

'GOD HAS NOT REJECTED HIS PEOPLE, HAS HE?'

SERIES: PAUL, AN INSTRUMENT OF THE RISEN CHRIST

by Ron Ritchie

I have had the privilege of visiting Israel on several occasions. On recent trips, however, my interests have been moving away from the famous Biblical sights and more toward the Jewish people themselves. As I have done so I have noticed that Jews are very religious people on the whole, but the god they are serving is a god of materialism, tradition, military might and secular humanism. My heart has been deeply grieved to find that the majority of them have rejected the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and, in these last days, their Messiah Jesus Christ.

On my last trip there, a group of us decided to have dinner one evening in a sidewalk restaurant in Jerusalem. It is fascinating to sit at a table in one of these restaurants and watch the passing parade of young and old, police and military, religious and secular. As we watched the hundreds of people passing by, my heart grieved over the emptiness of their lives and the fear which they must constantly live under. The apostle's word to the Romans came to mind, "God has not rejected His people, has He?" (Rom. 11:11). I wondered how could one penetrate the veneer of religion, pride and tradition of these people. Just as I was feeling helpless in the face of this seemingly overwhelming dilemma, a voice behind me said, "The word is out that you have been looking for me!" I turned around to find Tuvya and Ellen Zaretsky, missionaries whom we support from the Jews for Jesus movement, sitting behind me. They were in Israel accompanied by some twenty-five Christian students from the United States whom they were training to do evangelism among the Jews.

There in flesh and blood was the answer to my question of how to reach the Jews! Thus I could say, with Paul, "God has not rejected His people." Neither has God rejected the Gentiles. In every generation and in every nation he has placed his people, those who love him and his Son Jesus, to witness about the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. God has not rejected his people. He is constantly reaching out to penetrate the darkness of human hearts, hearts that are filled with pride and ignorance, and opening eyes and ears that are closed to the person of Christ. He uses Christians to be salt and light to dark and sinful communities of men and women everywhere. What a comfort it was to me that the Zaretskys were in Jerusalem that very evening!

The apostle's cry, "God has not rejected His people, has He?" is answered in three distinct phrases in our study in the life of the apostle, which we take up in the thirteenth chapter of Acts this week. Paul has embarked on what has come to be known as his first missionary journey, which will last approximately two years, from 47 to 49 A.D. He has just made his first Gentile convert, Sergius Paulus, on the island of Cyprus, and he has also demonstrated for the first time his gift of apostleship in his dealings with the Jewish false prophet, Bar-Jesus. Now recognized as an apostle, a teacher and a preacher, Paul has begun his first missionary journey, together with Barnabas and John Mark.

"God has not rejected His people, has He?" No, says Paul, in the first part of his answer.

God Has Chosen Our Fathers

Acts 13 :13-22

Now Paul and his companions put out to sea from Phaphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia; and John left them and returned to Jerusalem. But going on from Perga they arrived at Pisidian Antioch, and on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down.

Paul, Barnabas and John Mark enter the port of Perga, planning to travel on to Antioch, but two events occur before they ever reach that city. The first occurrence is that, following their arrival at Perga, John Mark decides

to return to Jerusalem. That in itself would be no cause for suspicion or alarm, except that in Acts 15:36-41 Paul charges that John Mark "deserted" them. This break-up of the missionary team would later become a bone of contention between Paul and Barnabas when another missionary journey is proposed.

The second thing that happened, many scholars believe, although it is not alluded to here, is that it was on this particular journey that Paul received his famous "thorn in the flesh." He would later write to the Galatians.

. . . you know that it was because of a bodily illness that I preached the gospel to you the first time; and that which was a trial to you in my bodily condition you did not despise or loathe, but you received me as an angel of God, as Christ Himself . . . for I bear you witness that if possible you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me.

Some feel Paul's illness may have been malaria. while others think he may have suffered from epilepsy. This text, however, seems to indicate that he suffered from a problem with his eyes. Regardless of his specific ailment, Paul was physically handicapped at the beginning of his Galatian ministry. Five or six years ago I suffered severely with my eyes when I had Graves' disease. Paul's word to the Galatians about their not loathing or despising him because of his illness reminded me that when I looked at myself in the mirror back then I had a sense of loathing because of the condition of my eyes. I wondered how I could ever minister in public when I couldn't even stand to look at myself. That is when one really ministers by faith, being thrown on the person of Christ himself for adequacy. Perhaps the apostle learned the same lesson.

Verse 15:

And after the reading of the Law and the Prophets the synagogue official sent to them, saying, "Brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say it."

