

PM Isaiah 49:1-7 & Acts 13:44-52 Light for the Whole World

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Preacher: Rev Robert Dale

[0 : 00] Let's hear from God's Word, and we have two readings tonight.

The first is from Isaiah 49, on page 737 of the Church Bibles.

Isaiah 49, and reading the first seven verses. Listen to me, O coastlands, and give attention, you peoples from afar.

The Lord called me from the womb, from the body of my mother he named my name. He made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me.

He made me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me away. And he said to me, you are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.

[1 : 13] But I said, I have laboured in vain. I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity. Yet surely my right is with the Lord, and my recompense with my God.

And now the Lord says, he who formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel may be gathered to him.

For I am honoured in the eyes of the Lord, and my God has become my strength. He says, it is too light a thing, that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to bring back the preserved of Israel.

I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.

Thus says the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel, and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nation, the servant of rulers, kings shall see and arise, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves, because of the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.

[2 : 42] We turn now over to Acts 13, continuing our studies in the missionary journeys of Paul.

The last part of his visit to Antioch in Pisidia in Acts 13, from verse 44 to the end of the chapter, page 1111, where you will notice shortly that he quotes from Isaiah 49.

So reading from verse 44. The next Sabbath, almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord.

But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy, and began to contradict what was spoken by Paul, reviling him.

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.

[4 : 02] 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.

And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord. And as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.

And the word of the Lord was spreading throughout the whole region. 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.

But they shook off the dust from their feet against them, and went to Iconium. And the disciples were filled with joy, and with the Holy Spirit.

Let's sing. Well, let's turn now to those verses we read in Acts 13.

[5 : 28] I'll read again verses 46 and 47. And Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you, that is, to the Jews.

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.

When Christ was born in Bethlehem, the angel said to the shepherds that that was good news, of great joy to all peoples.

But sadly, not everyone wants it. Even in New Testament times, there were some who received the gospel, and some who rejected it.

[6 : 45] And that's what we see here in Acts 13. Multitudes gathered to hear the word of God, and many believed, but many didn't.

And Paul and Barnabas are driven out of the city. And today, likewise, people are divided by the gospel.

Some believe, some don't. And in some parts of the world, this still breaks forth into persecution. And yet, the gospel goes on, despite all opposition. I want us to look at this passage tonight under three headings.

A division, a decision, and a departure. And I want us to see both God's judgment upon those who reject the gospel, and the unstoppable nature of the gospel.

[7 : 59] First, though, let me remind you of the background. This is now my third sermon on the missionary journeys of Paul. And we've seen how, on this first missionary journey, he has preached with Barnabas throughout Cyprus.

And they've then crossed over to the mainland and gone up into the mountains to Pisidian Antioch. And there, Paul has preached in the synagogue, showing that Jesus is the promised Messiah. And that sermon had been a great success. In verse 42, they'd been asked to come back the next Sabbath.

Verse 43, many of the Jews and devout converts to Judaism believed, and Paul had urged them to continue in the grace of God.

Well now, that second Sabbath has come. But this time, it's a very different story. Let's look first at the division in verses 44 and 45.

[9 : 20] It begins, encouragingly enough, in verse 44, the next Sabbath, almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord.

that this was a predominantly Gentile city, remember? So we must imagine crowds of Gentiles going into the synagogue to hear Paul and Barnabas.

Just imagine that today. Imagine that we have a visiting preacher come here, and he's so good that we urge him to come back next week.

And when next week comes, there are queues outside the door. Word has got around. People are queuing all down George Street and all around into Beclaw Street. There's nowhere to park because everyone wants to hear this preacher.

Hard to imagine, isn't it? But that's what happened to Paul. I must admit that with me it's usually the other way around.

[10 : 34] 30 in the morning on a good day, 20 in the evening. The numbers go down rather than up. It did happen to me once, over 40 years ago.

I was preaching on two successive weeks in Hazelmere Evangelical Church on Psalm 8, describing it as a messianic psalm.

And there were about 20 there the first week, and the next week suddenly there were 40. And I remember thinking of this verse. I think they'd never heard Psalm 8 expounded as a messianic psalm.

But it's all too rare, isn't it? The whole city coming to hear the word of the Lord just doesn't happen today. But it did hear.

It happened to Paul on a huge scale. Multitudes coming to hear the gospel. And it wasn't just the preacher.

[11 : 41] Paul admits elsewhere that his preaching was criticized by some. He didn't have the Greek oratory that people admired. People thought that his preaching was weak.

