

THE BOOK OF ACTS

Lesson 31, Chapters 13 and 14

At **Pisidian** Antioch (there were many Antiochs), Paul said this to the synagogue congregation he was addressing as recorded in Acts 13:38 and 39:

Acts 13:38-39 CJB

³⁸ ***"Therefore, brothers, let it be known to you that through this man is proclaimed forgiveness of sins!***

³⁹ ***That is, God clears everyone who puts his trust in this man, even in regard to all the things concerning which you could not be cleared by the Torah of Moshe.***

We discussed this statement at length last time because it is the molten core of our faith. But it is also crucial to help us understand the historical Paul, and what he means when he speaks about how he views the Law in some of his several letters that form the New Testament Biblical books that we call the Epistles. I'll do little more than summarize as to the plain meaning of verses 38 and 39. Clearly, no matter which English translation you might choose to read, the crux is that Paul says that there are things in the Torah of Moses for which forgiveness was not possible using the Torah system of atonement. However, trust in "this man" (Yeshua) can clear you of those formerly unforgivable sins. The mainstream Christian thought on this verse is that the Torah didn't forgive any sins at all; ever. Only Yeshua can do that. That head-scratching conclusion is a good example of a manmade doctrine that has been formed to satisfy a certain agenda, and then regardless of what the Bible might say, the Scripture is contorted or allegorized to uphold the doctrine.

We looked last week at Leviticus 4:32-35 as an example of the Torah claiming that if the sinner had a contrite heart and if he followed the ritual procedures (meaning offering a sacrifice) then that sinner would be forgiven of that sin. **Lev. 4:35** states: ***Thus the cohen will make atonement for him in regard to the sin he committed, and he will be forgiven.*** This same statement is made numerous times in the Law of Moses, so it cannot have been a translation error nor can it be anything but an established God-pattern. Obviously the Bible tells us that the sacrificial system offered actual forgiveness for sins, so logically it cannot be that Yeshua represents the first time in history that men could achieve forgiveness of sins. Rather, as the self-evident reading of Acts 13:39 states, there were certain sins in the Torah of Moses that could not be forgiven; but Messiah Yeshua can forgive them.

Although I've said it before in our earlier studies of the Old Testament books, it warrants repeating: either forgiveness of sins occurred as a result of an animal sacrifice properly administered through the Levitical priesthood, or it didn't. If an animal sacrifice didn't provide forgiveness as promised, then the Torah is simply wrong. So if the sacrificial system failed to atone for sins as the Torah claims, then God created and gave to the Israelites a broken

system or He deceived Israel into believing that the animal sacrifices forgave sin, but they didn't. And since God Himself gave Moses the Torah, then the bottom line is that God must either have made a mistake or He changed His mind. And both of these possibilities are as unthinkable to Christianity as they are to Judaism. Once again: Paul is pointing out that it is only that Yeshua could forgive sins that the Torah sacrificial system was not designed to forgive; sins such as idolatry, adultery, and murder. In fact the Mishnah says that there are 36 sins for which no animal sacrifice can provide forgiveness.

But what we also see in verses 38 and 39 is a fundamental understanding of Paul's theology. It is that Yeshua's kind of forgiveness is better and more all encompassing than the kind of forgiveness available in the Torah of Moses. Let's look it at this way: there are two sides of the divine ledger of justice that the Torah deals with: on one side is a series of written laws that are to be obeyed. On the other side of the ledger is what to do when one of those laws is disobeyed. The sacrificial system for atonement only dealt with the side of the ledger of what to do when a law is disobeyed. This side of the ledger is also called the curse of the Law because it deals with negative consequences for breaking the Law. Thus it is the same with Yeshua; He only came to deal with the side of the justice ledger that had to do with what happened when a law was disobeyed; the side that deals with the curse of the Law. This is why during His Sermon on the Mount, after addressing a few Torah laws and explaining their deepest meaning and intent, He then paused in Matthew 5:17 – 19 to declare that the side of the justice ledger that established the many laws and commandments that forms the Law of Moses is not what He came to deal with. Or as the passage says, "I did not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets". Ending or editing the list of divine laws in the ledger was not His purpose. Thus when Paul speaks of The Law and of the forgiveness of Messiah, it is in this context that he means it. It is on the side of the ledger that deals with the consequences of breaking the Law whereby Paul establishes the concept that Yeshua is better than the remedies the Law can provide when it comes to forgiveness. Therefore Yeshua is the answer to the curse of the Law; not to the Law itself.

