

God's Word: Handle with Care

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- [0:00] My dad, he rings me up all the time to talk about the Bible, which is a real thrill for me. And the reason is every day my dad reads his Old Testament.
- He loves the Old Testament. He reads his Old Testament and then a corresponding New Testament passage. And he rings me up all the time because he can't figure out what's wrong with the Jews.
- How could they have all that rich history with God, all those prophecies about Jesus, but then fail to recognize him when he arrived? Dad can't get over how this could happen and why our churches aren't full of more Jewish people.
- Well, in today's passage, we'll see the answer why. You might say we'll see the last chance the Jews have to be part of God's family. You see, Acts begins with Peter, the apostle to the Jews.
- But from today, we shift focus to Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles. The gospel begins in Jerusalem, the center of the Jewish world. But from today, Paul begins to take it to Rome, the center of the Gentile world.
- [1:08] You see, if you can get the gospel to Rome back then, you really can take it to the ends of the earth. In verse 1, God assembles five prophets and teachers.
- It's kind of like that movie Avengers Assemble. He's assembled five key prophets. In verse 2, the Holy Spirit says, Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.
- You see, they're gearing up for global mission. Everything is going according to Jesus' predictions. Remember chapter 1, verse 8, the key verse of the whole book.
- Jesus said, You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you. You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.
- So on one hand, the gospel going out was always part of God's plan. But today is the human reason why the gospel leaves Israel, as it were.
- [2:14] The human reason why our churches are so full of Anglo-Saxon, European, Asian, African, Persian, but so few Jews.
- And obviously this passage will be tough if you happen to be Jewish. But it's also going to be tough if you're a Christian. Because today's passage is a warning.
- It's a warning for all people about handling things with care. You know, on the side of boxes, you know, pick up the box with delicate things. It's got that sign, handle with care.
- When I play with my baby son Samuel, we're not yet, you know, doing play wrestles. I've got to handle him with care. It's a good warning when you handle fragile things.
- But today it's a warning for powerful things. Because again and again, the repeated theme in our passage is God's word. I think 29 times I counted it's repeated.
- [3:11] Far from being fragile, like glass or a little baby, God's word is powerful. It's dangerously good, if you could say that.

It's a little unsafe. It's like live electric wires. It's the warning today. Handle God's word with care. And so this is our first point.

Let's pick up the story in verse 4. The two of them, that's Paul and Barnabas, they sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus.

When they arrived in Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues. And in one corner, or when Paul gets to the synagogue, he's got a fight on his hands.

In one corner, verse 6 says, is a Jewish sorcerer, a false prophet named Bar Jesus. He is skilled in dark magic and twisting the word.

[4:09] In the other corner is the apostles. And it's a contest of power. And they're fighting over the faith of the proconsul, who in verse 7, we're told, is an intelligent man.

He sent for Barnabas and Saul because he wanted to hear the word of God. But the sorcerer opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith. The sorcerer's name is Bar Jesus, which means son of salvation.

But Paul looks at him, full of the Spirit, and says, you're a child of the devil. Verse 11, he's overpowered by the Holy Spirit. And Paul says, you are going to be blind for a time.

Not even be able to see the light of the sun. See, he was a powerful man. But now, groping around in the darkness, needing someone else to lead him by the hand.

He is a picture of weakness. But watch what happens in verse 12. When the proconsul saw what happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord.

[5:22] You see, the power to win the proconsul was not in the blindness miracle, but in Paul's teaching about the Lord. The word is living and active.

It's full of the Spirit's power. It rescues the proconsul from the grip of the devil and brings him to a place of belief.

And that is God's mission. His work in the world is to rescue people from sin, darkness, and the devil so they can be in his family.

It is done through the proclamation of the word. Now, let me just clarify. The fact that the sun still rises, that the ordinary course of the universe carries on, that is also God's work.

But there is a focusing of his power everywhere these apostles proclaim the gospel word, the message about Jesus. You see, God's main work is to establish Jesus' kingdom, to build his church.

[6:27] It is done as the gospel is proclaimed. The word, it makes baby Christians. It grows and matures existing Christians.

This is where we locate God's power. It is in a Spirit-filled word. It's not very safe sometimes. It is like live electric wires.

And I think that makes the story of the Jews that much more tragic. You see, they had centuries of relationship with God, front row seats to his forgiveness and blessings, and they possessed his word.

From the very first time he spoke to mankind. But something was wrong with them. And this is our second point. In verse 13, Paul travels from the island of Cyprus back to the mainland, to Antioch.