It wasn't just the preacher. It was the message he was bringing. The Messiah has come. What a message that was.

the whole city wanted to hear it. How encouraging that must have been for Paul. And how encouraging it should have been for the rulers of the synagogue and for the congregation.

surely they'd been praying for this. They'd been praying for years that the Messiah would come. And I'm sure they'd been praying for years that the people of Antioch would turn to the Lord. And here it was happening before their very eyes. And yet they are not pleased. In verse 45 when the Jews saw the crowds they rejoiced.

[13:01] No, no they didn't. They were filled with jealousy and began to contradict what was spoken by Paul reviling him.

Jealousy. the green-eyed monster. If the whole city had come out to hear the rulers of the synagogue then they would have been pleased.

But they'd come out to hear Paul with this new message of his. And they were not pleased about that. Jealousy played a part in our Lord's crucifixion.

Matthew 27 18 Pilate tried to get Jesus released. For it says he knew that it was out of envy that they had delivered him up.

Jewish leaders felt their authority was being threatened by Jesus. They saw the crowds following him rather than following them. And so they plotted and schemed to have him killed and stirred up the crowds against him.

[14:16] same thing is happening here. Paul and Barnabas are following in the footsteps of their master. Jewish leaders in Jerusalem had argued with Jesus and reviled him even on the cross.

So the Jewish leaders in Antioch were arguing with Paul and reviling him out of envy. I wonder if we're guilty of jealousy sometimes.

Guilty of envy. Might be jealousy over the things of this world. Envy of those who are rich and successful. Or it may be jealousy over spiritual success.

We may be jealous of those whose ministry appears to be more successful than ours. Or of churches that are larger than ours.

In a small church like ours it's very easy to be envious of large churches and to look for faults and to criticise them.

[15:29] Well churches do sometimes become big through compromise. Through telling people what they want to hear rather than what the Lord says. bigger doesn't always mean better.

But sometimes it may just be that the Lord has favoured them rather than us. And in those cases we should be humble and praise God for them.

Jealousy has no part in the Christian life. Now Paul was no stranger to opposition.

He'd been on the other side himself persecuting Christians. No doubt he'd often argued with Christians and reviled them. He'd faced opposition when he first preached in Damascus.

He'd had to run away escaping in a basket. He'd faced opposition in Jerusalem and the Jews had plotted to kill him.

[16:34] He knew where all this was leading. I'm sure he was very patient. I'm sure he reasoned with them. But eventually enough was enough.

So we come to our second point. The decision in verses 46 to 49. In verse 46 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 turn to the Gentiles. It was Paul and Barnabas notice who said this, not just the forthright Paul, but gentle Barnabas as well.

They were 100% agreed on this. They'd done their duty in preaching to the Jews. It was necessary for the gospel to be preached first to them.

That was God's order. To the Jew first and afterward to the Gentiles. That was the order historically.

[17:52] The word of God came first to the Jews in the Old Testament and afterward to the Gentiles. That was the order in the Great Commission, Luke 24.

Gospel was to be preached to all nations beginning at Jerusalem. That was the order in Acts 1 verse 8. You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

And the book of Acts follows that progress from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. All along the way the gospel offer is made first to the Jews.

And Paul had no problem with that. Paul loved the Jews. These were his own people. And they were God's chosen nation.

He says in Romans 10 it was his heart's desire and prayer for Israel that they may be saved. And we should still show love for the Jews today.

[18 : 57] Without getting into the politics of it all we should support their right to exist as a nation and pray for them not just in their political and military trials but spiritually that they might at last recognize their Messiah.

Messiah. But these Jews in Antioch had rejected the Messiah. And Paul and Barnabas therefore make this momentous decision to turn to the Gentiles.

Now some have seen in this a great turning point in history. A new dispensation creation. The beginning of the age of the Gentiles.

They link it with the prophecy in Revelation 11 of the 42 months where the temple will be trodden down by the Gentiles. And they suppose that God has now ceased temporarily to be concerned with the Jews.

He has now turned to the Gentiles and the Jews will only reappear on the scene at the end of the age. That's the dispensational view which you may have come across.

[20 : 23] I can't see that here. The gospel had been preached to the Gentiles before. Peter had preached to Cornelius in Acts 10.

Paul had preached to the Gentiles in Syrian Antioch and in Cyprus. There was nothing new to preach to the Gentiles. And Paul continued to preach to the Jews after this.

Indeed, immediately after this, in Iconium, in Acts 14 verse 1, where did they go? Straight to the synagogue. And again, you find it in Thessalonica and in Corinth, he preaches to the Jews.