Let's re-read the final few verses of Acts 13.

RE-READ ACTS CHAPTER 13:30 – end

After explaining to his mixed audience of Jews and God-fearing gentiles about Yeshua being the one that the Abrahamic Covenant promised, and that He forgives sins, Paul issues a stern warning. And he does it by borrowing a passage from **Habakkuk** chapter 1. The warning is that in Yeshua God is doing an astounding work that is hard to believe even when someone thoroughly explains it. But for those who mock what God has done, the eternal death penalty awaits them. And by the way; the wording of this passage as quoted is excellent evidence that Paul was teaching from the Greek Septuagint because this is the precise form it uses there. The Hebrew Bible form of this passage is slightly different (the biggest difference is that it doesn't add "you mockers"). And, it is to be expected that Paul would teach from the Greek Septuagint since he is, after all, dealing with Greek speakers in foreign lands.

Here's the thing: Paul is essentially declaring Yeshua to be God even though He doesn't explicitly say so. Every Jewish child knew that it was only God who could forgive sins, so when

Paul says that Yeshua could forgive sins, they instantly understood the implication. Messiah Yeshua found Himself being questioned because He said He could forgive sins.

Mark 2:5-7 CJB

⁵ *Seeing their trust, Yeshua said to the paralyzed man, "Son, your sins are forgiven."*

⁶ *Some Torah-teachers sitting there thought to themselves,*

⁷ *"How can this fellow say such a thing? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins except God?"*

No doubt Paul's teaching about forgiveness of sins in Yeshua was primarily responsible for Paul being beaten and run out of more than just a few synagogues and towns. For the Jews who just couldn't accept the great work that God had done, this statement seemed like blasphemy and idolatry.

Shulam and Le Cornu have done a wonderful job of digging through the Dead Sea Scrolls documents, and by doing so have found many writings that sound exactly like the Gospel message. This makes sense; the Essenes separated themselves from the Temple and the Synagogue and studied the Tanakh (the Hebrew Bible) diligently. It is therefore not surprising that they would find Messiah or someone like him in the passages of the Prophets. Listen to this passage from the Dead Sea Scrolls document that is essentially a *midrash* (a commentary) on the book of *Habakkuk*:

Habakkuk 1:5..... Look traitors, and behold, be astonished, shocked, for in your time a work is done which you would not believe if it was reported. The interpretation of the word concerns the traitors with the Man of the Lie, since they do not believe the words of the Teacher of Righteousness from the mouth of God; and it concerns the traitors of the new covenant since they did not believe in the covenant of God and they dishonored His holy name. They will not believe when they hear all this is going to happen to the final generation, from the mouth of the Priest whom God has placed within the Community, to foretell the fulfillment of all the words of his servants the prophets, by means of whom God has declared all that is going to happen to his people Israel.

The Teacher of Righteousness is a clear parallel concept to the anointed one, the *mashiach*, even though there is no evidence that the Essenes thought that Yeshua of Nazareth was their expected Teacher of Righteousness. They thought this Teacher would be one of their own.

Paul's speaking so struck the hearts of many of the congregation in Antioch that they pleaded with him to come back on the next Shabbat and teach again. Remember: within Judaism Shabbat had become a day when the most pious of the Jewish community would meet together at their synagogue for prayer, worship and study. This was Tradition, not Torah Law. You won't read about a communal worship meeting on the Sabbath in the Old Testament because the Tradition had not yet been established by the close of the Old Testament. So we

should never take meeting on Shabbat as Biblically directed. That said, there is certainly nothing wrong with it, and meeting on Saturday, or Friday after sundown, is a good and proper thing for any Believer to do. It is clear that Yeshua went to the synagogue on Shabbat, and we find the disciples doing the same thing not because Yeshua did it, but because it was the cultural norm just as Sunday service is a Tradition for the Christian world and has become the cultural norm.

It is important to see that Paul's approach to telling these Jews and gentile God-fearers of Antioch about Yeshua and the Gospel was to treat them with respect and to not accuse or demean them, or to incite them. Instead he taught them, by beginning with Abraham and explaining the road to redemption through the Patriarchs, then David, down to Yeshua. He did this in terms and history that Jews, and gentiles educated in the Jewish religion, would understand and find familiar. Later when Paul is talking to other gentiles who are not God-fearers (pagans), and so don't know the slightest thing about the God of Israel, he takes a different approach and uses terms that he knows they will understand.

