



## BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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### The Sermons of Dan Duncan

Acts 13:13-43

Acts

"Justification by Faith"

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] Our text this morning is Acts 13:13-43, which is a very lengthy passage, as you can see. It's a sermon, for the most part, that Paul preached. And I'm not going to read the entire text. What I'm going to do is read the first verses and read the last verses, and then give something of a synopsis of the sermon itself.

This is the first missionary journey on which Paul and Barnabas had set out from Antioch and Syria. And then we read in verse 13 they have gone from Antioch to the island of Cyprus, and now they're moving on and we read in verse 13, "Now Paul and his companions put out to sea from Pashos and came to Perga in Pamphylia; but John left them and returned to Jerusalem. But going on from Perga, they arrived at Pisidian Antioch." Now, this is a different Antioch from the one they left. They left from one in Syria. This is now up in Asia Minor, which we know is Turkey, in the area of area of Pisidia, and they enter a synagogue on that day and "went into the synagogue and sat down." After the reading of the Law and the Prophets the synagogue officials sent to them, saying, 'brethren, if you have any word of exhortation," or any word of encouragement, it can be translated, "for the people, say it.' Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand said,

"Men of Israel, and you who fear God, listen," and then follows his sermon, which is a sermon in which he recounts the blessings of God which led to Christ and to His crucifixion and His resurrection.

He begins with the fathers and he moves to David, and from David he speaks of the fulfillment of the Messianic promise, which is that of Jesus Christ, His death, and His resurrection, and he focuses on the resurrection in that he gives three texts from the Old Testament to prove that this was prophesied by the prophets.

And then he calls for a response. These are true. If Jesus Christ is as He describes in the Savior, if He has died, if He has raised from the dead, then that calls for a response, and in verse 38 we read, "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. Therefore take heed, so that the thing 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.'

"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."

May the Lord bless this reading of His word and our time of study in it together. Let's pray.

[Prayer] Father, we do thank You for time we have together this morning to gather together as men and women, young and old alike, who have put our faith in Jesus Christ, and we thank You for this opportunity to be together to read the scriptures together as we have, and then spend time considering the meaning of this text. It is a great text, Father, a great sermon, that the apostle preached, a sermon that unfolds Your goodness, Your grace, Your mercy that was extended to Israel and has been extended to the Gentiles' work of salvation in Jesus Christ, Your Son.

And so we pray that You would guide us in our thinking. We are thankful that not only do we possess the Scriptures, that we have Your inherent word, Your revelation to us, which we can read in this meeting and we can read every day during the week, but we also have the teacher that You have given, the Holy Spirit who opens up the text for us, who illuminates the page, who guides our thinking, and we pray that You would do this morning. May that work go unhindered. May it be present in the hearts of each of us here, to give us the understanding of the text that we need to have.

And for some, for most, perhaps for all, it is to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ. It is to advance in the faith and grow as disciples. But for some it may be to come to an understanding of the truth of the gospel for the first time. Perhaps, Father, we have in our midst people who have not believed in Jesus Christ, who are in a lost condition, in need of a salvation, and only You can give that, Father, and so we pray for them that You might open their minds to understand, they might do that, understand what Paul preached so long ago that is so relevant today, and then by Your grace believe it.

We look to You to bless us in all things, Father. We have much in this world. We are a blessed people. We have so much that so often we take it for granted and assume it to be our right, our privilege, and yet it's not that at all. It's a gift from you altogether, and so we thank You for every good thing that You give us. Every good and perfect gift comes from above, and we thank You for the material things of life, as well as the spiritual. We thank You that You provide so faithfully.

We pray for those who have sought our prayers for the sick, for the grieving. We pray that You'd bless. We think of Leana Grooms, who we have prayed for so often, and we pray for grace and healing for her, and for encouragement. Bless her and her family. We pray for the mission trip to Costa Rica. We pray that you'll bless it, give safety, give an enjoyable and a fruitful time to the young people who go.

And bless us this evening, Father, as we return to this place and celebrate the Lord's supper and remember His first coming, His death for us, what we will consider this morning as we consider this sermon by Paul. We thank You for that death for us. It's salvation. We'd be lost without it. We would have no life if He did not sacrifice His life for us. But He's coming again and we also remember that, and I pray, Lord, that as we gather together this evening we will reflect on both comings, both advents, one that has occurred and one that will occur, and be moved by that to reflect on the urgency of the day in which we live. We are to be about the work of the Lord. Help us to do that. And be faithful in the task that you have given each of us.