It was customary for Paul to visit the local synagogue whenever he entered a town. He knew he would find the Jews there, of course, but also those Gentiles who were God-fearers. Because of what the apostle says later in his sermon, it seems that on this occasion the Law was read from Deuteronomy 1, while the reading from the Prophets was taken from Isaiah 1. These readings covered the subjects of God's protection of Israel in the early days despite their rebellion, and his forgiveness of their sins, as recorded in Isaiah: "Come now, and let us reason together," says the Lord. "Though your sins are as scarlet, they will be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool. If you consent and obey, you will eat the best of the land."

Following the readings, it was customary for the leader of the synagogue to invite visitors to offer an exhortation. Paul did not need any persuading. Verse 16:

And Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand, he said, "Men of Israel, and you who fear God, listen: The God of this people Israel chose our fathers, and made the people great during their stay in the land of Egypt, and with an uplifted arm He led them out from it. And for a period of about forty years He put up with them in the wilderness. And when He had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, He distributed their land as an inheritance all of which took about four hundred and fifty years. And after these things He gave them judges until Samuel the prophet, and then they asked for a king, and God gave them Saul the son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, for forty years. And after He had removed him, He raised up David to be their king, concerning whom He also testified and said, 'I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after My heart, who will do all My will.' "

Here we have Paul's first recorded sermon. In order to put his audience at ease, he begins by going over material which was familiar to them. Peter had adopted the same approach at Pentecost, as had Stephen before the supreme court in Jerusalem. Thus Paul, the newly recognized apostle, is about to review one thousand years of Jewish history, an outline of God's dealings with his people. He is not thinking so much of a chronology of events as he is of the history of God's deliverance and salvation extended towards a wandering and rebellious people.

Paul makes reference to eight major events. "God chose our fathers, is his first point. He is referring to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph, spiritual leaders and shepherds, given by God to lead, guide and protect them in trying times. "God made our people great," he continues. The Jews went down to Egypt some 75 strong, and after 400 years they became a nation of 600,000 people. Paul goes on, "with uplifted arm, God led them out of Egypt," God used Moses to lead them out of the house of slavery into freedom. "For a period of forty years He put up with them," declares the apostle. God carried them like a father would carry his son through the desert. He bore them in his arms like a nurse. "God destroyed our enemies." Under Joshua, God destroyed seven Canaanite nations and gave their land to the Jews as an inheritance. Then, says the apostle, "God gave them judges.

The book of Judges records the names of those mighty ones: Deborah, Gideon. Samson, up to and including the last judge and prophet, Samuel. "Then they asked for a king, and God gave them Saul," the apostle continues. They wanted a king, just like all the nations around them. But God removed the wicked Saul from among them. Finally, says Paul, "God raised up David." Of him, God said, "I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after My heart, who will do all My will."

At this point Paul must have had the congregation in the palm of his hand. They did not find one thing he said to be offensive to them. The beauty of this history is that it reminded them of the sovereignty of God in all their affairs. They were reminded of his love and his care for them, and his patience with them despite their past disobedience and rebellion. The apostle had set out for them a history of their deliverance from Egypt, from the wilderness and from their enemies, and a history of the salvation which was offered them by their spiritual leaders, judges and kings.

The thrust of the apostle's first recorded sermon, of course, is that God is behind history, and especially the history of the nation of Israel. Behind all of history is a loving, merciful God who offers salvation to rebellious mankind. He chose Israel to deliver his plan of redemption to all the world. Included in that plan is his covenant which he made with Abraham, and the promises he made. Included in that plan also is the promise that a Savior would come forth from the loins of Abraham and David. The coming Messiah Jesus would be the fulfillment of those promises. This will be Paul's next point. The history of Israel, of course, is a picture of the life of every man and woman. It is my history and your history. We were born in trespasses and sin, held captive by the world, the flesh and the devil. We were wanderers, lost, confused and rebellious. We wanted only to serve the wicked king. Our only hope was God himself, the Deliverer and Savior.

Last week I met a newly married couple who were living in a disastrous way. They had bought just about all the temptations this world has to offer. As we talked, it was obvious to me that there was no clinic or hospital that could help them in their entrapments and their addictions. I could not recommend to them a psychiatrist who would help them overcome their emotional problems. I could not recommend an exercise plan to get them healthy. To do so would merely be squeezing pimples, and that was not the answer to their problems. They needed much more radical treatment. The blood of Jesus Christ was what was necessary to deliver them. I told them the only answer I had for them lay in his person and work. He would deal with them, not on an emotional and physical level at first, but on a spiritual basis. When the issue of their sin was dealt with by him, then their emotional and physical health problems could be addressed. I hope you will pray for them. This very week they are considering a "blood transfusion" by the Savior Jesus.