Paul would come back to Pisidian Antioch and apparently his emphasis this next time was to encourage them to hold fast to what they had learned. Speaking to a congregation, making some Believers, then leaving and coming back later to encourage them seems to be a pattern of Paul.

Verse 45 speaks of many Jews who had heard Paul but had not believed; they came against Paul and tried to disrupt his mission. The reason for their upset is that they felt Paul was blaspheming. I mentioned earlier that no doubt the blasphemy began with the idea that Yeshua could forgive sins, meaning He was God; and that is really the crux of the matter for Jews to this day. However the next verse lends credence to the thought that some of these Jews who came against Paul were upset at the inclusion of gentiles. Because in answer to the upset and accusations of the non-believing Jews, Paul said this in verse 46:

Acts 13:46 CJB

⁴⁶ However, Sha'ul and Bar-Nabba answered boldly: "It was necessary that God's word be spoken first to you. But since you are rejecting it and are judging yourselves unworthy of eternal life- why, we're turning to the Goyim!"

This issue of gentiles is admittedly a bit difficult to understand since God fearing gentiles were already a part of this synagogue congregation before Paul and Barnabas arrived. So perhaps the upset was that it was one thing for gentiles to come and worship the God of Israel as invited guests, but it was quite another for them to become delivered and sanctified by a uniquely Jewish Messiah. In other words, it is one thing to allow a foreign immigrant into your country to work and pay taxes; it is quite another to offer them citizenship and all the rights that citizens have. It is my opinion that all of these objections concerning gentiles boils down to the issue of circumcision, which is the mechanism by which a foreigner can convert to a Jew. And as we are seeing develop, Paul especially is outspoken against the need for a gentile to become a Jew in order to be grafted into the Jewish covenants with God, and therefore enjoy the benefits of salvation. There is no doubt in my mind that what we'll study in Acts 15 is

directly tied to this issue of the conversion of gentiles, the ritual purity issues they cause, and their eligibility to be saved by the Jewish Messiah.

As verse 48 says, the gentiles were very happy to hear this message from Paul, and especially when he quoted Isaiah 49, which he applied to this direct situation whereby Paul and Barnabas were the light for the *goyim*. But then later in verse 48 comes a few words that have been the spark behind the creation of the Church doctrine of predestination. The words are: **“....and as many as had been appointed to eternal life came to trust.”** I have checked this in the Greek and in a number of English translations and they all come out the same. The words seem to say that God appointed many to eternal life and it was they who came to trust. And by extension, those who God in eternity past did NOT appoint to eternal life, did NOT come to trust in Yeshua. The doctrine of predestination says that from eternity past God determined by His own will who would be saved and brought into the Kingdom of God and who wouldn't. This doctrine is a mainstay of Calvinism. The famous Westminster Confession defines this doctrine as meaning that God, “from all eternity did by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass”. And then Ephesians 1:11 is usually quoted.

Ephesians 1:11 CJB

11 Also in union with him we were given an inheritance, we who were picked in advance according to the purpose of the One who effects everything in keeping with the decision of his will.....

In other words the doctrine of predestination says that the course of human history is irrevocably set; everything that you or I will ever be or do has long ago been decided, and whether we will be saved or not has already been predetermined. Therefore the idea of choice is an illusion; God has supernaturally hardwired each of us to make all the choices He wants us to make. It may seem to us like we're choosing by our own human free will, but in fact we are like pre-programmed computers who do only what our programmers built us to do. Depending on which denomination you came from, their doctrine of predestination will take vastly different forms from other denominations. Some deny predestination altogether; others (like Calvin) essentially make every detail of life and history written before our birth. A kind of a middle ground approach is along the lines of God pre-knowing (as opposed to predetermining) what each person would do, and whether that person would choose to follow Yeshua or not.

There is no doubt that these passages from Paul smack of the thought of predestination. Where might Paul get such an idea that all has been predetermined by God; the destiny of human history, and the destiny of each and every human, was set in stone before Adam and Eve? In Paul's day, there were 3 main streams of Jewish thought and religious philosophy: that of the Sadducees, the Pharisees, and the Essenes. The Sadducees denied any interference whatsoever by God into human affairs and choices. The Pharisees said that indeed some things are predestined by the will of God, but that other things are determined by each man's will and God foreknows what they will be. The Essenes believed like Calvin: everything was pre-ordained by God, and it is only for each man to live out that predetermined destiny to find out what that destiny was, but only after the fact.