Bless us to that end this morning. We pray these things in Christ name. Amen.

[Message] Some years ago J. I. Packer wrote that once upon a time people in the Christian world knew that the most important issues anyone faces are those of eternity. In those days, he said, the study of salvation was a matter of general interest. Today, however, it is not so.

Well, the reason for that is not the problem has changed. People still need salvation, but they have become distracted by the fast pace of our culture and preoccupied with material things. Fundamentally, of course, the reason is sin. It's blinded the minds of men. But because of that, people today are largely indifferent to spiritual things. They are ignorant of God's truth. They don't know or don't care about the Bible.

So how do we reach such people? How do we awaken a generation that is so distracted by things and worldly pursuits? I think the answer to that is found in our text and in texts like it. It's the same way that the apostles reached their generation, the same way that people did: with the word of God.

His audience, Paul's audience, wasn't less difficult than ours. It was either the self-confident Jew who was proud of his ancient traditions or the pleasure-minded pagan who was as materialistic as people today. Paul spoke to intelligent philosophers, who were just as

sure of themselves as people today who believe that we are the wisest generation of history.

He had a tough audience. But he gave it the Scriptures. He taught it the doctrines of saving grace, of sovereign grace, and didn't mince words. Luke gives us an example of that in Acts 13, when people preached in the synagogue of Antioch of Pisidian. The effectiveness of it, the effectiveness of preaching the word of God is seen in verse 42 where Luke writes that as Paul and Barnabas were going out, the people kept begging that these things might be spoken to them the next Sabbath.

God's word is timeless. God's word is timely. God's word is sufficient. This is one of the great lessons we have in our text. Now, this happened on the second stop of Paul's first missionary journey, this Antioch, as I mentioned in the reading of scripture, is not to be confused with the Antioch in Syria, where the mission began when the Holy Spirit sent out Paul and Barnabas. They left Antioch. They sailed to the island of Cyprus. From there, they traveled to the southern coast of Asia Minor. So they crossed the sea from Barnabas' native island to Paul's native land. That's where we pick up the account in verse 13.

And from now on Paul is the recognized leader of the mission. Luke writes, "Paul and his companions put out to sea from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia." When the mission began, you'll remember it was Barnabas and Saul. In fact, throughout these chapters when we have been acquainted, there have been references made to Barnabas and Saul. It has been in that order. But now it's Paul and his companions. So at some point Paul took the first place. There's nothing in the text to suggest that Barnabas resisted this or did anything but recognize God's hand in it. He responded with loyalty. That's typical of Barnabas and he worked very well with the apostle Paul, which speaks well of Barnabas. Someone said, "It takes more grace than I can tell to play the second fiddle well." That's certainly true, and Barnabas played it well.

He's a man who serves as a great example to all of us, a man whom we can pattern ourselves after in many ways, and this is certainly one way in which we should pattern our lives after him. He was a man of encouragement. That's what his nickname Barnabas means. He's not a man of personal ambition. He was not a man of self-interest. He did not seek to put himself first and seek his own rights and his own place above all us. He was a man who gladly took the second position if that was God's will and that worked best in the outworking of God's plan and His mission. He and Paul were a team.

But the team met disappointment not long after arriving in Asia Minor. Luke writes that John, whom we know better as Mark, left them and returned to Jerusalem. It doesn't say why Mark left, but it's clear from Paul's response later in chapter 15, when he and Barnabas are about to begin the second missionary journey, that Paul considered this a desertion.

Numerous ideas have been suggested as the reason for Mark's departure. Perhaps he resented Barnabas given second place in the mission, even though Barnabas accepted it well. Or Mark was intimidated by the possible hazards of the journey into the heart of Asia Minor. The thought of crossing the Taurus mountains, which were notorious for robbers and wild mountain tribes made him lose heart.

Or it may simply be that Mark became homesick for Jerusalem. He was a young man. He was an inexperienced man. He was unprepared for the hard life of a missionary, and it was very hard. He was in strange places, away from everything that was familiar to him, away from family and friends, and it would have been very natural for a young man in that situation to become homesick.

Well, we're not told what caused the disaffection, but Mark left the team and returned home. So Paul and Barnabas pressed on by themselves up through the mountains to Antioch of Pisidian, which lies 3,600 feet above sea level. This was the southern part of the Roman province of Galatia, and it was to the churches that would be established in this region that Paul would write the book of Galatians.