"God has not rejected His people, has He?" asks Paul. No, certainly not. God has chosen our fathers, he says; and secondly,

II. God Has Chosen a Savior

From the offspring of this man, according to promise, God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, after John had proclaimed before His coming a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. And while John was completing his course, he kept saying, "Who do you suppose that I am? I am not He. But behold, one is coming after me the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to untie." Brethren, sons of Abraham's family, and those among you who fear God, to us the word of this salvation is sent out. For those who live in Jerusalem, and their rulers, recognizing neither Him nor the utterances of the prophets which are read every Sabbath,

fulfilled these by condemning Him. And though they found no ground for putting Him to death, they asked Pilate that He be executed. And when they had carried out all that was written concerning Him, they took Him down from the cross and laid Him in a tomb. But God raised Him from the dead; and for many days He appeared to those who came up with Him from Galilee to Jerusalem, the very ones who are now His witnesses to the people.

In these verses the apostle highlights two things: God told the prophets of a coming Savior; and, God keeps his promises. As the years rolled by following the death of David, his house seemed to pass from the pages of history. The Jews began to realize that the promises of God would not be fulfilled through David's immediate seed but through a future seed whom he would raise up.

A study of the prophets Ezekiel and Jeremiah reveals that they were anticipating the coming of a greater "David." For example, Ezekiel 21:32 says,

. . . a ruin, a ruin, a ruin, I shall make it. This also will be no more, until He comes whose right it is, and I shall give it to Him.

The coming One, the Messiah, would restore and surpass the vanished glories of earlier days. Jeremiah 23:5 says,

Behold the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I shall raise up for David a Righteous Branch; and He will reign and act wisely and do justice and righteousness in the land.

From the offspring of David, Paul declares, according to promise, God brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus. The apostle skips over the next one thousand years of Jewish history and comes directly to the story of Jesus. Those years were a time of captivity and defeat, a time of the break-up of the kingdom of Israel. There was no prophet, no king, no priest in the land. The Jews were conquered by the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks and the Romans in turn. But Paul passes over all that history, preferring instead to come right to his main point: Following all of this darkness and despair, God brought forth his Son Jesus. It is he who would fulfill all the promises made to David and the sons of Israel.

Paul continues by demonstrating to those in the synagogue how God keeps his promises. He moves from a history of human failure to tell of a history of grace. Truly, God keeps his promises. From the loins of David, according to the promise, God brought forth a Savior. Psalms 89:3 says,

I have made a covenant with My Chosen, I have sworn to David My Servant, I will establish your seed forever and build up your throne to all generations.

Referring to Messiah in the New Testament, Luke records the words of the angel to Mary,

And behold you will conceive in your womb, and bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and His kingdom will have no end.

Paul then went on to illustrate how this occurred on a human level. John the Baptist was the fulfillment of the prophecies of Isaiah and Malachi. John kept repeating to the Jews that he himself was not the Messiah, but he proclaimed a baptism of repentance to prepare the nation to receive the coming King.

Thirdly, Paul says to those listening to him in the synagogue, "Brethren, sons of Abraham's family, and those among you who fear God, to us the word of salvation is sent out." Now their hope and their salvation rested in

Jesus who, Paul says, has already come.

He continues by saying that God had sent his Son but the rulers of the Jews and the people rejected him, as they had rejected his prophets. They condemned their innocent Messiah and crucified him, all in fulfillment of prophecy. "But God raised Him from the dead," says Paul. For a period of forty days Jesus appeared to his disciples who were now his witnesses throughout the world. They talked with Jesus, ate with him, were taught by him and, finally, were given the Holy Spirit to witness to him. Can there be any doubt that Jesus is the Son of God? How much more evidence do you need? Paul asks his hearers.

"God has not rejected His people, has he?" Absolutely not!. says Paul. "God has chosen our fathers, God has chosen a Savior, and,

III. God Has Chosen Some of You, Acts 13:32-43

And we preach to you the good news of the promise made to the fathers, that God has fulfilled this promise to our children in that He raised up Jesus, as it is also written in the second Psalm, "Thou art My Son; today I have begotten Thee."

Paul is preaching nothing but good news, saying in this section that Jesus is both King and Messiah, and then extending to his hearers an invitation to eternal life.

First, Jesus is King. According to Psalm 2, God fulfilled his promise by decreeing that Jesus be King. The nations of the earth were rebelling against God and reviling him, and here is part of God's response to them, taken from Psalm 2:

The Lord God said to the kings of the nations on earth who are taking their stand against Him and His Anointed . . . "I have installed My King upon Zion, My holy mountain. I will surely tell of the decree of the Lord: He said to Me, 'Thou art My Son, today I have begotten Thee.'"

God had allowed Jesus to become manifested as King. According to Paul, Jesus is the one referred to in Psalm 2.

