

PAUL AND THE FEAR FACTOR
ACTS 13:26-52

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

In the course of life we all deal with various fears. For ten years after I finished my formal schooling I had a nightmare that kept coming back to me. In one variation of this nightmare I would get up in the morning and suddenly discover that I was having a big test that I had forgotten about or had not known about. I was unprepared. In another variation I would suddenly discover that I had a big paper due the next day which I had not realized was due and that I had not started. I would wake up afraid and in a cold sweat.

For the first part of my life academics were central to my identity, and my conscious or unconscious fear was that I might be found academically unsuccessful. I might not measure up.

[Chapman University in southern California conducts a regular survey of the fears of Americans. They list 97 items and ask respondents if these issues cause them fear. These are the top 6 items for which over half of Americans express fear. Number one is corrupt government officials at 60.1%. Number 2 is economic or financial collapse at 54.7%. Number 3 is the use of nuclear weapons by Russia at 52.5%. Number 4 is involvement by the US in a world war. Number five is loved ones becoming very sick at 50.6%. Number 6 is loved ones dying at 50.4% of respondents.

The *Washington Post* did a survey a couple of years ago. They asked Americans about their phobias. Number one on their list was public speaking.]

{What are some of the fears that you have experienced, either in the past or presently? Anything which you would like to share?}

Fear is a natural emotion. It is a reaction to perceived dangers, real or imagined. Fear can be healthy or unhealthy. It can be paralyzing, or it can be motivating. Our passage this morning touches on the subject of fear at several points. We are going to examine it with that subject in mind and see if we can find lessons that may help us to put our fears in a proper perspective.

We have been making our way through the Book of Acts. The theme of the book is expressed in the first chapter where Luke records the command of Jesus to His disciples to share the gospel by beginning in Jerusalem and going out to the rest of the world. We are at the point in our study where Paul and Barnabas have embarked on their first missionary journey. (PROJECTOR ON--- PAUL'S FIRST MISSIONARY JOURNEY)

This missionary duo was sent out by a church in Antioch in Syria that was comprised of Gentile as well as Jewish Christians. They went to the island of Cyprus, which was the original home of Barnabas. Then they sailed across to Asia Minor. At Perga Mark, the cousin of Barnabas, left them and returned to Jerusalem. (PISIDIAN ANTIOCH) Paul and Barnabas went further north to Pisidian Antioch.

Here we saw last week that Paul and Barnabas spoke in the synagogue on the Sabbath. (PISIDIAN ANTIOCH SYNAGOGUE) We looked at the first part of Paul's message and saw him make a strong emphasis on the sovereignty of God. We take up the rest of his sermon beginning in v. 26 of Acts #13.

I.

In vv. 26-39 we find A MESSAGE OF HOPE FOR THOSE WHO FEAR GOD. (I. A MESSAGE OF HOPE FOR THOSE WHO...) After briefly reviewing Israel's history and speaking of John the Baptist who talked about the coming Messiah, the author Luke addressed his audience in v. 26, saying, "**Brothers, sons of the family of Abraham, and those among you who fear God, to us has been sent the message of this salvation.**"

The "brothers" and "sons of the family of Abraham" are Jews. "Those among you who fear God" is a reference to the Gentiles in the audience. These Gentiles have some attachment to the synagogue but have not fully converted to Judaism. Their fear of God is reflected in their attendance at the synagogue. It is a healthy fear which motivates them to know the God who is really there. I pointed out last week that archaeologists have found a dedication pillar from another synagogue nearby which had almost a third of the congregation members with Gentile names.

The fear of God, of course, has proper application to Jews as well as Gentiles. A certain fear of God is essential to having a proper relationship with Him. In order to live well and to have assurance that we will go to heaven some day we have to begin with a respect for the God who is there. (PSALM 111:10) Psalm 111 v. 10 says, "**The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom...**" Proverbs #1 v. 7 says a similar thing. (PROVERBS 1:7) It reads, "**The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge...**"

The message of salvation that Paul is describing is a message of hope to these God-fearing Gentiles and Jews. In vv. 27-31 he speaks of the content of this message. He tells about how the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem failed to recognize that Jesus was the fulfillment of the prophecies in their own Scriptures. He speaks of their condemnation of Jesus, His death and burial and resurrection, and His appearance to His followers. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Paul then proceeds to argue from the Old Testament to his audience which respects the Hebrew Scriptures that the resurrection is in accord with Old Testament prophecy. In v. 33 he says that God "**has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus, as also it is written in the second Psalm, 'You are my Son, today I have begotten you.'**" This happens to be the only Old Testament quotation in the New Testament that has a

specific address. In whatever version of the Psalms which Paul was using this was the Second Psalm.