A century ago, the British scholar William Ramsay argued that Paul's visit to Galatia was caused by ill health, that he caught malaria in the lower territory and went to the higher altitude of Antioch to recuperate. And Paul did write in Galatians 4:13 "it was because of a bodily illness that I preached the gospel to you the first time."

Now that doesn't prove Ramsay's theory. In fact, there are good objections to it, and Paul's words in Galatians 4 can be explained differently. But if it were true, it would mean that God led Paul into that region by means of affliction. And He does that. That's the province of God and it is simply Romans 8:28, "That God works all things according to His counsel, according to our good," and He does that even when it comes to an illness. He can bring a good thing out of that and in fact use that in His way and His means of bringing about such a thing as this missionary journey.

Paul did come to those churches in weakness. His strength was not his physical appearance. It was not his personality. He was not a celebrity. He came to the Corinthians, he said, in weakness. This was typical of God. So his strength was not in any of those things. His strength was in what he spoke. It was the word of God. He preached the whole counsel of God. He did that in Antioch. Whether his condition was one of physical weakness or whether he was physically fit, that is how he came to these people. I think that's significant, because the strength of this man and what he does, it's not to be found in himself. And the strength and the effectiveness of what we do is not going to be found in our personalities. It's not going to be found in our appearance. It's not going to be found in anything of us. Paul came to churches in weakness, personal weakness, but in the power of God, with the power of His word, and that's how he came to these churches and those this church in Antioch. Whatever his condition, he entered the synagogue at the first opportunity and gave a sermon that was wholly Biblical, completely Biblical, and it is an example for us, for us personally and for us as a church.

What gave him the opportunity to do that, to preach a sermon in this synagogue was the open or free structure of the synagogue.

Typically, a meeting in the synagogue began with a call to worship and the reciting of prayers. After that, scriptures were read, one text from the Law, and one text from the Prophets. And then the leader of the synagogue would ask if some qualified person in the congregation had a lesson to give and that person would then come forward to teach.

And the early church followed the same openness or freedom in its meetings in order to maintain an environment in which the Holy Spirit could move men who had prepared themselves to speak, or move a prophet to speak. We saw that last week in the church in Antioch and Syria. And that was the case here. We see that the freedom here in the synagogue of Antioch, the officials asked Paul and Barnabas if they had anything to say. "Brethren, if you have a word of encouragement, say it."

Well, they did. A word that they had to say is the greatest encouragement that anyone can speak. Paul stood up and addressed the congregation. It was a mixed audience of Jews and Gentile proselytes, or God-fearers, because he says, "Men of Israel, and you who fear God, listen." Then he gave a great sermon by tracing out some of Israel's history. Much as Stephen had done. Perhaps Paul, he was there and witnessed that very sermon when he preached in the synagogue there in Jerusalem. Paul does that; he traces out Israel's history and does so, giving a survey of God's saving acts, and those acts of God, those saving acts of God prefigure and lead up to the great act of salvation in Jesus Christ.

He spoke of saving grace, and he did that by speaking on themes that he would develop in his letters later on, the themes of faith, forgiveness, and justification. He introduced all of this with one of his most familiar themes of all, that of divine election. He begins, "the God of this people Israel chose our fathers." Jesus had that as one of His great themes. He told His disciples, "You did not choose me, but I



chose you." And that's how Israel's history began. And so that's where Paul begins here. It's where Paul began so often when he taught and when he wrote.

We see that in many different places, because it is with election that our blessings begin. That's the source of all that we are, all that we have. All of our blessings can be traced back to God's eternal and unconditional election. And so Paul begins his letters sometimes in that way. The book of Ephesians is a good example. He starts out in Ephesians 1:4, "He chose us in Him before the foundation before the world that we should be holy and blameless before Him in love."

We can be holy and blameless before Him because of His choice of us from all eternity. That's the source of all of our blessings, and so very often Paul goes back to that, begins at that point. He begins in this sermon at that very point, because the gospel is the good news of God's grace, and that's what he's going to preach. And so begins with grace. It's God who saves. From beginning to end, salvation is God's work. Go back to the beginning, go back to the patriarchs. Go back beyond the patriarchs. Go back into eternity past to God's eternal counsel and we find grace.