Jews. In Acts 18 and verse 6, having preached to the Jews and having heard the gospel being rejected again, he says the same words, from now on I will go to the Gentiles.

And yet he still preached to the Jews in the next chapter in Ephesus. God hadn't given up on the Jews, and he still hasn't.

[21 : 37] Paul hadn't given up on the Jews, and nor should we. Perfectly true that the Jews, as a people, did reject Christ, and did reject the gospel.

And it did come to the point where Jerusalem was destroyed in AD 70, and the Jewish people have suffered terribly down through the centuries. But God has not abandoned them.

And even through those dark centuries, Jewish people have been saved. And at this present time, the gospel is still going to the Jews. We pray regularly for the international mission to Jewish people, and they report of Jewish people being saved today.

God has not given up on the Jews. Jews. But these Jews in Antioch, they had judged themselves unworthy.

Paul says they had thrust aside the gospel, and therefore he would not be back for a third Sabbath. Their opportunity had gone.

[22 : 58] He was no longer going to preach to them. He was going elsewhere. You see, it's a very solemn thing to reject the gospel.

God is very patient. As we sang in Psalm 103, the Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in a steadfast love. The way to God was still open.

Even to these Jews in Antioch, it was still possible for them to be saved. Paul, the converted Pharisee, knew that more than most. But their great day of opportunity had gone.

Wasted. They had hardened their hearts, and it would be perfectly just if God left them like that in their unbelief.

faith. The very fact of Paul and Barnabas turning to the Gentiles was in itself a judgment on them.

[24 : 07] They were about to suffer a famine of the word of God. God was effectively withdrawing from them. And if they didn't repent, then judgment would be final.

But it isn't only the Jews who can harden their hearts against the gospel, is it? There's reason to fear that in Scotland today, multitudes of people have hardened their hearts, judged themselves unworthy, thrust aside the gospel.

Gospel has been preached in this land for hundreds of years, and at times God has poured out his spirit in wonderful ways, and many have been saved.

But this present generation has rejected the Lord, and who knows what the consequences might be. Already gospel preaching is rare in this land, and that in itself is a judgment.

The sword of judgment is over Scotland, and we need to pray that God will be merciful. So, the decision had been taken.

[25 : 33] We will turn to the Gentiles. It's a big decision, and yet it's also a biblical decision. Paul quotes in verse 47, So the Lord has commanded us, saying, I have made you a light for the

Gentiles, that you might bring salvation to the ends of the earth.

If you just read that without knowing the Old Testament background, you might think that it was Paul who had been sent as a light to the Gentiles. He's not saying that.

He's quoting from the Old Testament, and those words were actually spoken of Christ. It's quoting from Isaiah 49, verse 6, from the second servant song, which we read from earlier.

And that song begins with the servant, Christ, addressing the nations. Christians, listen to me, O coastlands, and give attention, you peoples from afar.

That would include these people at Antioch and Pisidia, and it will include us. God had given him, he says, a mouth like a sharp sword.

[26 : 55] It made him like a polished arrow, and yet he says, I have labored in vain. I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity. This is Christ speaking.

Christ, who had been rejected by his own people, the greatest preacher there ever was, rejected in Israel.

And we might add, still being rejected in Scotland today. But God's plans were bigger than Israel. That's the point of that second servant song. God says to his servant in verse 6, it is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob to bring back the preserved of Israel. I will make you a light to the nations that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth. God's plan had always extended beyond Israel.

[28 : 04] Abraham was told that in him all the families of the earth would be blessed. Psalm 2, God said to his son, ask of me and I will give you the nations for your inheritance and the ends of the earth for your possession.

The Psalms call upon all nations to worship him, not just Israel. The gospel was always intended to be God's light for the whole world.

God. Paul, therefore, was on sure ground turning to the Gentiles. Yes, the gospel had to go first to the Jews, but God had big plans, plans for the nations and that is where Paul must now go.

This is what God had commanded and that command still applies to us. Christ commands in the Great Commission, go and make disciples of all the nations.

So Paul and Barnabas decide to move on. And there are times when we do have to move on.

[29 : 22] Some years ago I knew a man who had been visiting door to door in a wealthy part of Lincoln and he was getting absolutely nowhere.

So he decided to move on to a local council estate and everyone wanted to hear the gospel. It's rather like that here.

If the Jews don't want to hear, well, that's tragic, but there are others who do. Likewise today. If there are some people who reject the gospel, well, that's tragic.