The Second Psalm has as its background the promise of God to David in 2 Samuel #7 that he would have a kingdom that would endure forever and that his throne would be an eternal throne. The terminology of begetting a son was used in the Ancient Near East to describe a king who installed his son upon the throne. Paul is arguing that Jesus is the fulfillment of that promise concerning an eternal throne. Jesus was anointed at His baptism by John the Baptist. At the ascension Jesus ascended to the right hand of God the Father. At some future time He will return to rule upon the earth.

In a similar way David himself was anointed to be king by Samuel at the command of God. But it was years later that he actually became king of the kingdom of Israel. There is debate among the scholars about the reference to the “today” at which this begetting takes place. Is it a reference to the baptism by John, the resurrection, the ascension, or a future installment of Jesus during the Millennial Kingdom? I am a bit more inclined to think that it is a general reference to this whole process that culminates in Jesus becoming king upon the earth.

In v. 34 Paul quotes from Isaiah #55. Paul is arguing that the eternal promises made to David could only be fulfilled in a king who could overcome death. Then in v. 35 he quotes from Psalm 16 v. 10 which speaks of a holy one who would not undergo decay. This could not refer to David, because he died. It could not refer to others like Lazarus who was raised from the dead, because he also eventually died, and his body decayed. Jesus, however, rose from the dead and received a resurrection body. This body would not experience decay.

Thus Paul declares in vv. 38 & 39, **“Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses.”** Paul identifies two benefits which come from this message of hope. The first has to do with forgiveness of sins. The second has to do with being freed from all things. Literally, the original word is “justified.”

Forgiveness of sins was good news, even to Gentiles in the first century. There was perhaps a more general awareness of sin in that culture than there is today. Many religions required animal sacrifice to atone for wrongdoing and to placate the gods. The gods that were worshiped were often fickle, and their standards of morality were often much different than ours. But people generally had a fear of violating whatever the standards were.

The Pew Research Center says that between 60 and 64% of Americans identify themselves as Christians. Yet I wonder how many of them really have a healthy fear of violating His standards. A healthy fear of God recognizes that there are consequences that come from offending Him. The good news for those who have a healthy fear of God is that forgiveness is available in Christ.

Also Paul indicates that justification is available. This is a legal term that literally means “to be declared righteous.” The implication is that God is the ultimate Judge before whom we all must stand. But Paul says in these two verses that everyone who believes in Jesus is justified, declared righteous, before the God of the universe.

Here also is a simple statement of our responsibility to benefit from what Jesus did in providing forgiveness of sins and justification. We are to believe in Jesus. Paul does not say that forgiveness of sins and justification come from good works, from water baptism, from generous giving, or by doing more good things than bad things.

In a recent interview with Fox News President Trump commented on his efforts to end the war in Ukraine. He said, **“If I can save 7,000 people a week from being killed, I think that’s pretty-- I want to try to get to heaven if possible, I’m hearing that I’m not doing well. I am really at the bottom of the totem pole,”** he added, to laughter from the Fox News hosts. **“But if I can get to heaven, this will be one of the reasons.”** That is not the gospel. Paul says that people get forgiveness of sins by believing in Jesus--- full stop.

Lokmani Bhandari was a Hindu from the Himalayan kingdom of Nepal. He was a gang leader and a street fighter. He was so good at Tae-Kwon-Do that he won his country’s national championship in 1984. In spite of his violent life he had a fear of god, or the gods. He said, **“I had always read in the Hindu scriptures that someday there would come a judge riding on a horse with a sword in his hand. He would demand an account for what one did in his life and judge all nations.”**

On one occasion Finnish missionaries had Lokmani visit their home, where they told him about Jesus. Nevertheless Lokmani continued his violent ways. Some months later, however, he had a motorbike accident in which he was seriously injured. He had a vision of Jesus in the midst of his recovery. He was gripped with fear. This healthy fear prompted him to trust in the Jesus he had learned about from the Finnish missionaries.

Lokmani went on to become a flaming evangelist. (PROJECTOR ON--- LOKMANI BHANDARI) He got a further education which included a doctor’s degree from Fuller Seminary. He planted several churches in Nepal, where there was much opposition to the gospel. He served as president of Katmandu Bible College, which he founded. The gospel became a message of hope to this man who experienced the fear of God.

II.

In vv. 40 & 41 we encounter A WARNING TO THOSE WHO DON’T FEAR GOD. (II. A WARNING TO THOSE WHO...) The Jews thought that they were OK with God by virtue of their Jewishness. Simply being descendants of Abraham made them part of God’s family, so they thought. The Jews in the synagogue also were necessarily observant of at least the main aspects of the Law of Moses. But in v. 39 Paul claimed that the Law of Moses could not ultimately provide justification and forgiveness of sins. Only through

the Messiah could justification and forgiveness be found. Unfortunately the religious leaders in Jerusalem had rejected the Messiah.

