

Truth On Fire

“Ordained to Eternal Life”

– A Contextual Exposition of Acts 13:48 –

Don Roberts, M.Div., B.A.

Table of Contents

Continuing in the Grace of God.....3
Ordained to Eternal Life (Part 1).....5
Ordained to Eternal Life (Part 2).....7

Continuing in the Grace of God

The word of exhortation delivered by Paul to those gathered in the synagogue at Antioch of Pisidia contains many of the essential elements of apostolic preaching (Acts 13:14-52). There was the historical linkage that began with the fathers (13:17), transitioned through Egypt and the wilderness (13:17-18), brought Israel into the land of promise (13:19), led to the Judges and Samuel (13:20), and then king David (13:22), from whose seed he raised unto Israel a Saviour, Jesus (13:23). This Jesus is portrayed as the One in whom there was no cause of death, but crucified nonetheless by an elect nation that condemned him (13:27-28). In so doing, they fulfilled the prophetic scriptures by nailing him to a tree (13:29). But God raised him from the dead (13:30).

According to Paul, the death and resurrection of Christ had now become the basis for forgiveness of sins (13:38). It is worth noting that this synagogue crowd consisted of both Jews and Gentiles, all of which were recipients of the word of salvation (13:26). Paul clearly believed that the death of Christ was inclusive of all men without exception or distinction. If Paul had believed in a limited atonement, there is no way (with good conscience) he could have preached the forgiveness of sins to every man in that synagogue. But when Paul preached the cross, he made a universal application of its merits, and excluded no one in his appeal! If the cross and empty tomb do not represent hope and good news for every sinner, then who can know with certainty (apart from a subjective experience) whether there is a value in that cross for them?

There are two observations to be made from our text. The first is from Paul's opening remarks, and the second from Paul's interaction with the hearers after the meeting broke up. Both of them provide valuable insight into the mind of Paul regarding his perspective on grace.

In his introduction, Paul referred to his audience as "Men of Israel, and ye that fear God" (13:16). Mid-way through his message, he addressed them as "children of the stock of Abraham, and whosoever among you feareth God" (13:26). Now, this is the same man who wrote: "There is no fear of God before their eyes" (Rom. 3:18). Is Paul contradicting himself? What could have caused Paul to attribute the fear of God to men in this crowd and deny it to the entire race of sinners in his epistle to the Romans?

The answer lies in what Paul immediately perceived as he sized up the congregation prior to speaking—the grace of God was at work in Antioch of Pisidia long before he arrived! God's drawing grace alone could account for both Jewish and Gentile hearts ready to receive the Word with reverence and awe. And as the apostle to the Gentiles, it must have thrilled Paul's heart to see so many Gentiles hungering for the truth of God. This was grace at work...and the Gentiles were in the midst of it!

The second observation finds these same God-fearing Gentiles begging for another dose of the gospel on the next Sabbath day (13:42-43). This is grace in durative action. God prepared

their hearts before Paul came on the scene, and continued to stir their souls by his Spirit regarding his Son after the preaching had ended. Many of the Jews and religious proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas, who “persuaded them to continue in the grace of God.” Paul was aware of what God was up to with his grace, and convinced these men that they should remain open to the truth they had heard until it bore the fruit of salvation in their souls!

Now, we can call this grace of God drawing grace, illuminating grace, or quickening grace (that awakens the soul that is dead in trespasses and sins to the light of gospel truth so that the will is able to respond to it in faith). Paul discerned the work of God in their midst, but also realized it was possible for them to discontinue the journey toward gospel truth, and frustrate the grace of God.

The manner in which Paul dealt with these men is totally inconsistent with the philosophical notions of “unconditional election” and “irresistible grace.” If Paul had been a “sovereign grace” preacher, as some have mislabeled him, he would have been content to let God regenerate his elect without regard for their continuance in grace or the lack thereof. In fact, the seekers would have had no choice in the matter. But Paul appealed to them as one who knew they had a responsibility to cooperate with the grace of God, knowing that eternal danger was close at hand for those who rejected the work of grace (13:40-41).