And as usual, he seeks out the local Jewish synagogue. In verse 15, he's invited by those leaders to preach. And in his sermon, what he does is give a Bible overview. The angle to listen out for is handling God with care.

[7:38] Handling things with care. So look down at your Bibles with me. Verse 16. Standing up, Paul motioned with his hand and said, Fellow Israelites and you Gentiles who worship God, listen to me.

The God of the people of Israel chose our ancestors. He made the people prosper during their stay in Egypt. With mighty power, he led them out of that country. The emphasis already is how special Israel was to God.

God was their God. He chose them. He prospered them. He led them out. But how did they treat him in return? Verse 18. For about 40 years, he had to endure their conduct in the wilderness.

It's okay though. God is gracious and forgiving. Verse 19. He still overthrew seven foreign nations. He gave their land to his people as an inheritance.

Verse 20. He gave them judges to keep them in line. Until the time of the prophets and Samuel took over. But how did they treat God in return? Verse 21.

[8 : 45] Then the people asked for a king. You see, they spurned their relationship with God. They wanted to be just like the nations around them. It's okay.

God is gracious and forgiving. So in verse 22, he gave them a proper king. I have found David, son of Jesse, a man after my own heart.

He will do everything I want him to do. In fact, from David, verse 23, God has brought to Israel a savior, Jesus, just as he promised.

But how did they treat Jesus when he arrived? Verse 27. The people of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognize him. Yet in condemning Jesus, they fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath.

Though they had found no proper ground for a death sentence, they asked Pilate to have him executed. When they carried out all that was written about him, they took him down off the cross and laid him in a tomb.

[9 : 49] You see, the tragedy of the Jews is they have no excuse. Everything that happened to Jesus was foretold by the prophets in words that were read out for them in their synagogues every Sabbath since they were little.

If only they had taken more care with God's word. You see, when someone passes, the chance to repair your relationship is gone.

But God raised Jesus from the dead. The first witnesses were Jewish people. Jesus' resurrection means they get to say they're sorry to him.

And that is good news if you tried to kill him. If you rejected God in your lives. And what Paul does is he strings together a bunch of Old Testament quotes.

I think they're indented in your Bibles. Paul strings together a bunch of Old Testament quotes to say that this is their last warning. So look at verse 33.

[10 : 55] Paul says, We all know the second psalm, Psalm 2. It's all about God's ruling king.

But it's also for us a test of intelligence. It's on your screen now, please, Tim. That is the message.

For people like the Jews who rejected Jesus, Psalm 2 says they're facing destruction. But the gospel is their last chance at peace.

Look at verse 38 in your Bibles. Therefore, my friends, I want you to know that through Jesus, the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him, everyone who believes is set free from every sin.

And that is good news. See, Paul wants them to know that the gospel is the Jews' last chance. The message about Jesus is where they'll find the necessary sins forgiven.

[12 : 21] Now, in the message of the gospel, verse 40. Take care that what the prophets have said does not happen to you. Look, you scoffers, wonder and perish.

I'm going to do something in your days that you would never believe, even if someone told you. Take care with the gospel, with the word. Don't be scoffers or you'll perish.

Don't be those who would never believe, even if someone told you. You see, there are no more Exodus rescues. No more Old Testament prophets to come.

No more human kings. No more John the Baptist. No more baby Jesus. No more dying on the cross. No more saviors. There is only a judge, Jesus, and he's on his way.

In the gospel, the message about Jesus is the last chance that people have to be forgiven, to have peace with God.

[13:23] And everywhere Paul travels after today, as he heads towards Rome, the first place he goes is always the Jewish synagogues. They are still the chosen people.

It is not as though chapter 13 is their last chance, but everywhere Paul brings this message. The message is the last chance that Jews have, that all people have.

But let's see how the people in chapter 13 respond. This is our last point. So in verse 42 and 43, it says, Many of the Jews and devout converts to Judaism invited them to speak further next Sabbath.

And I think that is a fantastic response. In fact, they valued the word so much. They shared the word so much that by verse 44, the next Sabbath, the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord.

It is electric, like live wires, powerful. People can't stay away. But by verse 45, other Jews, when they saw the crowds, were filled with jealousy.

[14:32] And they began to contradict what Paul was saying and heaped abuse on him. And for those Jews in verse 45, having rejected the gospel, I want you to watch how God responds this time.

Verse 46. Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly. We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles.

Well, this is what the Lord has commanded. I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth. And in verse 48, it is the Gentiles who honor the word of the Lord and believe.