Now in vv. 40 & 41 Paul warned, **“Beware, therefore, lest what is said in the Prophets should come about:/ ‘Look, you scoffers,/ be astounded and perish;/ for I am doing a work in your days,/ a work that you will not believe, even if one tells it to you.’”** Paul was quoting from Habakkuk #1 v. 5. The original warning of the prophet concerned the sin of Judah that was about to be punished by the coming of the Babylonians. Paul makes an application of that warning to the members of his audience, especially the Jewish members, who will reject his claims about Jesus as the Messiah. He warns them that they will be subject to the judgment of God if they reject the Messiah.

John Newton (JOHN NEWTON) was one who did not fear God. He had been taught the Bible as a child by his mother. But when his mother died when he was seven years old, he became bitter toward God. He went to sea with his father. He became a foul-mouthed, cynical seaman who was fond of mocking God. At age 23 he was already the captain of his own British ship, which was engaged in the slave trade. One day in March of 1747 he came across a New Testament on his ship. He spent time reading it but it aroused emotions of fear inside of him. He put it aside.

Later that night he was aroused from sleep by a storm. It turned out to be the worst storm that he had ever experienced. John Newton was also concerned because the vessel he captained was not especially sea worthy. He became afraid. He was afraid that his ship might sink, and that everyone would drown. He was afraid that he might soon have to face the God he had mocked.

John Newton had his men tie him to the helm. During that long night he had a serious conversation with God. He confessed his sin. He promised to change his way of being. He put his trust in Jesus. Eventually he left his life at sea. Eventually he recognized the sin of slavery. Eventually he became a pastor in England. Eventually he wrote the familiar hymn “Amazing Grace.” John Newton took his experience at sea as a warning to those who do not fear God.

The God of the Bible is our Creator. He has provided us with a Savior. Some day He will be our judge. That prospect should create in us a healthy fear. It should motivate us to accept His Son as our Savior.

III.

In vv. 42-47 and v. 50 we come to THE CONSEQUENCES FOR THOSE WHO FEAR LOSS OF POSITION. (III. THE CONSEQUENCES FOR THOSE WHO...) These verses deal with an unhealthy fear.

The initial response to Paul’s message of hope is positive. Luke writes in vv. 42 & 43, **“As they went out, the people begged that these things might be told them the next Sabbath. And after the meeting of the synagogue broke up, many Jews and**

devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who, as they spoke with them, urged them to continue in the grace of God." The leaders of the synagogue apparently gave their approval for a meeting on the next Sabbath.

According to v. 44, **"The next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord."** What better response could the missionaries have had? But then we find out in v. 45, **"But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy..."**

Jealousy involves wanting something that someone else has. The Jewish leaders would like to have the attention, recognition, and power that Paul and Barnabas have with these crowds. Jealousy may also involve a fear. If my rival gets the promotion that I want, if she gets the best grade in the class, if he makes the starting team instead of me, I may get less attention, less recognition, and less power over others.

Charles Swindoll says, **"[Jealousy] begins with full hands but is threatened by the loss of its plenty. It is the pain of losing what I have to someone else, in spite of all my efforts to keep it."** The Jewish leaders here feared a loss of their position in the religious community, a loss of their traditional religious practices, a loss of power over their congregation. Some of their Jewish members and Gentile visitors might go over to these Christians. The leaders of the synagogue had an unhealthy fear. Their concern was not for truth but for their position and control.

These Jewish leaders watched as their synagogue was flooded with Gentiles, Gentiles who had no previous connection with the synagogue. They found Gentiles sitting in their seats. Perhaps more likely, since the whole city was gathered together, they were meeting outside of the synagogue, perhaps in a larger outdoor venue. The synagogue leaders may also have begun to catch the drift of the Christian message that this salvation was offered apart from the need to become Jews.

Thus in v. 45 they **"began to contradict what was spoken by Paul, reviling him."** Their jealousy and fear led to division. It led to verbal attacks. Apparently they began speaking against Jesus and the simplicity of their Christian gospel.

According to vv. 46 & 47, **"And Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, 'It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, "I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth."'"**

Paul quotes Isaiah #49 v. 6. The prophet had commanded the Jewish people to bring the light to the Gentiles. They did not do a very good job of being faithful to that command. Jesus came to be obedient to that command. Paul says, "You are not willing to carry on that responsibility. You are opposing this message from God and from the Son of God, the Messiah. Therefore we will take on the job that you reject."

