

Notes for the Ekklēsia Meeting

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Forgiven and Freed, Released and Made Righteous

by Dan Trygg

“...to us the word of this salvation is sent out. ²⁷ For those who live in Jerusalem, and their rulers, recognizing neither Him nor the utterances of the prophets which are read every Sabbath, fulfilled these by condemning Him. ²⁸ And though they found no ground for putting Him to death, they asked Pilate that He be executed. ²⁹ And when they had carried out all that was written concerning Him, they took Him down from the cross and laid Him in a tomb. ³⁰ But God raised Him from the dead; ³¹ and for many 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. ³² And we preach to you the good news of the promise made to the fathers, ³³ that God has fulfilled this promise to our children in that He raised-up Jesus... ³⁸ Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through Him forgiveness (release) of sins is proclaimed to you, ³⁹ and from all things which you could not be freed (justified) through the Law of Moses, in This One everyone believing is freed (justified).”
Acts 13:26-33,38,39

Paul was preaching in the synagogue of Antioch of Pisidia, almost squarely in the middle of the country called Turkey today. As was the custom, the leader of the synagogue had asked the visitors if they had any word of encouragement to share with the congregation. This gave Paul his opportunity to share the gospel message with the Jews and god-fearing Gentiles who were in attendance that day.

He laid out the history of God's dealings with Israel, beginning from the exodus out of Egypt, skimming over historical figures, until coming to rest upon King David, the greatest example of a godly king in the OT. God had promised to bring a Savior, a Messiah, from his offspring (II Sam. 7:12; Psa. 89:35-37; Jer. 33:15-17; Amos 9:11). This was a well-known, well-established prophetic declaration, which would have been readily acknowledged and accepted by his listeners. From this foundational article of faith, Paul went on to tell the gospel story, insisting ***“From the offspring of this man, according to promise, God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus”*** (Acts 13:23).

He then spoke of John the Baptist. John's ministry had been almost 20 years earlier, but there were undoubtedly men present at this synagogue meeting who had actually heard John preach. Because Jewish men were required to go to the annual feasts, anyone who had the means would make the trek back to Jerusalem at least once a year. These men would have heard of John, and remembered the excitement he generated. He preached a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel, which was ***a revolutionary call to start fresh with God***. Multitudes went out to hear him and be baptized by him. Before he was arrested, John began to openly reject any rumors that he might be the Messiah. Instead, ***John had proclaimed that the Messiah was soon to follow him***, and John did not consider himself worthy to even untie the sandals of this Coming One.

This provided Paul with the basis for the bold declaration, “Brethren, sons of Abraham's family (Jews), and those among you who fear God (Gentiles), to us (both groups) the message of this salvation is sent forth.” Paul quickly traces the historical events leading up to the crucifixion and death of Jesus. He emphasized that the people in Jerusalem did not recognize Him as the Messiah, nor did they see the fulfillment of the utterances of the prophets. ***They unwittingly fulfilled all that the prophets had declared would take place***, condemning Jesus to death and asking Pilate to execute Him. After His death, He was taken down from the cross, and laid in a tomb. But God raised Him from the dead!! For many days, He showed Himself alive to His friends and followers, who are now witnesses proclaiming His resurrection to the people.

Paul returns to the punch of his main message, “We preach to you the good news of the promise made to the fathers, that God has fulfilled this to our children, and raised up Jesus. (Some examples of the “promises made to the fathers” -- Gen. 3:15; 12:3; 22:18; 49:10; Deut. 18:15; Isa. 7:14; 9:6,7; 11:1; 52:13-53:12; Jer. 23:5; Ezk. 34:23; Dan. 9:24-26; Mic. 5:2; Hag. 2:7; Zech. 9:9; 13:1,7; Mal. 3:1.) ***Even this resurrection was spoken of prophetically!*** In Psalm 16:10, it had been said that God would not allow His Holy One to undergo decay. Obviously, this was not fulfilled in David, since his body did decay. It was fulfilled in David's greater Son, Jesus, when He was raised from the dead. “...He whom God raised did not undergo decay” (Act 13:37).

“Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through Him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and from all things you could not be freed by the Law of Moses, by This One every one believing will be freed.”

This statement is the climax of Paul's presentation of the gospel. It is worth taking a deeper look at. We see here an early example of the theology that later would become the centerpiece of Paul's great theological letters, especially of Galatians and Romans.

The first point is that ***forgiveness of sins is proclaimed***. The word for “forgiveness” here occurs 17 times in the NT (Matt. 26:28; Mk. 1:4; 3:29; Lk. 1:77; 3:3; 4:18 [2x]; 24:47; Acts 2:38; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18; Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:14; Heb.