It's the Gentiles who take care with what God has said. But in verse 50, it's mainly the Jews who reject it. And in a way, that mirrors the story of the proconsul and the sorcerer.

Taking care with the word will leave you like the proconsul in the light, like the rest of the Gentiles. But oppose it and you'll be like that sorcerer, groping around, blind, in the dark when it comes to God.

[15:50] And Jewish people listening, if there are any listening today, Jewish people might feel as though God is against them. But from their history, who has failed whom?

See, everywhere Paul travels, his first priority is to find the local synagogue. But what is wrong with the Jews? Well, actually, the answer is the same thing that's wrong with the Gentiles, with the Christians.

This passage is a warning for us too. You see, we Christians, Gentiles, we resemble the Jews, Israel, in many ways.

We too have had thousands of years of God working in our church. It's possible for us to grow up in a Christian home, to hear the Bible taught every Sabbath since we were little, to know the Jesus story back to front.

But when push comes to shove, to disregard it in our lives. You see, it's not an issue of ethnicity. It's whether we handle God's word with care.

[16:58] Our church, it's a Bible teaching church. It's what we're known for. New people and visitors, they very quickly realise where we find God's power.

But let's make sure that they could never say, Oh yeah, they get a lot of Bible every Sunday, every Sabbath. But they can't do the most basic Christian things, like telling the truth, or being kind, being like Jesus to other people.

It's not so much about our disobedience. Of course we're disobedient. Remember, God is forgiving and gracious. In Jesus, he'll always forgive when we repent.

This isn't about that constant sin and repentance cycle. I think that's just part of the Christian life. This is about unrepentance. The danger in this passage is not caring what the word says.

The danger for Jewish people and for any people is that we reject God's power to save them. The power is in the word.

[18:03] You see, the Jewish mistake was not that they disobeyed God per se, but it was verse 40.

They did not take care what the prophet said. The danger for us is we get to a point with the Bible where verse 41, we scoff and we never are convicted.

We never believe, even when someone speaks to us. When the Jews expelled Paul from their synagogues, sure, they didn't have to listen to him.

They weren't bothered by him. Sure. When we close the Bible, when we don't have to listen to it, sure, it can feel like freedom at times, but where else will we hear about how God wants us to live?

Who else has words of forgiveness of sins? What other teaching has the Spirit's power to change us, to make us more like Jesus?

[19:08] Where else will we hear about eternal life? See, the gospel, the message, the word, is the Jews' last chance, but it's also the Gentiles' last chance.

It's the Christians' last chance. It's every person's last chance at salvation. The power is in the word. See, when we become blasé about the Bible, we lose our conviction about spiritual things.

We stop holding tight to our future inheritance. When we begin swapping Sunday sermons for Sunday sport, when we begin listening to the world, rather than listening to the word, we start down a path of repeating the Jewish mistake.

The warning for us today, as this word goes to the ends of the earth, if God can move on from Israel, then he can also move on from us, as it were.

For people here who aren't Christians, and there'll be a few, you need to know that Jesus is unstoppable, that he is God's ruling king, that he will come back to judge.

[20:27] Not even death could hold him. And your options are this, from our passage, your options are to have forgiveness of sins, be appointed for eternal life, or to scoff in disbelief and perish when Jesus arrives.

And where you end up depends on how you handle the word with care. Remember that story of the proconsul and the sorcerer?

He was being fought over, wasn't he, by the evil sorcerer and Paul. The author comments that he was an intelligent man. And I think that's God's way of saying, if you want to make an intelligent decision, then seek out God's word.

Want to hear more, as he did, which I think means tuning in next Sunday, coming to speak to me and Andrew, coming to be in the room when we're allowed to physically gather.

If you want to be wise, as Psalm 2 said, then be warned by the words of our passage today. Even if you're in the grip of the devil, like the proconsul, God's word has the power to set you free.

[21 : 43] See, that Bible you're holding in your hand, it's not really that safe. It really does have the power to bring people from death to life, to free them from the slavery of sin, darkness and the devil, when you listen and believe and handle it with care.

Shall I pray that we would do that? Father God, thank you that you speak to us by your spirit and through your word.

Thank you that in your word, we hear about forgiveness of sins, about the resurrection of Jesus, about eternal life, a second chance for all of us.

Please, Father, would we handle your word with care? Would we store it up in our hearts that we would not sin against you? Please, Father, for a church like ours, a Bible church like ours, Father, please stop us from becoming blasé.

Stop our eyes from rolling when we see passages we've read before. Please, Father, would we long to hear from you? Would we handle your word with care?

[22 : 54] We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.