Going Beyond the Theory

This is part five - the last part - in a series of studies in the ‘Acts of the Apostles,’ looking at challenges and problems the early church faced: challenges to their thinking; sacrifices they made to maintain their faith; problems they encountered because of their commitment to the gospel of Jesus. Along the way we consider what that says to us.

As mentioned before: these studies aren’t necessarily to be completed in one go. Take as long as you like, answer as many questions as you like. But the point is, talk about it.

**Overall text: Acts 13 verse 13 to 48**

**Opener:** Imagine being Luke Skywalker from Star Wars. You spend your life wishing you had a father like your friends, then you find out he’s Darth Vader! How do you feel? If you were little when you first saw that film, did it worry you? It’s an incredible plot twist. That will help us relate to some plot twists God threw at the early church.

**Question: Can you think of any plot twists in the bible, where things didn’t turn out as people imagined?**

The early church had a problem. They found it easy, as many religious people do, to live in the realm of the theoretical. But when what we say we believe actually happens, we freak out. We talk theology and live safe lives, uninterrupted by the implications of what we say we believe. The challenge for us all is to move out of the theoretical; to let theory and reality meet; to anticipate it, so we’re not thrown when it comes.

**Imagine: You have prayed for something big to happen, and it does. You like it. But consider how it might affect you or other people badly.**

We often don’t see the implications of what we say we believe. For instance, we pray: ‘Help our church reach many more people.’ But, when growth comes, we have to get more leaders, change the seating, and we say, ‘That’s inconvenient.’ Or, we pray for different people to come in. Then we say, ‘No! Not THAT kind of person.’

We have our list of prayer items, but when they come they surprise us. We say, ‘Jesus is Lord. We want to follow him,’ but are scandalised by some of his teaching, and try to find excuses to say, ‘He couldn’t have meant that!’

Some things Jesus teaches are hard to understand. They’re cryptic, rooted in 1st century Jewish imagery. But others things are easy. Yet, sometimes it’s the plain stuff - loving your enemy, turning the other cheek, going the extra mile, non-violence, grace to your enemy - that the church has tried to play down. They see where it will lead, and then backpedal.

**Question: Look at that list: ‘loving your enemy, turning the other cheek, going the extra mile, non-violence, grace to your enemy.’ What could be the drawbacks to following these instructions?**

Paul writes to Christians in Thessalonica, ‘Pray for us so that the word of the Lord may spread rapidly and be glorified, just as it is among you.’ That word for ‘glorified’ is normally used to mean ‘praise God in our relationship with him’. So, Paul is saying, ‘There’s a glory, a delight, in the gospel itself.’ The goal is not just to think about the gospel as some ideal, but allow it to permeate our lives so that it gets worked out in reality. If we can do that, we’re ready for any plot twist.

## Verse Study, Part One

**Read Acts 13 verses 13 to 31**

Acts 13 verse 13:

‘Paul and his companions sailed to Perga in Pamphylia, where John left them to return to Jerusalem.’

Pamphylia is a coastal region of Turkey, now the region of Antalya, North of Cyprus.

Note one thing here. Until this point it’s been ‘Barnabas and Paul,’ or ‘Barnabas and his companions.’ Barnabas was leader, the mature Christian. He advocated for Paul. Now Paul, who knows his scriptures, and has a brilliant mind, seems to take over. So the leadership shifts. It’s an ancient tradition in writings that the one you mention first is leader. From this point, in Acts, with few exceptions, it’s all ‘Paul and Barnabas,’ or whoever is with him.

**Question: How might Barnabas be tempted to feel, losing the ‘glory’ spot, and coming second to Paul?**

Nothing wrong with Barnabas. He’s confident, a great speaker, encourager, wonderful leader. But he says, ‘It’s better, for the kingdom, for me to back off.’ That’s beautiful. The only place where it reverts to, ‘Barnabas and Paul’ is when they go back to Jerusalem to explain about the Gentiles coming to faith. It’s Barnabas’ home. So he says, ‘I should take the lead here.’ It’s a beautiful give-and-take. Whatever is good for the kingdom is their priority.

**Reflection: Think of your church. See the different gifts people have, and where in church life they may come to the fore to be used.**

Then John Mark leaves them. John Mark was from a wealthy Jerusalem family, and is now on the mission field. I guess he might be someone who enjoyed the theory, but couldn’t handle the reality. In Acts 15, Paul will say it feels like John deserted them. So, maybe the mission field didn’t live up to his expectations. He wanted adventure, but found hardship.

**Question: Are there parts of a life of following Jesus that you find hard to fully accept? Why?**

Maybe John Mark disagreed with Paul. Maybe he saw Gentiles coming to faith, and Paul wasn’t making them become Jews. So perhaps John Mark said, ‘Is this where the gospel leads? I’m not comfortable,’ and retreated to Jerusalem. Barnabas and Paul, meanwhile, went to Pisidian Antioch. This is a different Antioch to the one mentioned in verse 1. Pisidian Antioch is in an inland region of Turkey now called Isparta province, about 150 miles north of Pamphylia.