So clearly Paul either believed as the Pharisees did (he was after all a Pharisee), or he believed as the Essenes did. I don't want to turn this lesson into a debate on predestination, but unfortunately this issue confronts us right here. Without going too deeply into the matter, here is what I think Paul believed, and what I believe. The Essenes version (which is the same as Calvinism) essentially cancels human free will other than for the most trivial of choices (chocolate ice cream over strawberry, for instance). I don't see that in Paul the person or in his writings. Rather he is all about each individual making choices. Even his statement in Acts 13:46 where he says: ***"It was necessary that God's word be spoken first to you. But since you are rejecting it and are judging yourselves unworthy of eternal life- why, we're turning to the Goyim"***, the idea is that the Jews he spoke to chose to reject his message, therefore choosing to forgo eternal life, and therefore as a result he is taking that same message to the gentiles. There is a definite tone of choosing as individual choices of the free will. Choosing and turning, in fact, are two of Paul's typical themes in his letters: he exhorts us to choose to do God's will over our own, and to determine to turn from evil to good. If these aren't acts of the human will then I don't know how to define what a human will does, or why God equipped us with one.

It is indeed a frustrating pattern we find with Paul that he tends to make a strong statement that seems unequivocal, only to turn around at another time and say something a bit different, but just as strong, about the same subject. If you search on the internet you'll see many Christian websites that have entire sections about where they see Paul in direct conflict with Yeshua on certain subjects. Or Paul conflicting with Paul; in other words, he contradicts himself. I don't think either of these are the case, but it is easy to see why it seems that way. We've spent a great deal of time on Paul the person and we find that the most influential thing in his life, outside of his personal experience with Yeshua, is the synagogue and those who run the synagogue, the Pharisees. These influences didn't just suddenly depart from him, even if some of his theology concerning the Messiah certainly changed, simply because he learned and accepted that Yeshua is the Messiah.

Paul thought as a Pharisee because he was a Pharisee, and salvation didn't change that. I see Paul as occupying that Pharisaical middle ground on predestination; that is, some things are indeed predetermined by God, but other things are not. Exactly which is and which is not, is not entirely clear. We have here a mystery that we can debate and never really know for certain. But this much merely common sense can lead us to: why would Christ say that the Gospel must be taken to the ends of the earth if everyone is already predestined to choose one of two options? Those who we tell and reject were predestined to reject so they were born to go to Hell. Those who we tell and accept were predestined to salvation, so no matter what happens they will be saved before their death. If this is true, then evangelistic efforts of Churches around the world, and the suffering and discomforts that the Apostles went through were rather pointless exercises. If this is the case, then a cruel game is being played with us as little more than hapless marionettes being manipulated by a God of serendipity; and that is not the God that I know and that is not the God that Paul describes.

To end chapter 13 we learn that a group of the non-believing Jews went to some of the female God-fearers and incited them to persecute Paul and Barnabas. It is interesting that the women are characterized as having high social standing. Well-off women in that era, especially the

aristocrats, had lives of leisure and their husbands controlled every financial aspect of the marriage. However, one area outside the family that women were often permitted to enter into was as benefactors to various social and religious groups. So we'll find that not only in the history books but in our Bibles well-to-do women hosted meetings in their homes, or gave food or clothing to the poor or supported some cause or another; usually things that their husbands had little interest in but gave the woman a sense of value and worth.

We must also notice that since the term "persecution" is used quite often in the New Testament, it had a wide range of intensity from mere harassment up to violence and murder. Here it seems to mean mostly harassment that involved the emissaries being told to leave because they were no longer welcome. Paul and Barnabas chose to leave. As we'll see later, they often went back to places that they had been treated poorly, so they were anything but timid or fearful men. Apparently in consultation with the Holy Spirit they decided that the best course of action for now was to leave. They had, after all, established a core group of Believers in Pisidian Antioch, and that was a very good start. So they left for Iconium in hopes of doing the same. Let's move on to chapter 14.

READ ACTS CHAPTER 14 all

As was their habit, Paul and Barnabas went to the local synagogue in Iconium, and were given a chance to speak. Many trusted as a result: Jews and God-fearing gentiles (pagan gentiles would not be attending synagogues). Iconium was a major Roman city located about 95 miles east of Pisidian Antioch, situated at a crossroad of major trade routes. A sizeable Jewish community lived there no doubt due in part to the business opportunities.