During my years as a pastor, I witnessed on many occasions the grace of God working in the hearts of lost sinners. They would often come back to church Sunday after Sunday with an apparent hunger for the truth. It was always my prayer that they would continue in the grace of God, and during visits to their homes I would try to encourage them to do so. At times I would say, “The church cannot get you to heaven, but it’s a great place to catch the bus that can.” The metaphorical bus of which I spoke is the Lord Jesus Christ. If you have a lost friend, loved one, or acquaintance that is searching, then know that the grace of God is at work within them. Do all you can to persuade them to continue in that precious grace!

Ordained to Eternal Life (Part 1)

When we last left the apostle Paul in Antioch of Pisidia, he and Barnabas had persuaded many of the Jews and religious proselytes to continue in the grace of God. If Paul had been carrying a DayMinder business calendar, he might have already flipped over to the page for the next Sabbath day, and penciled in: "Preach again at synagogue by popular demand! God is moving!" These men had issued a bona fide invitation to Paul and his team, and the invite was accepted. So, like yeast in a batch of bread dough, the gospel of forgiveness through faith in Jesus—the One who died and rose again for Jews and Gentiles alike—had seven days to permeate the city...and permeate it did!

Think for a moment about the conversations that must have taken place that week at the work place, in the houses of friends as they visited, around dinner tables, and between attendees of the previous meeting who occasioned to meet. Those that took place between Gentiles must have been especially riveting. They were no doubt overwhelmed by the fact that a merciful God had included them in the offering up of his Son for the sins of the world. No more outcasts! No longer strangers to the promises! No longer relegated to proselyte status! It was an open door afforded to them by grace to stand justified by faith before a Holy God, and on equal footing with the Jews! Oh, that gospel must have been to them like a river of refreshing water in the midst of a dry and thirsty land. It is inconceivable to me that those Gentiles who heard it could have kept silent for a full week. By the way, how is it that we who have tasted grace of God are able to keep silent?

Luke tells us that almost the whole city came together on the next Sabbath day to hear the Word of God (Acts 13:44). That phrase does indeed make the case for permeation! A key omission is any mention of the synagogue. Since the entire city (minus a citizen or two) showed up, the meeting was most likely held outdoors. It's always a sure sign of God's grace and power at work when the gospel message actually breaks out from behind the meeting place walls and into the streets of the city!

The Jews did not respond well to this break out (13:45). I can see them leaving home for the synagogue as they had done many times before, expecting one more time to hear the itinerant Jewish evangelist speak of Jesus and the forgiveness of sins. Upon their arrival at the meeting place, they were "filled with envy" when they saw the multitudes (plural) of Gentiles that had congregated. God was on the scene, and had messed up their solemn and predictable routine.

I suppose what really stuck in their craw was the fact that God was extending his grace to Gentiles, and willing to by-pass "the chosen" in the process. So envy in the heart transformed these previously respectful men into blaspheming combatants. In my mind, the blasphemy was an accusation that Paul was speaking lies and operating under the power of Satan. There is no greater crime against heaven than that of standing between a lost sinner and the gospel that can save his or her soul!

Paul and Barnabas responded boldly to the verbal attacks (13:46-47). First, they affirmed the primacy of preaching to the Jews. It was necessary as a matter of election. Jesus had come to his chosen people even though they received him not. Secondly, they pulled no punches in spelling out what the Jews were in the process of doing—rejecting the Word of the very God they claimed to worship! Thirdly, they pronounced a self-imposed sentence upon the Jews—unworthy of everlasting life! God imposes such a sentence on those who impose it upon themselves! Eternal life in the Lord Jesus Christ was theirs for the believing, but they chose to remain in unbelief. Fourthly, they informed the Jews that they could expect to see more of the same with respect to the Gentiles and salvation.

Those words reassured the Gentiles concerning God’s good grace toward them (13:48). They were glad, and glorified the word of the Lord: and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed. Expositor G. Campbell Morgan is correct when he states: “The word ordained has no reference whatsoever to any act of God” (The Acts of The Apostles, p. 334). He further cites the rendering of Rotherham’s Emphasized Bible, which reads: “they that were disposed to eternal life.” Any Greek lexicon will confirm that “to dispose” is a perfectly legitimate meaning of the Greek word. Nothing in Luke’s inspired record suggests an act of Divine election that took place before the world began. The context makes absolutely clear what ordained (disposed) them to life eternal. It was the Word of God working on their open minds and hearts as they continued in the grace of God!