Verse 14:

‘On the Sabbath they entered the synagogue and sat down. After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the leaders of the synagogue sent word to them…’

Remember, Paul comes from a rich, Pharisaic family, and was probably dressed as a Rabbi. So the leaders said, ‘You’re a visiting Rabbi. Will you give the word of exhortation this morning.’

**Imagine: Paul’s invited to proclaim whatever he believes is God’s word for this Jewish congregation in this Pagan city. How would Paul and Barnabas feel?**

It’s a great opportunity. But, look at Paul’s approach. He uses the story of Israel to show how their story is God’s story, and both are partnered together to lead to the story of Jesus.

This can help us. It makes sense if we’re talking to Jewish friends, to help them understand that it is the story of God which becomes the story of Jesus, and we have an opportunity to join them in that story.

**Question: This approach may help in talking to Jewish friends. But, will this approach help in talking about the gospel to people without a Jewish background?**

Our passage has one of three sermons by Paul. This one is to Jews, the others are to Pagans; but he uses the same approach. The difference with pagans is that he doesn’t say, ‘I want you to understand the story of ISRAEL, so that you see God’s story and how that leads to Jesus.’ Instead he helps them see how THEIR story is God’s story, and how THAT leads to Jesus. He doesn’t quote scripture or talk about Israel. Instead he reminds them of their story and how God has been at work through their history.

That’s true for everyone. If God is God of everyone, while he was working with Israel he wasn’t ignoring everyone else. We shouldn’t say, ‘I don’t think God knows you exist, but let me tell you what he’s done here.’ Instead we say, ‘Before I talk, I want to listen, to learn; because I believe God’s already been at work here.’ We don’t bring God to them. God was there long before us. Now we discern how God has already been working, and how that points toward Jesus. It’s no good just pointing to scripture. It’s saying, ‘How has God been at work in your life, drawing you to Jesus?’ So Paul says,

Verse 16:

‘Fellow Israelites and you Gentiles who worship God…’

Some Gentiles attended synagogue services, yet weren’t prepared to convert to Judaism. For one thing, the males would have to be circumcised. Yet they were attracted to this idea of one God.

Verse 17:

‘The God of the people of Israel chose our ancestors…’

Notice the ‘choice’ language. God chose Israel for a purpose. He didn’t choose Israel to be saved and everyone else condemned. But he chooses people-groups to work with them. His purpose is to see the gospel spread to all people. So, in Isaiah, he calls Israel to be light to the nations.

**Question: ‘Choice' language is important. Are you aware of approaches by Christians that imply God chose some people and rejected others? How does that make you feel?**

In the New Testament God speaks to Jews and Gentiles TOGETHER as God’s people: ‘God chose you.’ Many interpret that to mean, ‘God chose me to be saved, not you.’ But that is not scripture. God chooses people for a purpose. Then, within that group, some people may choose to rebel. And, outside that group, some people may choose to follow. So the New Testament talks about all of us as God’s chosen race, Jews and Gentiles together. It’s God’s intention. Notice this is God-action, God’s story. Have a look at all the God actions in these following verses:

‘…HE MADE the people prosper during their stay in Egypt; HE LED THEM out of that country…’

Verse 19 to 23:

‘…HE OVERTHREW seven nations in Canaan, giving their land to his people as their inheritance. GOD GAVE THEM judges until the time of Samuel the prophet. Then the people asked for a king, and HE GAVE THEM Saul son of Kish… HE MADE David their king. GOD HAS BROUGHT to Israel the Saviour Jesus, as he promised.’

Paul knows the story of Israel. He shows how this is God’s story, leading them to Jesus. Then he uses evidence to which they relate. John the Baptist was a known figure. So Paul talks about John’s connection with Jesus, and Jesus’ death in Jerusalem. Then he starts to use THEY language. God brought them to this point. Now see the THEY language:

Verses 27 to 28:

‘THEY, the people of Jerusalem… THEY fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read… Though THEY found no proper ground for a death sentence, THEY asked Pilate to have him executed.’

The bible is clear that Jesus died a political, Roman death. A religious death was stoning. A political death by crucifixion. Yet he died on the cross, because of the religious establishment. They went to the political powers and pulled strings to get him crucified. So religion pulled the strings of politics that led to his death.

Verse 29:

‘…THEY took him down from the cross and laid him in a tomb. But GOD raised him from the dead…’

Paul says, ‘But here’s the good news.’ He’s letting them know, ‘I understand where you’re coming from. I’m not punching you. I’ve come to pull you, your energy, in the right direction.’ We might say it’s spiritual Aikido, not spiritual Karate. Aikido is a martial art which uses the energy of your opponent against them to accomplish what you want. That is the gospel presentation in the New Testament: using the energy, the drive, the story and momentum of those you talk to, to lead them towards Jesus. Karate, on the other hand, is block and kick, block and punch.

