

It Could Be Easy

2nd Kings 5:8-14; Acts 13:41-50



It could be easy. Why do we have to make it so hard? We seem forever to complicate the simple and oversimplifying the complex. When it comes to the gospel, what could be simpler and easier than grace? Why complicate matters of God's forgiveness, mercy, and reconciliation?

Barnabas and Paul went to Psidian Antioch, after God had called the church to set them apart. As was customary, Paul went to the Jewish synagogue on the Sabbath. Per the custom, they asked Paul as a visiting Rabbi to speak to the synagogue after the reading of the Scriptures. The day's passage was read from the Torah, then a passage from the prophets. This gathering of Jews and devout Gentiles was very receptive to Paul's words.

Paul gave them a brief run-down of God's history among the Hebrew people. He spoke of Jesus as the fulfillment of the hope of the prophets. He spoke of *Yahweh* God prospering the Hebrews while they were yet foreigners and slaves in Egypt. He spoke of God putting up with the people during the forty years of wandering in the wilderness. He spoke of the overthrow of seven nations in Canaan to place the nation in the land promised to Abraham. He spoke of the judges and the nation's desire for a king.

Paul didn't mince his words, yet he was well received. Paul spoke of John the Baptist's witness to Jesus as being greater than himself. He spoke of how the Jewish leaders had trumped up false charges against Jesus, fulfilling the words of Scripture in putting Jesus to death. He spoke of how Rome had been used to kill Jesus unjustly. He showed Jesus' resurrection as fulfilling the Scriptures that called for God restoring a son of David beyond the decay of flesh. He spoke of the multiple witnesses to Jesus' having risen from the dead.

In a world in which the quality of a man's word was his credit report, such witness was not to be taken lightly. The word of two witnesses could condemn a man to death. The word of multiple witnesses testifying to Jesus' resurrection was formidable proof to its truth. False witness was a capital offense.

Paul spoke of Jesus as presenting the world with a fuller means of justification before God. The Mosaic law could not justify one before God. It could merely present the individual an understanding of God's instruction (*Torah*) for living and a means to beg clemency if one did not fulfill the righteous demands of God's instruction. Being unable to fulfill the demands of God's *Torah* completely, one could merely present offerings and sacrifice to plead audience before *Yahweh*, falling upon grace. In Jesus, Paul declared, God offers justification and forgiveness freely!

The Jews did not appear put off by Paul's words. They accepted the proofs he presented, even if they needed to mull over his words and their implications. They took to heart the Scripture Paul quoted that what God had promised to do would surpass anyone's imagination. God was offering through Jesus free justification, clemency, mercy, grace. One could be reconciled to God not by performing a list of detailed rites down to the least letter of legal instruction, but because **God** desired to reconcile the world!

This was unheard of, not only in Judaism, but among all the various religious structures among the nations. One constantly lived in fear of incurring the wrath of the fickle gods. A Jew lived in dread of missing some portion of God's instruction and falling out of favor with *Yahweh*, being cut off from the people. This is why we could find Jews even during the holocaust seeking out a rabbi to question the legality of taking property left behind when others were marched to death camps, in order to feed their children. There was great uncertainty and fear of the Almighty God they served.

Paul preached grace through the gift of Jesus Christ. Unheard of! Why should God offer grace to a people who were undeserving? Why should grace and love and mercy be showered freely upon us when we do nothing more than repent and ask for grace? This was the same people who attached bells to the garments of the high priest and tied a rope around his leg in case God killed him behind the curtain to the Holy of Holies. Could this same Almighty God ignore all the time and effort invested in detailing the 613 commandments in the Torah and codifying the traditions of their interpretation, offering grace to all who simply asked?

Paul spoke of how God had always dealt with the people in grace. He reminded them that while in Egyptian bondage God blessed them. He recalled God's patience during the wilderness wandering. He spoke of how God allowed the people a king, even though it ran against God's will. He shared the message as being as old as the promise to Abraham, though never before fully understood.

At the close of the service, many decided to follow Paul and Barnabas to learn more and become disciples. They were invited to return to the synagogue on the following Sabbath to speak further. On their return, the whole city seemed to have turned out to hear this message of God's abundant grace and release from the bondage of fear. It was not only the Jews and converts to Judaism that turned out to hear Paul and Barnabas. The Gentiles came out as well.

That is when things got complicated. Oh, they still liked Paul's message. They were still entranced at what God was doing that was different and more complete than God's work in the past. They just didn't want to let in the Gentiles. Grace was good for the Jewish people. Grace could be extended to those who first converted to Judaism and kept the legal prescriptions of Jewish tradition. God was allowed to favor the chosen people, but offering that kind of grace to outsiders was too much.

The Jews in Psidian Antioch balked. They were not rejecting the validity of the message about Jesus. They just could not accept the sweeping character of the grace of God that Paul proclaimed. They were too enamored with their privileged position of God's chosen and special people. They wanted things to be more complicated than that. It was just too easy and simple. They felt they had too much to lose if they accepted others in accord with the same quality of God's grace.

Is it selfishness that drives us to complicate ministry, service, grace, and reconciliation? Is it a perceived sense of loss that would keep us from extending grace along God's measure? Are we perhaps too enamored with some sense of status, position, or privilege to accept our full responsibility to extend God's grace to all? The Jews turned against the gospel, because they did not want grace for the Gentiles. If grace is not freely available for all, we likewise have no claim on grace. This is the stumbling block of the gospel. God's favor is unmerited and freely offered. Will we accept God's full offer of grace, or will we disregard it for some selfish reason? It could be easy. We like it complicated.

—*Christopher B. Harbin*