9:22; 10:18). In every context, except Luke 4:18, it refers to the “sending-away, pardon or forgiveness” of sins. This forgiveness of sins is not arbitrary, or based upon wishful thinking, nor is it presented as some kind of softening of God’s holiness or standards of righteousness. No. **This forgiveness of sins is proclaimed as being consistent with the age-old promises and prophecies of God throughout history**, specifically to the forefathers of Israel as recorded in the scriptures. This was God’s plan all along, not a change of plans or a softening of God’s standards.

Secondly, this forgiveness is available “through” or “by means of” Jesus. Paul later wrote to the Corinthians in his “thumbnail version” of the gospel, “I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that *Christ died for our sins* according to the Scriptures,⁴ and that He was buried, and... was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures...” (1 Cor. 15:3-4). **Jesus was the payment made for our sins.** As Paul would later explain in Romans, **Jesus was the redemption price** paid for our freedom. **His blood was the satisfactory sacrifice** to publicly display the righteous justice of God (Rom. 3:24-26). *There was no lessening or softening of God’s standards, but a literal and complete fulfillment of what the entire sacrificial system of ancient Israel had foreshadowed.* The book of Hebrews expands on this more. **Jesus was a better priest, a better sacrifice, and therefore He established a better hope and a better covenant** than was possible through the Mosaic covenant (7:15-22; 9:1-10:14).

Thirdly, in Jesus we can be set free from the power of sin. This is what is meant by the phrase, “you will be freed from all the things that the Law of Moses could not free you from.” **The Law was powerless to give us life, or enable us to overcome sin** (Gal. 2:21; 3:21). **All it could do was point out what sin was.** It could educate us regarding what God’s standards were, and it could expose sin when it appeared in our lives. It gave us no ability to resist or overcome it, however. In fact, knowing about sin seemed only to aggravate its activity in our lives. **Jesus came to change that. He came to bring about a release from sin’s power.** The word translated as “forgiveness” literally means “release” or “send-away”. It was used to describe a release of debts, or the divorce of a spouse, or a release from bondage or imprisonment. This is the meaning of it in the two instances it occurs in Luke 4:18, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim *release* to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to *set free* those who are downtrodden.” So, in Acts 13:38, it could mean more than just forgiveness, it could refer to a release from the bondage of sin. “Through Him a *release* of sins is proclaimed to you...” Not only a release from the *penalty* or *indebtedness* of sins, but also a release from the *power* of sins, as well. **By means of Him, we are separated from sin’s domination, divorced from its control.** “No one who abides in Him sins... He came to destroy (lit., ‘loose’) the works of the devil”, i.e., sin. (I Jn. 3:6,8).

Fourth, through Jesus we can be made righteous. The verb that occurs twice in verse 39 is the Greek word, *dikaioō*. This is the word later used by Paul in Romans for “declared righteous” or “justified” in Rom. 3:24. It was used for being acquitted in a trial. In such a case, one was “counted-as-righteous”, or treated “just-as-if-I’d never sinned”. It had another usage, however, that refers to *more than* just our legal status. It could also mean to “be *made* righteous, upright or pure”. While this is not often the rendering, I would suggest that this is what Paul has in mind here in Acts 13:39. *Not only are we “justified” in Jesus from those things that we could never be “justified” under the Law of Moses, but we are “made righteous” in ways that were not possible under the Law of Moses.* **This is consistent with Paul’s emphasis on the fulfillment of the scriptures.** What *was* the emphasis of the OT, that we would merely be “declared righteous”, or that God would institute a new covenant that would actually “make us righteous”? Jeremiah 31:31-33 says, “I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah,³² not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,” declares Yahweh. ³³ ‘But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,’ declares Yahweh, ‘I will put My law *within* them, and *on their heart* I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.’” God spoke through Ezekiel, “And I shall give them one heart, and shall put a new spirit within them. And I shall take the heart of stone out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh,²⁰ *that they may walk in My statutes and keep My ordinances, and do them. Then they will be My people, and I shall be their God*”, and again, “...I will put My Spirit within you and *cause you* to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances” (11:19,20; 36:27). **It is clear that the OT promise was for a new heart that would motivate and enable God’s people to actually be righteous.** *This is what Paul is referring to in Acts 13:39. It is clear that this was God’s intent in the sacrifice of Jesus, that we would not only be forgiven, and declared righteous, but that we would actually become a people who live righteously.* **“He bore our sins in His body on the cross, in order that dying to the sins we might live in righteousness”** (I Pet. 2:24). **“God made the One not experientially-knowing sin to be sin, in order that we might come to be God’s righteousness in Him”** (II Cor. 5:21). “For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh,⁴ in order that the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit” (Rom. 8:3-4).