What we cannot do for ourselves, God does and God has done in His Son the Lord Jesus Christ. He and He alone is the Savior, and that's Paul's point here. It's his point throughout this sermon. God is the subject of nearly all the verbs that Paul uses. God's the initiator of salvation; grace begins with Him. And so Paul begins in that way. He introduces the sermon with the statement that God chose our fathers. We have a nation, we have a history, because we have a beginning in God. He chose our fathers. Then he says that He made the people great when they were down in Egypt. And when they became slaves there, God delivered them. Paul says with an uplifted arm He led them out from it. God's the deliverer. He did that with miracles. He did that with plagues upon the land, and finally He did that by parting the Red Sea and delivering His people from slavery.

Well, what was Israel's response to that great deliverance? Initially it was one of gratitude. They sang praises to God on the far side of the sea. We have a record of that in Exodus chapter 15, which is the song of Moses that Israel sang along with Moses. "The Lord is my strength in song and He has become my salvation. This is my God and I will praise Him." And so they stood on the other shore, the eastern shore, and they praised God for His great deliverance.

Well, that's how things began, but it wasn't long after when the journey through the wilderness became difficult and tested their loyalty that their enthusiasm and their gratitude turned into grumbling and discontent. This is a pattern down through Israel's history and we see this pattern in the sermon that Paul preaches to the synagogue. God blessed His people and the people became discontented and they responded with a lack of faith.

So they became discontented, but Paul in verse 18 speaks of God's response. "For a period of about 40 years, He put up with them in the wilderness." God was patient with His people. He brought them through the wilderness, into the promised land. "He destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan," Paul says, and gave the land to His people as an inheritance. This grumbling, discontented people were given this great inheritance that He had promised to them when He gave the promise to Abraham.

Then He ruled over the nation as its king. He gave them judges. He ruled the nation as a theocracy. But the people were not satisfied with that. They wanted a ruler like the kind of ruler that the nations had, like the Gentiles had. And so after 450 years, they asked for a king. It was a rebellion against God, but God gave them a king and He gave them Saul. But he ruled badly. Saul was not obedient. God was patient with him. He ruled for 40 years. But finally God removed him, and Paul says in verse 22, "He raised up David to be 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.'" God established David's throne. He established the House of David. Israel's kinds

descended from him. And God promised to send the final king, to send the Messiah, the Deliverer, from that royal line. He would be of the bloodline of David. That was Israel's hope.

Now, the people in the synagogue knew all of this. There's nothing that Paul has said to this point they did not know. They studied their Bibles. They read the Scriptures every Sabbath. They learned and thought about these things. They knew their history. They knew the promises of God. But what Paul said next must have caused everyone in the synagogue to sit up in either shock or amazement, because Paul goes on to say that this Messiah they all hoped in has come, verse 23. "From the descendants of this man," that is, from David, "according to the promise, God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus."

Centuries had passed since the last king sat on a throne of Israel. It seemed that sovereignty had vanished from the House of David forever, and now they hear that God has sent Jesus the Savior. He is the King. God is faithful to His promises. His coming was announced by a forerunner, John the Baptist, who pointed the people to Jesus, saying, "One is coming after me, the sandals of whose feet I'm not worthy to untie." But the rulers didn't recognize Him as the Savior, even though they read the Prophets every Sabbath day, just as the people in the synagogue there in Antioch had read the Prophets that foretold the coming of this person and what kind of person He would be. They read all of that, but instead of receiving Him, the leaders sought His death and in so doing they unwittingly fulfilled the prophecies that they had read, the prophecies that foretold that the Messiah would suffer and die - Psalm 22, Isaiah 53, Zechariah 13:7, and others. They asked Pilate to sent Him to death and it was carried out by crucifixion.

Then they took Him down from the cross, Paul says, and laid Him in the tomb. So it seemed that everything had come to an end and that the work of our Lord had come to nothing. But Paul goes on to say that God reversed the judgment of men. They laid Him in a tomb

and God raised Him up from the dead. The resurrection was the Father's vindication of His Son. It was the proof, the tangible, historical proof that He had accepted His Son's death as the sacrifice for sin, that Christ had in fact accomplished the work of salvation and God put His approval upon that work with a resurrection from the dead.

Then Paul adds in verse 31 that "for man 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." As Paul will later say in one of his later sermons in chapter 26, this was not done in a corner. These things didn't happen in secret. This was all very public. It all happened openly. There were many witnesses to the crucifixion, many witnesses, more witnesses to the resurrection. It is well attested historical fact. And it well attested in scripture. In verse 32 Paul calls it "the good news of the promise made to the fathers." All of this has been promised. This was to be expected. This was promised to the fathers from the very beginning. They've known about this one who would come and die and be resurrected. And then he quotes three Old Testament passages to prove that statement.