A week of continuance in grace had finally turned desire into disposition, and faith in Jesus was the result! The unbelieving Jews might have been ordained in like manner if they had continued in the same grace. But envy born of prejudice cut that continuance short, and sealed their eternal fate. Thanks be unto God for his matchless grace!

Ordained to Eternal Life (Part 2)

Let us contemplate for a few moments the power of the word of God to radically and permanently change the dispositions of those to whom it is preached. One of the many Biblical illustrations of this truth took place in the synagogue at Antioch during the second missionary journey of the apostle Paul (Acts 13:14-52). After reading the law and prophets, Paul and his company were asked by the rulers of the synagogue to share any word of exhortation they might have for the people (13:15). In response to their gracious offer (and no doubt recognizing the providential hand of God), Paul stood up, and respectfully requested that the congregation give audience to what they were about to hear (13:16). Paul proceeded to deliver an historical and prophetic masterpiece.

He began his message with the captivity of Israel in Egypt. He cited the forty years of wilderness wanderings, the conquest of Canaan, the four hundred-fifty year era of the judges, the work of Samuel the prophet, the kingships of Saul and David, and the preaching of John before the coming of Jesus—the Saviour of Israel, and the fulfillment of all the promises made to David. He recounted the condemnation and crucifixion of Jesus at the hands of the Jews at Jerusalem, and concluded with the resurrection of Jesus from the dead as the fulfillment of the promises made unto the fathers.

It is worth noting that this word of exhortation delivered by Paul was also referred to as the word of this salvation (13:26), the word of God (13:43, 46), and the word of the Lord (13:48, 49). His final admonition consisted of three unambiguous assertions: through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins (13:38); by him all that believe are justified (13:39); and beware of despising the message of salvation in Jesus (13:40-41).

The disposition of the Jews toward the word of God stands in stark contrast to that of the Gentiles. The Jews were filled with envy at the Gentile multitudes, and spoke contradictory and blasphemous words against the word of God. Paul boldly accused them of putting it away, and judging themselves unworthy of everlasting life. The Gentiles, on the other hand, desired for these words to be preached to them again the next Sabbath day. They responded with gladness to the fact that God was offering to them the same forgiveness of sins, justification (righteous standing before Him), and eternal life. They glorified the word of the Lord, and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed.

The word *ordained* is the Greek **tasso**. It can have a range of meanings depending on the context in which it is used, including to arrange (in an orderly manner), to place (in order), to dispose (to a certain position or lot), to addict, and to determine. The verb form is a perfect passive participle, which tells us that this ordination to eternal life was of a permanent nature, that it came upon them from an outside source, and that it took place prior to (and as a condition for) the exercise of faith.

Our task is three-fold: (1) to determine the sense (meaning) of ordained as it is used here, (2) to identify the source, and (3) to ascertain the time at which it took place. The context enables

us to achieve all three objectives, especially since Luke takes great care to represent eternal life as a genuine offer made by God to all men without exception or distinction, and faith as the condition upon which God justifies sinners, whether Jew or Gentile.

The clear meaning of ordained in this context is that the Gentiles had become permanently disposed toward eternal life due to the effect of the word of God upon them. The hunger to hear resulted in an addiction to those things that pertain to eternal life, and a resolute determination to trust in Jesus to receive the benefits of salvation. There is nothing in the context to suggest an act of God in eternity past. The believing Gentiles were ordained (disposed) to eternal life in an historical context after hearing the word of salvation and before they believed. The unbelieving Jews had every opportunity to be ordained to eternal life, but chose rather to reject the word of the Lord.

Brethren, the disposition of the Gentiles to eternal life holds two great lessons for us. First, it confirms that one's response to the word of God is the critical difference between heaven and hell. Secondly, it defines that disposition of soul that always precedes saving faith. How many professing Christians have never experienced a fixed determination to pursue the Lord and or a permanent addiction to those things that pertain to life and godliness? Let us examine ourselves to see whether we have been ordained to eternal life or merely pretenders to it.