Down in v. 50 we discover, **“But the Jews incited the devout women of high standing and the leading men of the city, stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district.”** These devout women were apparently Gentile women who had some connection to the synagogue. They had husbands who were leaders in the community. The wives told them that the missionaries were trouble makers. Judaism was a legal religion in the Roman Empire. These women perhaps convinced the husbands that the men were not a legitimate part of Judaism and were therefore connected to an illegal religion. Paul and Barnabas were thus kicked out of town. Maybe they were also beaten up.

Jealousy that includes an element of fear often leads to a counterattack. Fear that one is losing status or control or power may lead to an attack upon the object of jealousy and fear. It may lead to destructive gossip about the woman who got the position that I wanted. It may lead to criticism of the pastor who is getting members from my church. It may lead to dissing the person who is making more money than I am. Jealousy often involves an unhealthy fear, a fear that is motivated by selfishness, a fear that leads to division and attacks upon others.

IV.

Finally, we come to THE BENEFIT OF FEARING GOD ONLY. (IV. THE BENEFIT OF FEARING GOD ONLY) That is the subject of vv. 48 & 49 and vv. 51 & 52. The first part of v. 48 says, **“And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord...”** What is it that the Gentiles heard? It was the message of Paul in vv. 46 & 47 that the God of the Hebrews has commanded that the message of salvation through faith in the Messiah be declared to the Gentiles. The joy comes also because this gospel is offered without any requirement that the Gentiles become Jews.

The rest of v. 48 reads, **“...and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.”** The human responsibility is simply to believe in Jesus. Many of the Gentiles in Antioch did that. But Luke the historian also points to the sovereignty of God in salvation, which was the emphasis in the first part of Paul’s sermon. We stressed that last week.

In v. 49 Luke adds that this gospel message spread throughout the area around Antioch. Verse 50 says that the Jews were behind a persecution that resulted in Paul and Barnabas being kicked out of town. According to v. 51, **“But they shook off the dust from their feet against them and went to Iconium.”** Shaking off the dust of their feet was a way of expressing condemnation of the actions of the city officials.

The next stop on their missionary journey was Iconium (ICONIUM MAP), which was 80 miles to the southeast. It was a town where several Roman roads met. Today it is a city of 600,000 people.

Verse 52 describes the attitude of the Christians who remained in Pisidian Antioch: **“And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.”** The Christians had reasons to be upset. Their spiritual leaders had been kicked out of town. They were

faced with opposition to their new belief system (PROJECTOR OFF) There was probably some persecution that was directed toward them. Yet their lives were characterized by joy. The reason was that their lives had been transformed. They were convinced that their sins had been forgiven and that they had received the gift of eternal life. They believed that they now served a sovereign God who loved them. If He cared enough to provide them with salvation, He was sure to care enough for them to provide for their ongoing needs. He was certain to provide a remedy for their fears.

Oswald Chambers (PROJECTOR ON--- OSWALD CHAMBERS) was a Christian writer and devotional thinker who lived a hundred years ago. He served as a chaplain and YMCA worker in Egypt for the British army in World War I. He once said (OSWALD CHAMBERS SAYING), **“The remarkable thing about fearing God is that when you fear God you fear nothing else, whereas if you do not fear God you fear everything else.”**

There is a certain wisdom that is expressed in that statement. If we do not fear God, then death is a cause for fear. It means judgment from God, or a great leap into the dark. It means that we are dependent upon ourselves for our own meaning and security in life. It means that life is a crap shoot. There is little hope of finding meaning in the things that happen around us. There is no real security. We are simply the products of laws of physics and principles of evolution.

For those of us who fear God to the point of having trusted in Jesus death has a different meaning. We are promised eternal life. Death for the Christian means entrance into Paradise. We may fear the judgment of God for the things that we have done in life (ROMANS 8:1) but Romans #8 v. 1 tells us, **“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”** Eighty times in the Bible the people of God are told by the Lord or His angel to fear not.

We may have fears of insignificance, fears that our life is without meaning, that we are not important. But the Bible tells us Christians that we are children of God, that we are heavenly ambassadors, that we are heirs of the kingdom of God, that we are royalty.

We may have fears of loneliness. God tells us in Hebrews #13 v. 5 (HEBREWS 13:5), **“I will never leave you nor forsake you.”** We may have fears about the meeting of our physical and material needs. Jesus told His followers (MATTHEW 6:33) in Matthew #6 v. 33, **“But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these [material] things will be added to you.”**

The world in which we live is inherently dangerous. Bad things happen to Christian people. But ultimately we have reason for hope. We have a sovereign God who is going to care for us. The Bible (ROMANS 8:28) says in Romans 8:28, **“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”** If we fear God, if we have trusted in Jesus as our Savior, we can have our greatest fears alleviated.

(OSWALD CHAMBERS SAYING) **“The remarkable thing about fearing God is that when you fear God you fear nothing else, whereas if you do not fear God you fear everything else.”**