In verse 33, he cites Psalm 2, a passage that Paul's audience was very familiar with. This was a clearly Messianic psalm, speaks of the Messiah and His strength. But it also says in verse 7, which he quotes as proof of the resurrection, "You are My Son. Today I have begotten You." Now that doesn't mean that Christ became God's Son at the resurrection. He's always been the second person of the Trinity. The Son is co-eternal and co-equal with the Father and the Spirit.

But when He entered the world through the incarnation, being born of a virgin He took to Himself a genuine human nature at the moment of conception. He became the God-man, though His deity was veiled in His humanity. There was nothing special, there was nothing extraordinary about His appearance. And Isaiah told the people that that would be the case. Isaiah 53:2. There'd be nothing about his appearance that would be attractive, that would be desirable. In fact,

he describes Him as one who grew up among us "like a dry root in parched ground." An unattractive person physically. But when the sacrifice was accomplished, everything changed. The resurrection, Jesus was, at it were, begotten from the tomb as the glorified God-man and King.

So this declaration is given. And Paul recognized that the words of David were written of Jesus. In verse 32, he quotes another text, the second text, Isaiah 55:3, which is a promise given to the Messiah. "I will give You the holy and sure blessings of David." Now, those blessings of David were royal blessings, royal promises of an eternal throne. And if you examine the context of an eternal people over whom He would rule, a kingdom that He would be given, which will be eternal, will be populated by an eternal people, which could only be sure, permanent, eternal, because of the resurrection. And Paul proves that the resurrection was prophesied of the Messiah from the third text, quoted in verse 35, Psalm 16. "You will not allow Your Holy One to undergo decay."

Now, you'll remember that text from our earlier studies in the book of Acts in chapter 2 when Peter quoted that in his sermon on the day of Pentecost. He cited that text, and Paul cites it as well and cites it in the same way, uses it in the same sense that Peter did. It was written by David, but it couldn't apply to David. Verse 36, "For David," Paul writes, or says, "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." That's exactly the sense that Peter used that in, you'll remember, on the day of Pentecost. He said, "He's buried and with us today. You can go look at his tomb, and should you open the tomb, you'll find the bones of the king in there. But go to the tomb where they lay Jesus Christ and you'll find it empty." That statement by David was not about David. It was about another. It was about the Messiah. And this applies to Jesus Christ, all of this.

Well, all of this being so, Jesus being the promised Deliverer, Jesus being the Messiah who was crucified and raised from the dead, all of this being so calls for a response, a personal response. And in verses 38 and 39, Paul makes that appeal. He states the significance of Jesus' death and resurrection. He says that it was 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.

The word translated "freed" here in the New American Standard Bible is the word "justified." It's the word that's used in Paul's writings in Romans. The word that's used there is used here, translated "justified." So I think a better translation would be, "Through Him everyone who believes is justified from all things, from which you could not be justified through the Law of Moses." This is one of the great statements of the gospel in the Bible. The promise of forgiveness of sins and justification from all things for all who believe in Jesus Christ regardless of who they are. That's the grace of God.

We see in two words that are in contrast to one another: forgiveness and justification. You can't forgive a person and justify him at the same time. If you forgive a person, then he or she is guilty. If you justify that person, then he or she is innocent. You justify the innocent, you forgive the guilty.

Let me illustrate that. Imagine, for example, that you are in a courtroom. You have been on trial. And at the end of the trial the jury decides you are innocent and the judge declares the verdict "not guilty." You walk out of the courtroom a free man, when someone comes up to you and says, "That was sure gracious of the judge to forgive you." Well, you would respond, "What do you mean, forgive? The judge didn't forgive me. He cleared me. I'm justified. I've been declared innocent, because I am innocent, If anyone's going to forgive someone, I'll forgive the people that wrongly accused me."

Now that's the way things function in a court of law. We declare people to be what they are. We clear the innocent and condemn the

guilty. We justify the righteous. But in the court of God's grace, He justifies the guilty. He forgives sinners and then declares them righteous. That's what saved people are. Everyone of you who have believed in Jesus Christ are righteous sinners. And the reason is because Christ is our righteousness. He died in our place, he bore the penalty of our sins, and at the moment of faith, the payment that He made by His death is transferred to us. It becomes our payment.

