

Luke tells us in Acts 13:14 that Paul and Barnabas arrived in Pisidian Antioch. It seems likely that they arrived in town several days before the Sabbath, during which time they became familiar with the city. And on the sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down. After the reading of the law and the prophets, the officials of the synagogue sent them a message, saying, *“Brothers, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, give it.”* (Acts 13:15)

Adam Hamilton writes, “Paul stood, gestured with his hand, and started to talk. What follows in Acts is the longest recorded sermon from Paul that we have in the New Testament. What Paul did in Antioch became his *modus operandi*. He entered a town and began teaching in the synagogue. When the Jewish communities gathered in the synagogue, there almost always were some Gentiles who joined them for prayer and exhortation, Gentiles who were drawn to the monotheistic Jewish faith with its emphasis on a God of justice and love who created all things and ruled as King of the universe. The New Testament refers to these Gentiles as “God-worshippers” or “God-fearers.” Such persons were included among the people of the synagogue and the Jewish community, to a point. It was only as the men underwent circumcision and possibly a form of baptism—a ritual bathing—that they became full converts; until then they seem to have been welcomed and yet retained a lesser status. It was these Gentile God-worshippers who found the gospel Paul preached to be so compelling” (*The Call*, p. 70).

Paul begins with a 450-year story that each person in the synagogue would have known by heart—Israel’s story. Then he proclaimed that the long-awaited Savior from God was indeed Jesus of Nazareth. Paul preached that Jesus was crucified, dead, and buried, *“But God raised him from the dead!”* (v. 30).

Paul concluded his sermon with these (and other) words: *“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, a justification you were not able to obtain under the law of Moses”* (vss. 38-39). Adam Hamilton notes that the way Eugene Peterson captures this last sentence in *The Message* is fascinating: *“Everyone who believes in this raised-up Jesus is declared good and right and whole before God.”* So, what is the meaning of the gospel that Paul was preaching?

According to Paul, the fundamental problem with the human condition is sin. Paul uses the word fifty-two times in his letters. The Greek word he uses, *hamartia*, means literally to miss the mark. A similar Hebrew word for sin that is often used in the Old Testament means to stray from the path, which assumes there is a path we’re meant to walk on. Paul uses *hamartia* several different ways. It is first an orientation of the human soul. We human beings tend to stray from God’s path, to miss God’s target for our lives. We don’t like rules. We don’t want to be told what we can do or cannot do. If the speed limit is fifty-five, we want to drive sixty-five. If there is a sign that says, “Do not touch,” we suddenly have the desire to touch. If there is something we’re supposed to do, we often avoid doing it. In his letter to the Romans, Paul puts it this way: *“I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate...I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do”* (Romans 7:15, 19).

So, sin is a type of condition, sort of like a virus, a deadly virus. In Matthew’s gospel Jesus says to the Pharisees: *“It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners”* (9:12-13). Sin is a

human tendency, but it's also an external influence. It's every act in which we turn, intentionally or unintentionally, away from God's will for human life. We're called to forgive, but we harbor resentment. We're called to faithfulness, yet we struggle with desire for things we cannot have. We're called to show kindness, yet how easily we speak harsh words and act with selfish pride.

Nearly all the problems plaguing humanity today have sin at their root. Injustice, racism, the lure for and misuse of power, war, totalitarianism, materialism, infidelity, abuse, addiction, and so many more problems are caused by straying from God's path—they are all *hamartia*. Paul famously notes in Romans 3:23 “*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*” The condition of sin separates us from one another and from God. It harms our relationships, brings pain to our world, and leaves us alienated from God. Paul preached that Jews and Gentiles need a savior—not a savior to deliver the Jews from the Romans, for as long as there is sin in the world there will be conquering and occupying powers. What human beings need is a Savior who can save them from themselves. Jesus, as Paul proclaimed, came to save us.