But we mustn't fret about it forever. There's a whole world out there waiting to be saved. There are others who need the gospel too.

Paul and Barnabas were vindicated in their decision by what followed. verse 48, when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.

[30 : 35] Notice the balance there between divine sovereignty and human faith. Those who are appointed to eternal life, the elect, are saved.

but only when they believe. Paul says in Ephesians, by grace you are saved, through faith.

God has his elect among the Gentiles, and they will come to faith, even if the Jews don't. He still has his elect amongst the nations today.

People out there in Dumfries, chosen by God, there must be some, and they will believe. God will send his servants to them, God will send us to them, God will bring them into contact with us, that we may share the gospel with those who are ordained to eternal life.

And it's not just a momentary success. Verse 49, the word of the Lord was spreading throughout the whole region. From now onwards, there will be a shifted emphasis in Paul's ministry.

[31 : 54] He still preaches to the Jews, and many Jews are still converted in different cities, but more and more, his success will be among the Gentiles.

His ministry in Antioch, however, comes to an abrupt end, which brings us to our last point, the departure, verses 50 to 52.

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. But they shook off the

dust from their feet against them, and went to Iconium.

And the disciples were filled with joy and the Holy Spirit. Persecution, sadly, often comes from people in high places.

It was the chief priests who plotted to kill Christ. It was the Roman governor, Pilate, who carried out the sentence. In Acts 12, it was Herod who executed James.

[33 : 08] Here it is the leading men and the devout women who stir up the people against Paul and Barnabas.

Presumably by devout women, it means devout pagan women. Religious people. Down through history, religious people have been the most dangerous.

If it's false religion, beware. All the persecutions of the covenanters in this area, it was the powerful and the rich and it was the religious who led those persecutions, bishops and archbishops.

Well, here it's the devout women and the chief leading men who stir up the persecution against Paul. There's nothing realistically that Paul and Barnabas can do about this, things.

But that's okay. There is a whole world out there that needs the gospel and they're quite happy to move on to the next city.

[34 : 20] And they are in fact following to the letter here, the commands of Christ. In Matthew 10, 14, if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town.

Later, in the same chapter, when they persecute you in one town, flee to the next. The chapter ends with rejoicing, the disciples were filled with joy and the Holy Spirit.

When it says the disciples, that could mean Paul and Barnabas. Sure, they rejoiced. But more likely, it means the new disciples in Antioch. To the world, that might seem strange.

Rejoicing when you're persecuted. Rejoicing when your preacher has been driven out of the city. But that's what Jesus commanded. Matthew 5, 11, Blessed are you when they revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

Rejoice and be glad. For your reward is great in heaven. For so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. So was it a success, this visit to Antioch?

[35 : 42] At one level it might look like a failure. Rejected in the synagogue and forced to leave. But look at what had been achieved.

On the first Sabbath many, both Jews and devout converts to Judaism had believed. On the second Sabbath the Gentiles rejoiced in the good news and the word had spread through the region.

That sounds like success to me. And a church was established. In Acts 14 and verse 21 Paul and Barnabas returned to the cities where they had preached including Antioch.

Strengthening the disciples urging them to continue in the faith, saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God and appointing elders.

people to God to see our Lord was fulfilling his promise. I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

[36 : 50] The gates of hell had been opened against Paul and Barnabas and yet Christ was still building his church. church. And that is still marvelously true today.

Faithful preachers have carried on the work of Paul and Barnabas. The gospel has spread throughout the world, even to Scotland. Those preachers down through the ages, they too have endured great trials and persecutions, but the word of the Lord continues to spread. nothing can stop it. It's our task to carry the light of Christ to our nation.

The flame has passed to us, just as the Olympic flame is passed from runner to runner on its way to the Olympic stadium, so the flame of the gospel has been passed to us.

And we in turn will pass it on to the next generation, we must never drop it, nor quench the flame. There will be times of discouragement.

[38 : 04] The world will sometimes argue with us and revile us. They may even persecute us. They do already in many parts of the world. But the Lord will stave some.

As many as are ordained to eternal life will believe. We pray for days of revival when many will believe.

I would be more than happy with the success that Paul and Barnabas had here. But even in the lean times, God is at work. Only make sure that you yourself are among the saved.

Those who rejected the gospel at Antioch made a tragic decision. who knows if the opportunity ever came to them again.

May everyone here from the oldest to the youngest trust in Christ, the saviour of the world. Amen.
Amen. Amen.

[39 : 11] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.