The second promise of God to the Jews is referred to by Paul in verses 34-37:

And as for the fact that He raised Him up from the dead, no more to return to decay, He has spoken in this way: "I will give you the holy and sure blessings of David." Therefore He also says in another Psalm, "Thou wilt not allow Thy Holy One to undergo decay." For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep, and was laid among his fathers, and underwent decay; but He whom God raised did not undergo decay.

Paul is saying that not only is Jesus King, according to Psalm 2, but Psalm 16 declares him to be Messiah. The psalm was not speaking of David, who died and was buried, but of Someone who would come from the loins of David. So Jesus is both King and Messiah. The promises made to David and his posterity, and repeated centuries later by Isaiah, could not have been fulfilled apart from the resurrection of the crucified Messiah. The resurrection was one of the promised blessings. The proof of the resurrection is the fulfillment of Psalm 16:10, which does not refer to David, who did see corruption, but to Jesus who died and was buried and then rose again without undergoing corruption. Thus, Paul declares, here is proof that Jesus is the Messiah.

The apostle next extends an invitation to eternal life, in verses 38 and 39:

Therefore, let it be known to you, brethren, that through Him forgiveness of sins is

proclaimed to you, and through Him everyone who believes is freed from all things, from which you could not be freed through the law of Moses.

Through Jesus as Messiah and Savior the forgiveness of sins is made possible. "Through him everyone who believes is freed from all things, from which they could not be freed through the law of Moses," says Paul. The apostle is referring to justification, the divine act whereby a holy God declares a believing sinner to be righteous and acceptable to him because Jesus Christ has borne his sins on the cross. The sinner who accepts this and believes it is thus made righteous in Christ. The forgiveness of sins therefore is based on faith in Jesus alone. It has nothing to do with the works of the law.

The holy God allowed his wrath to come upon mankind because of man's sin and rebellion. The only way man can return to a relationship with God is through the blood of his son Jesus Christ. He cannot do so by his efforts to keep the law because just one breach of the law makes him a lawbreaker and a sinner. In Old Testament times, a lamb was slain for the forgiveness of sins, foreshadowing the Lamb of God who was to come. In order to be acceptable before God, man must accept the finished work of Jesus on the cross. There he took all of our sins upon himself. When we accept that, we come into a relationship with him. That is when, according to Isaiah, God clothes us with garments of salvation and wraps us with robes of righteousness. The prophet says in 61:10:

I will rejoice greatly in the Lord. My soul will exult in my God for He has clothed me with garments of salvation, He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness.

God no longer extends his wrath upon the man who by faith comes to Christ. but rather declares him righteous before him, and never again condemns him. He is wrapped in Jesus Christ himself. his robe of righteousness. This is the only hope for mankind.

The apostle concludes his first sermon with a warning. Verses 40 and 41:

Take heed, therefore, so that the things spoken of in the Prophets may not come upon you."
"Behold, you scoffers, and marvel, and perish; for I am accomplishing a work in your days, a work which you will never believe, though someone should describe it to you."

The apostle caps his message of the good news of salvation in Christ Jesus by quoting a warning from the Old Testament prophet Habakkuk. "Remember Pearl Harbor"! ! he is saying, in a sense. The Jews in Habakkuk's day refused to believe in the impending invasion by the Chaldeans, but it came. Won't you respond to this good news? asks Paul. Do not reject the Savior whom God has sent.

Let us see how the people responded to this powerful invitation.

And as Paul and Barnabas were going out, the people kept begging that these things might be spoken to them the next Sabbath. Now when the meeting of the synagogue had broken up, many of the Jews and of the God-fearing proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas, who, speaking to them, were urging them to continue in the grace of-God.

The meeting spilled out on to the street. "Please come back next week," they pleaded with Paul and Barnabas. They had heard the word of God, spoken by men of God, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

"God has not rejected His people, has He?" Absolutely not. God has chosen the fathers as a testimony of his love, care, protection, deliverance and salvation, despite the human condition of weakness, failure and rebellion. God has chosen a Savior, Jesus, who is the fulfillment of all of God's promises to Abraham and David. He is the King of kings, the Messiah, God's Anointed One. In him and in him alone do we find forgiveness of sin. He is the justifier of all who place their faith in him.

Today is the day of salvation. Many of you who are here this morning are in the same spiritual condition as many in the congregation who heard Paul in the synagogue. You have a choice: Accept Jesus Christ, the only One who has power to forgive sin, the only One who can offer you a relationship with God. If you have already done that, you will never again be condemned by him. Your heart will forever be filled with joy because you have a relationship that no one can destroy. If you have not done that, today you have one more opportunity to come to Jesus by faith. Come to him and receive your robe of righteousness, the forgiveness of your sins. If you refuse him, you will walk out of here today still under his wrath. It's your choice.

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