The French existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre once said, “Man is the being whose project is to be God.” What a penetrating assessment and it's incredibly accurate! Paul's sermon at Antioch, however, reverses that kind of thinking. Christian preaching is the antithesis of the Enlightenment idea that “man is the measure of all things.” However, author Jacques Barzun concludes that one of the great themes of western culture is “emancipation,” the desire for independence from all authority. Barzun concludes that for the modern era, it is perhaps the most characteristic cultural theme of all. The value of “autonomous individualism” maintains that each person is independent in terms of destiny and accountability. Ultimate moral authority is self-generated. In the end, we answer to no one but ourselves for we are truly on our own. Our choices are ours alone; determined by our personal pleasure and not by any higher moral authority.

Intriguingly, Christian theologian Thomas Oden notes that this is the force behind the idea of heresy. The “key to ‘haireisis’ (the root word for heresy) is the notion of choice—choosing for oneself, over against the apostolic tradition.” It was this same spirit of autonomous individualism that erected the infamous tower of Babel and is leading to what some would say is its rebuilding today. Only this time, we do not build with bricks and mortar but with silicon chips and genetic engineering. We live in a technological age and have embraced technological advancement with abandon, creating what Neil Postman termed a “technopoly,” where technology of every kind is cheerfully granted sovereignty over our lives.

At Antioch Paul preached to “*fellow Israelites and you Gentiles who worship God*” the message that Jesus came to deliver us from sin, to forgive us, to call us to a new way of life, to change our hearts and minds, and then to deliver us from death and to eternal life. He came to call humanity to establish God's empire, which Jesus called the Kingdom of God. Paul draws upon the metaphors and philosophical, theological, and social categories and images of his time to explain salvation and how it is brought about by Christ.

At times Paul's assertions seem to contradict other assertions he makes elsewhere, sometimes in the same letter. In fact, the more literally we read his metaphors, often the harder it is to make sense of them, because his way of talking about salvation was more like poetry than an engineering manual. I would say that Paul's teaching about salvation can be summarized in a few big ideas. The fundamental idea is that

Jesus, by his life, his ministry, his death and his resurrection, saves us from the fundamental existential problems human beings have always had: sin, alienation, hopelessness, fear, and death. (*The Call*. Abingdon Press. Kindle Edition.)

In the year 2003, the first test-tube baby turned 25. Robert Edwards, who, along with his partner, Patrick Steptoe, pioneered the procedure, graced the occasion with a rare but candid interview with *The Times* of London. “It was a fantastic achievement, but it was about more than infertility,” said Edwards, then 77 and emeritus professor of human reproduction at Cambridge University. “I wanted to find out exactly who was in charge, whether it was God Himself or whether it was scientists in the laboratory.”

Smiling triumphantly at the reporter, he said, “It was us.”

Technology may be some new sort of Tower of Babel, but the deeper reality is that, because of sin, it will end just as the first Tower of Babel did.

I think it would be fitting for me to close this sermon with the same words Paul concluded his sermon in Antioch. Beginning at verse 38 of Acts 13 Paul said: “*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...*” (38-39).

God has done something that people living in any age would never believe, even if they heard it from a most trustworthy source.

In the *Jewish New Testament Commentary* David Stern says, “According to the Mishnah, There are thirty-six transgressions for which the Torah specifies the punishment of *karet*, that is, being ‘cut off’ from Israel...For these, the Torah provides no clearing. No sacrifice or punishment named in the Torah provides atonement or restores fellowship...” (p. 270).

We can passively ally ourselves with Jesus Christ, or we can stand apart from the crowd by trusting him completely and serving him faithfully. One thing that the life of Paul the Apostle has taught me is that following Jesus is never mainstream. It’s never floating down a lazy river on an inner tube. It’s always paddling against a very strong current with all your might.

But remember again the central theme of Paul’s sermon in Acts 13: “*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...*”

The important work is done. Jesus has taken care of the heavy lifting.

Paul knew nothing of Jean-Paul Sartre (in a way his namesake), but if he had met him, I’m certain he would preach to him the same powerful message of the forgiveness of sins that he gave at Pisidian Antioch on his first missionary journey. He would likely say to Sartre, “The project of human beings is not to *be* God, but to *let God be God*, because God has forgiven our every sin through our Savior Jesus Christ.”

And that is the incredibly good news. Amen.