At the moment of faith His work and His righteousness are counted as ours. We are declared innocent forever. We stand before a God guiltless and just. We are innocent, we are guiltless, because we have paid for our sins in our substitute. He did it for you and it became our payment. We are just, because Christ's obedience is perfection is counted as our own.

Now that is something Moses' Law could never do. It operates according to strict legal principles and it condemns the guilty. People have tried to use the Law to produce righteousness. The synagogue was filled with people who were doing that, trying to gain God's acceptance and be saved by Lawkeeping, but the Law was never intended as a way of salvation. It was given to show our need of salvation. It was given to expose our sin. It is the standard that shows how far short we fall. But it cannot lift us up. It cannot make us clean. It cannot remove any sin. No amount of Lawkeeping can erase our failures. No amount of Lawkeeping can make us good people.

Paul knew that very well. As a Pharisee, he was devoted to the Law. He told the Philippians that in that time of his life when he was such an earnest Pharisee, when he was so zealous for the Law that he really thought that he had arrived, that he was perfect. He said, "As to the Law, found blameless." In his mind, he couldn't see where he violated. He thought he actually kept the Law. But when he met Christ on the Damascus road, all that changed. He knew that he was guilty, he knew that he was lost, and received forgiveness through faith in the risen, living Lord Jesus Christ.

Salvation is in Him alone. His death is the sacrifice that God made to satisfy His own justice and turn away His wrath so that He could justify sinners and make them His children. Now that's what Paul is teaching and that's what Jesus Himself taught. There's nothing new in here that we can't find in the gospels and we can't find on the lips of our Lord.

In Luke 18, he speak, the Lord speaks, of justification, and He describes it in regard to two men that He saw praying in the temple. One was an upright man. He was a moral man. He was a Pharisee who looked up to heaven when he prayed and he spoke of his righteousness, how he fasted, how he tithed. He was a Lawkeeper. He was not like other men. He was not the thieves. He was not like the adulterers. And he really was not like that tax collector he saw over in the other side of the temple praying, and he thanked God that he was not like that man. In fact, what a joke. That tax collector, that sinner, is in this place. Who does he think he is, praying?

Now the tax collector seems to have been completely unaware of the Pharisee, but he would have agreed with that Pharisee's condemnation with him. He would have agreed that he was a bad individual and that he was completely unworthy. He felt that very deeply. In fact, he felt it so much, he felt so unworthy, that he couldn't even look up to heaven to pray. Instead, he looked, he stood there, beating his breast, saying, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner."

And Jesus said, "I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other." Now that must have come as a shock to those who heard Him say that. It wasn't the moral man, the Pharisee, who went home justified. It was the sinner who went home justified. It is not the man who exalts himself, who justifies himself, who is justified. It is the person who humbles himself, who recognizes that he or she is a sinner and calls on the mercy of God that is justified.

Justification is by grace alone. It is received through faith alone. That's what Jesus said. That's what Paul said. Moses's Law could not justify. Faith in Christ does that. That's the gospel, and Paul urged the



congregation in the synagogue, Jews and Gentiles alike, to do that, to believe. And Paul, though, didn't end on that note. He didn't end on that positive word of peace, of good news. Instead, Paul concludes his sermon with a warning. Maybe he could sense that in the congregation there was some rebellion, or maybe he saw some anger on the faces of the rabbis who were there. Israel had a sorry history of believing God's word. Constantly we're in rebellion against Him. They did that in the days of the prophet Habakkuk, and so Paul concludes his sermon by quoting the prophet, verse 41. "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."

In Habakkuk's day, the Babylonians were threatening to invade the prophet, warned the people of the coming judgment, but they refused to believe. Judgment came and Jerusalem fell. And Paul cites this text to make the point that the God who freely forgives those who believe judges unbelief. God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. The triune God is the same, and the God that judged Israel in Habakkuk's day is the same today. And Paul was saying He will judge unbelief in our day. He'll judge it more severely. The judgment that Paul is referring to is eternal judgment, and He judges men in our day. Same is true today. That prophecy applies to us.

People are responsible to believe. They are responsible to seek the Lord while He may be found. They are responsible to believe God's word when they hear it, so that they may be saved. It's true, it is the elect who will be saved. But the elect are known are known by their faith. The elect believe. All who have been chosen by God from all eternity, chosen unconditionally by God's grace, have been chosen to salvation through faith. And no one is saved apart from faith. The elect here and they believe. Faith comes from hearing, Paul would later write, and hearing by the word of Christ, by the preaching of the gospel.

