passing you by.”

He quotes from Isaiah 49, which speaks of the Messiah being a light to the world. Paul applies it to the work of the Church. We are Christ’s body. We continue *His* work. As individuals we want to be sure we’re participating. As Wyatt Earp says in the classic *Tombstone*: “The fight’s commenced. Get to fightin’ or get away!”

The work can be a struggle, but it is the highest endeavor: To bring salvation to the end of the earth. You hear stories of treasure hunters *searching* the farthest corners of the world, hoping to find gold or riches. You don’t hear the reverse - people *taking* riches to share them all over the globe. But that’s exactly what we get to be a part of as we continue Christ’s work.

Acts 13:48 - ⁴⁸When the Gentiles heard this, they rejoiced and honored the word of the Lord, and all who had been appointed to eternal life believed.

In the Bible, when people had their lives changed by God, the response is instantaneous praise. What a great thing that, right from a beginning, even if someone doesn’t know the fine points of doctrine or doesn’t know what their spiritual gifts are or doesn’t know much about God’s call on their life, they still can worship. They are immediately able to give full-throated thanks and adoration to God. In Acts, over and over, Christians are described as being people who are *full* of joy and rejoicing. And so, we want to be people who continue to fan the flame of worship in our lives and in our church. We should be a group of people who are quick to rejoice in praise and not let that fire die, but in fact pile fuel on that flame.

But now we come to the big, bad second half of verse 48: “All who had been *appointed* to eternal life believed.” Alexander MacLaren wrote, “The din of many a theological battle has raged round these words.”² Those who hold to a Calvinistic interpretation of Scripture say this text proves that God does, in fact, choose some for salvation, while choosing others for damnation. We reject the idea that God does not give mankind a genuine free will. So, what do we do with this verse?

Let’s look at this at 3 different levels. First, the grammatical level.

This Greek word for ‘appointed’ is used 8 times in the New Testament and comes to us via different English words such as: appointed, ordained, set, determined or even addicted. Some scholars suggest that the reading should be more like, “as many as had been prepared for eternal life believed.”³

Now, arguments like that can be useful but really shouldn’t be the thing we run to. Because the grammatical argument, though it has value, always comes to the conclusion that the words says what I wanted it to say and, miraculously, *doesn’t* say what I don’t want it to say. So, it’s worth studying, it’s good to know, but we should be wary of doctrines that are built on specific renderings of Greek or Hebrew words.

So let’s go up a level and evaluate this phrase looking at the Biblical harmony. Does the Bible harmonize if this phrase means God appointed *some* to salvation and *some* to damnation? Well, again, the answer is no. Jesus says very clearly in Revelation 21:

² Alexander MacLaren’s *Expositions of Holy Scripture*

³ Bob Wilkin *A New View On Acts 13:48* <https://faithalone.org/grace-in-focus-articles/a-new-view-on-acts-13-48/>

Revelation 21:6b - I will give of the fountain of the water of life freely to him who thirsts.

God is not willing that *any* should perish and will give life to *anyone* who repents. Rather than mangle a *multitude* of passages in order to justify a certain doctrinal position in Acts 13:48, we should take the whole of what has been revealed weighed with the character and nature of God.

We look at a passage like the Parable of the Servants. The servant who did not obey the Master was appointed for destruction *after* he refused to obey and repent, not before. He had as free a chance as the other 2 servants. The Bible clearly teaches that men have a free choice to receive or reject salvation by grace through faith. God does not predetermine who will believe and who will not. Instead, through what is called “prevenient grace,” He frees the will of human beings so that they are able to respond to the Gospel one way or another.

And then the third level. We looked grammatical, we looked Biblical, now we should look situational. There is a juxtaposition here: The Jews had clearly, willfully, *refused* the offer of eternal life. And now we see *some* of the Gentiles willfully *receiving* it. These particular Jews, who were so confident that they were ‘chosen’ are being shown that they aren’t chosen instead of the Gentiles for *salvation*, but that salvation is for everyone. The message may have come to them *first*, but their assumption that they were fore-ordained for salvation was wrong.

So, it’s a difficult phrase given to us by Dr. Luke, but not an unsolvable one.

Acts 13:49-50 - ⁴⁹The word of the Lord spread through the whole region. ⁵⁰But the Jews incited the prominent God-fearing women and the leading men of the city. They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas and expelled them from their district.

From one vantage point, it seems like the apostles were knocked out of the ring. They weren’t just run out of town, they were run *out of the district*. And yet, we see that even when God’s people are hit, the Lord still wins. The word spread. The Gospel cannot be contained. Not by persecution, not by anger, not by our own imperfections. It spread because of the power of the Holy Spirit, but also because each of those individual Jews and Gentiles who did believe not only became *Christians*, they also immediately became *missionaries*, like Paul and Barnabas. They too would go, down the road, full of joy, sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Meanwhile, the apostles were headed elsewhere. How fast things can change. A few verses ago they were in Cyprus, working miracles as the governor of the whole island accepted Christ in astonished awe. Now, the local officials are running them out on a rail. We can’t predict the future, so we should make the most of any spiritual opportunities that are set before us.

Acts 13:51 - ⁵¹But Paul and Barnabas shook the dust off their feet against them and went to Iconium.

For the time being, the fight in Antioch was over. They’d be back, but for now, they didn’t sue to stay. They didn’t try to manipulate people the way the Jews had. In the spiritual war, this wasn’t the hill to die on. So they moved on.

Acts 13:52 - ⁵²And the disciples were filled with joy and the Holy Spirit.

What an amazing end to this altercation. On the human scorecard, the enemies of the Gospel had won. But when the bell rang, the Christians were the victors. Facing persecution, having been stripped of the apostles, the infant church there in the city was still full of joy and the Holy Spirit. And that was *more* than enough for them to not only survive, but thrive.

Don't get me wrong, it would've been a hard start. How can you replace Paul and Barnabas? But, even with what little they had, they were vibrant and growing and able to take up the fight themselves, rejoicing as they went.

We don't head out of these doors looking for a fight. Like Paul, we're on a mission of mercy. We're Doctors Without Borders, not Blackwater. But when the enemy brings a fight to our door, we can respond like these believers who came before us. With grace, truth, boldness and mercy. And we can trust that we're already more than conquerors because of the power Jesus Christ and God the Holy Spirit working in us.