**Question: Consider your own view of Christianity. Do you see it as spiritual Aikido or spiritual Karate? Can you say why you think that?**

A lot of Christians are experts at spiritual Karate. ‘I will beat you to a pulp. I WILL win the debate, in the name of Jesus.’ But Paul says, ‘This is the momentum of Israel. Here’s where it leads. I’m with you in this. So, here’s the good news.’

## Verse Study, Part Two

**Read Acts 13 verses 31 to 48**

Verse 32:

‘What God promised our ancestors he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus.’

All this leads to Jesus, and God raised Jesus. So Paul says, ‘Some Psalms talk about this anointed one.’ He points out some that the Rabbis debated. They said, ‘Maybe it refers to David. Maybe to Israel. We’re not sure.’ Paul says, ‘Maybe it’s speaking of Messiah who will not decay. There are witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus, who claimed to be Messiah.’ Here, with historical and scriptural evidence, is the answer to the mystery. It points to Jesus.

**Action: Find a psalm that, viewing it with a New Testament view, you could say it points to Jesus.**

So Paul gives his punchline:

Verse 38:

‘…through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is set free from every sin, a justification you were not able to obtain under the law of Moses.’

‘Through Jesus, God achieved all we tried to do through this whole Israel, chosen, thing.’ Paul empathised with their story. He rooted his message in their history, culture, and evidence. So the immediate reaction is not completely negative.

So, when he says, ‘You can receive through Jesus what you can’t through the Torah,’ I’m sure some faces wince. But he doesn’t back down and say, ‘Sorry. Was that too challenging?’ He turns up the volume and warns them:

Verse 40:

‘Take care that what the prophets have said does not happen to you: “‘Look, you scoffers, wonder and perish, for I am going to do something in your days that you would never believe.’

‘You might think that’s about unfaithful people who don’t show up to Synagogue, but it could be you.’

Verse 42:

‘As Paul and Barnabas were leaving the synagogue, the people invited them to speak further about these things on the next Sabbath.’

They give Paul and Barnabas an invitation to return and talk further. ‘We need to investigate this.’

Verse 43:

‘…many of the Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas…’

These are devoted Jewish believers, who start to embrace the ideal. But, maybe they don’t yet embrace the real.

‘…who talked with them and urged them to continue in the grace of God.’

This is the only place in Acts where the word for ‘follow’ is used. In Luke’s gospel it means people giving their life to Jesus. So here this doesn’t mean they followed Paul and Barnabas out the door. It means they followed, or started to move towards, their faith. These conservative Jews start to embrace the message. But, the ideal has a real, an implication.

Verse 44:

‘On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord.’

Suddenly, all these Gentiles crowd into the synagogue. The conservative Jews start to say, ‘This makes us uncomfortable.’

**Question: Are there any aspects of modern church life that make you uncomfortable? Perhaps things you hear about happening and you say, ‘I don’t want that to happen here!’**

Maybe they’re waiting to hear Paul say to the Gentiles, ‘You’ve got to convert to Judaism.’ But he doesn’t. His message is, ‘Jews, you can let go of your religious tradition, and follow the Messiah, with our Gentile brothers and sisters.’ The theory, meeting reality, is too much for them.

Verse 45:

‘When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy.’

‘How can you let THEM be chosen? They have to become us to get into God’s story.’ ‘No,’ says Paul. ‘God works in everyone’s story. We all arrive at Jesus. Let’s move forward.’

‘They began to contradict what Paul was saying and heaped abuse on him.’

That word for ‘heaped abuse’ means ‘blasphemed.’ That usually means they spoke against God. So to reject this message and its messenger now means you make yourself God’s enemy.

Verse 46:

‘Paul and Barnabas answered: “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 turn to the Gentiles.’

God finally made Israel a light to the Gentiles; but he’s done it through Jesus, and we carry that message.

**Imagine: You have been given the task of taking the gospel to a completely different section of society than your own - young, old, black, rich, poor, lower class, upper class. Whatever it is, imagine how you might persuade them that God has already been working in their lives.**

Verse 48:

‘When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad…’

So Paul lost his Jewish converts. When theory meets reality, they said no. But the Gentiles said yes.

‘…and honoured (or glorified) the word of the Lord…’

These Gentiles don’t just accept, think about, or consider, the message. They glorify in it. It becomes everything to them.

‘…and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.’

Now God appoints Gentiles as well as Jews, not just one. The religious people didn’t expect that, and many couldn’t live with the implications.

**What does this teach us? Discuss these:**

**One:** This challenges us to think through what we believe. If it’s true, we need to go with what that means for our lives and the challenges that might bring.

**Two:** This also challenges us to look at how we present the gospel. Do we go in with gospel quotes and expect people to connect? Hit them with the bible? That no longer works in our society. Instead, we need to get alongside, understand their story. Then help them see that God has been there all along, and is leading them to Jesus.