That's why Paul could proclaim the gospel with confidence. Salvation is God's work. He gives us, though, the part of calling sinners to repentance and calling them to faith, calling them to believe, knowing that in the proclamation of that truth God will use that to quicken hearts and bring His elect to saving knowledge of Him. It's God work. We have the opportunity, though, the privilege, of being a part of that in presenting the gospel.

So Paul could go to the front of that synagogue and he could preach this message and preach it with great confidence. The leader of the synagogue was probably shocked by what he heard. When he invited these men to speak, to offer a word of encouragement, he no doubt expected an exposition of the Law, such as they heard every Sabbath and have that accompanied with a moral exhortation. What was given was unlike anything anyone in the congregation ever heard. Salvation by faith in Christ, not by works of the Law? It's all of grace, it's all a gift. It's not our own effort. The yoke of the Law which breaks a man has been broken by Christ and we have His yoke, which is light and which is easy. That was good news. That was truly a word of encouragement and the people there received it well. They wanted to hear more.

When Paul finished, people followed him and Barnabas out of the synagogue, begging them to speak more about these things, and invited them to return the next Saturday to speak again about Christ. There was real enthusiasm among them. Many believed.

But what stirred this interest in the synagogue, what gave the people there an excitement about what was taking place, what did all of this within them was the word of God and the doctrines of saving grace. That's what Paul proclaimed in his generation and it is what we are to proclaim in our generation. It is what has been proclaimed from the beginning. We're not to modify it, we're not to try to improve it. We're to preach the word of God. Centuries before this, Isaiah said all flesh is grass. The grass withers, the flowers fades, but the word of God stands forever. It is eternal. It never changes. Many things

change. Movements and fads come and go, but the word of God is forever.

And the condition of man is the same. The need of mankind is the same today as it was in the day of Adam. It never changes. It is the same in every generation and this word of God, which never changes, gives the solution in every generation, and so we are to be faithful to it. We're to proclaim it.

Later Paul would take up this theme of justification by faith in the book of Romans. It's the theme of that book. There are other themes as well, but that certainly is the central theme of the book and he begins in that way. He begins in Romans 1:16, 17 with justification and he quotes Habakkuk there as well. "The just shall live by faith." It goes on in the book to develop that. The end of chapter 3 and chapter 4 and chapter 5, he develops justification through faith. Then begins chapter 8. "Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Now, what an encouraging word that is - no condemnation. That's what Paul said in the synagogue in Antioch, that through Christ everyone who believes is freed, is justified, from all things, from every sin.

That's good news. That's a word of encouragement. Do you desire to have that? Do you desire to be completely justified? Do you want to know that there is absolutely no condemnation, that you are completely of the guilt and the penalty of sin? Well, you are, if you are in Christ, if you are joined to Him through faith. You are completely accepted by God. The moment of faith, you are justified. You are declared righteous. You're a sinner, and sanctification is the process that removes that sin and conforms to the image of Jesus Christ, but in terms of God's law, in terms of justice, in terms of your standing before Him, you are absolutely, completely accepted by Him. You can't improve upon that acceptance. It's not a partial acceptance. It's full and complete and it will never change for all eternity. You don't need to try to gain God's approval, gain God's acceptance. You have it through faith and faith alone.

So if you desire that, you have that if you're a believer in Jesus Christ. But if you've not believed in Jesus Christ and you want to have that complete justification, just be justified from all things, then look to Christ. The promise that Paul gives is for those who believe, not for those who work, not for those who toil, but for those who rest in Him, who trust in Him. So realize that Jesus Christ died for sinners. Realize that you're a sinner. Trust in Him and know that you are accepted by Him at that moment, forgiven of your sins, justified and given eternal life.

May God help you to do that, help all of us to rejoice in what God has given to us in His Son. Let's pray.

[Prayer] Father, we do thank You for Your goodness, Your grace, Your mercy. We come to a text such as this and we're reminded of that. We're reminded of Your goodness from beginning to end, how what we have we have a gift because of Your choice of us, because You purchased us through Your Son and that work of Christ was applied to us by the work of the Holy Spirit. We are through faith and faith alone justified, accepted by You, made Your children and Your sons. We thank You for that, Father, and pray that we would live lives of faithful service to You. We pray these things in Christ name. Amen.