But as many as had come to believe, a sizeable number of Jews were also opposed and upset at the Gospel message of the disciples so they sought an alliance with the local gentiles to stir up trouble against Paul and Barnabas. As always, we have to wonder what the major upset was about. Out in the Diaspora, the issues of religion were less apparent than they were in the hyper-sensitive religious environment of Jerusalem; but religious issues remained nonetheless. In Jerusalem the issues were mostly about internal, highly nuanced doctrinal matters within Judaism that involved factional infighting. But outside of the Holy Land the issues of religion were more about Judaism versus the various pagan religions that dominated the Roman Empire.

I think it can be challenging for Christians and Bible students to understand what it sounded like to pagans of the New Testament era when the Jews told them about their One-God, and then when they spoke harshly against the evils of idolatry. You see the concept of idolatry only exists in a religion whereby idols are forbidden; and that prohibition of idols is generally restricted only to Judeo-Christianity. In other words, up to New Testament times it was only Jews who leveled the charge of idolatry, because in all other religions the use of idols was usual, normal and customary. To be chastised and told by a small but vocal minority who lived their lives in nonconformist ways that you are evil for having your cherished household idols, and for sincerely worshipping the Greek/Roman gods and goddesses that practically everyone did, including your esteemed political and social leaders, didn't sit well with the majority who felt good about those idols and their religion.

Jews showed open contempt for the pantheon of gods that dominated every gentile society they lived among in the Diaspora, and it made the citizens of the Roman Empire feel like Jews and Judaism were cultish isolationists who thought that everything they did regarding the spirit world was right, and everything everyone else did regarding the spirit world was not just different, but wrong. The gentile Roman society on the other hand was quite tolerant of the many different religious beliefs and god systems, including Judaism, unless the Jews became too radical and irritating to their way of thinking.

And it must be realized just how different and separate from all other of the world's religions Judaism was and remains. The Roman Historian Tacitus who was born at the time of the events we are reading about in the Book of Acts said this about the Jewish religion: "The Jews regard as profane all that we hold sacred". Let that sink in for a moment. The Romans may have been pagans in the eyes of the Jews; but they certainly didn't consider themselves pagan. The Romans, in general, were quite religious. They prayed regularly, they had Temples, they sacrificed, they tithed, and they believed in divine beings superior to themselves. They saw themselves as generally pious and good people. But the Laws of Moses were so contrary to most religious customs that existed in the Roman Empire, and the Jews were so different in what they ate, what they wore, and in their religious observances; and so resistant to recognize or join in the pagan religious observances of their neighbors, that they were often seen as aloof, unfriendly, uncooperative and highly intolerant. Greeks and Romans were open minded towards religion; Jews were closed minded. And of course in our time, just as 2000 years ago, the qualities of tolerance and open mindedness concerning all things (including morals and religion) were highly valued by society in general. So when a certain religion, like Judaism or Christianity, comes along and turns up their noses at tolerance and open mindedness, or refuses acceptance of all religions and all holy books as good, then the followers of that religion are looked down upon by others as hateful and backward; a societal problem to be dealt with.

And just like today, most Jews in the Roman Empire tried very hard to walk a fine line between observing their religion, and having a live and let live attitude towards their pagan neighbors. So when Paul and Barnabas come along and upset the apple cart (pretty much wherever they went), they were none too welcome by the majority of Jews or gentiles. And that as much as any reason is why we see Paul attacked and run out of town as almost routine. But he never gave up, because the cause was greater than himself.

Let us end with this thought. The Book of Revelation reveals that the End Times will be much like the time of the Roman Empire. And especially so as to the challenges that worshippers of the God of Israel will face. So as Believers living in the 21st century what shall we do? Shall we do what society wants us to do? Shall we learn from history to compromise and do as the Romans did and join in their tolerance for anything and everything as what they saw as an expression of love and intelligence? Shall we agree that faith in anything is a good and equal faith to our faith? Shall we practice our faith as a purely private matter and keep it private by not revealing any element of it in public or at our workplace.....sometimes not even to friends or family?

Or shall we do as the Jews of Paul's day and in the years thereafter, and stubbornly adhere to

our faith even though the world will misunderstand and think us as aloof, intolerant, unloving and isolationist? Here is what our Savior had to say about this challenge.

John 15:17-21 CJB

¹⁷ This is what I command you: keep loving each other!

¹⁸ "If the world hates you, understand that it hated me first.

¹⁹ If you belonged to the world, the world would have loved its own. But because you do not belong to the world- on the contrary, I have picked you out of the world- therefore the world hates you.

²⁰ Remember what I told you, 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you too; if they kept my word, they will keep yours too.

²¹ But they will do all this to you on my account, because they don't know the One who sent me.

We'll continue in Acts 14 next week.