



Lessons from the Life of David: A Man after God's Own Heart (Acts 13:13-43)

Notes: Week Nineteen

New American Commentary¹

3. Paul's Address to the Synagogue at Pisidian Antioch [13:13-52](#)

The remainder of chap. [13](#) is set primarily in Pisidian Antioch. It consists of three main parts: (1) the journey to Antioch and the setting of the stage for Paul's speech in the synagogue (vv. [13-16a](#)), (2) Paul's address to the synagogue (vv. [16b-41](#)), and (3) the final response of the Jews and Gentiles on the occasion of a second visit to the synagogue in Antioch (vv. [42-52](#)).

(1) The Setting [13:13-16a](#)

Leaving Cyprus, Paul and his party sailed from Paphos northwest to the coast of present-day Turkey. Their stopping place was Perga, some twelve miles inland. Perga was located in Pamphylia, the land that lay between the Taurus mountains and the Mediterranean Sea. The area of Lycia lay to the west and Cilicia to the east. Pamphylia was under Roman jurisdiction, having been a separate province from 25 B.C. to A.D. 43 and then being merged with Lycia into the province of Pamphylia-Lycia from A.D. 43-68. Perga could be reached by traveling seven miles up the Cestrus River from the Mediterranean port of Attalia and then going about five miles west by foot to Perga. The Cestrus is not navigable in this area today, and it may not have been in Paul's day. If not, the missionaries would have landed at Attalia and traveled by foot to Perga. At this point Perga seems to have been only a stopping place on their journey. On their return trip they would preach there ([14:25](#)).

At Perga, John Mark decided to leave them, and he returned home to Jerusalem. Just why he did so has long been a fruitful subject for speculation. Was he intimidated by the prospect of the arduous and dangerous task of crossing the Taurus mountains to reach Antioch? Was he angered that Paul was assuming more and more authority and forcing his cousin Barnabas to a lesser role? Did he contract malaria in the Pamphylian lowlands? Did he disagree with Paul's concept of a law-free mission to the Gentiles? All of these have been suggested; none can be substantiated. Luke was simply silent on the reason. He did clarify that it was a serious matter for Paul, serious enough to create a falling out with Barnabas on a subsequent occasion (cf. [15:37f.](#)).

1. John B. Polhill, *New American Commentary – Volume 26: Acts*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 295-304.

Luke's note that they went from Perga to Pisidian Antioch is extremely terse, and one is apt to miss the difficulty of the trek. Antioch lay some 100 miles to the north across the Taurus mountain range. The route was barren, often flooded by swollen mountain streams, and notorious for its bandits, which even the Romans had difficulty bringing under control. Antioch itself was in the highlands, some 3,600 feet above sea level. It was one of the sixteen cities named Antioch that had been established around 300 B.C. by Seleucus Nikator in honor of his father Antiochus. Although referred to as "Pisidian Antioch" to distinguish it from the others, it was actually in Phrygia but just across the border from Pisidia. In Paul's day it belonged to the Roman province of Galatia and was the leading city of the southern part of the province, having the status of a "colony city" with its privileges of local autonomy and exemption from imperial taxes. The Seleucid rulers had moved many Jews to the city, and there was a large Jewish population there.

[13:14–16](#) As was their custom, Paul and Barnabas went first to the synagogue in the city. The Diaspora synagogue was more than a house of worship. It was the hub of the Jewish community—house of worship, center of education, judicial center, social gathering place, general "civic center" for the Jewish community. If one wished to make contact with the Jewish community in a town, the synagogue was the natural place to begin. It was also the natural place to begin if one wished to share the Christian message. Jesus was the expected Jewish Messiah, and it was natural to share him with "the Jews first." There had perhaps been an arrangement already for Paul to speak that day, as the invitation from the rulers of the synagogue would suggest (v. [15b](#)). Usually a synagogue had only one ruling elder, but evidence suggests that the title was retained by those who formerly served as well as sometimes being conferred strictly as an honor, which explains why it occurs sometimes in the plural, as here. The ruling elder was responsible for worship, appointing lay members to lead in prayer and read the Scripture lessons. He also would invite suitable persons to deliver the homily on the day's Scripture when such were available. The form of the service as depicted in v. [15](#) is exactly that known from rabbinic sources, the sermon following the readings from the Law and the Prophets. There seem to have been a number of styles of homilies, but one that linked the Torah and prophetic texts together was considered ideal. One is tempted to try to derive the texts on which Paul expounded in Pisidian Antioch. [Deuteronomy 1:1–3:22](#) for the Torah (*seder*) and [Isa 1:1–22](#) for the prophetic text (*haftarah*) were suggested by Ramsay. More recently J. Bowker has suggested [Deut 4:25–46](#) as the *seder* and [2 Sam 7:6–16](#) as the *haftarah*, with [1 Sam 13:14](#) as the "proem text," that is, the text that links the two together.

(2) The Sermon [13:16b–41](#)

It is instructive to compare Paul's sermon in Pisidian Antioch with the other speeches in Acts. It has much in common with Peter's speeches—the emphasis on the Jerusalem Jews' responsibility for Jesus' death, the contrast between the death on the cross and the triumph of the resurrection, the apostolic witness, the proofs from Scripture (even some of the same texts), and the call to repentance. One would expect many of the same emphases. This, as with most of Peter's sermons, was a speech to Jews. Paul's sermons to Gentiles (chaps. [14](#); [17](#)) would be radically different. This sermon has a feature in common also with Stephen's speech—namely, the long introductory sketch of Jewish history. There is a radically different function for the historical sketches in the two speeches, however. Stephen used Old Testament history to depict the rebelliousness of the Jews toward their divinely appointed leaders. Paul used it to show God's faithfulness to his promises for Israel, promises that were ultimately fulfilled in Christ.

The speech falls into three main parts. Verses [16b–25](#) provide a sketch of Old Testament history that emphasizes God's providence and promise to Israel. Verses [26–37](#) demonstrate by means of apostolic witness and scriptural proof how those promises are fulfilled in Christ. Finally, vv. [38–41](#) issue an invitation to accept the promises and a warning against rejecting God's marvelous deed in Christ.

THE PROMISE TO ISRAEL ([13:16b–25](#)). [13:16b–21](#) Paul was aware of two groups in his congregation and addressed them both—“men of Israel” and “Gentiles who worship God” (vv. [16b](#), [26](#)). It was to the first group that the primary content of the sermon was addressed. It was from the second group that he would receive the most positive response. The keynote of Paul’s sketch of Old Testament history was God’s mercy to Israel, his acts of lovingkindness. This is particularly to be seen in the verbs he used to depict each stage of history. God “chose” the patriarchs (*eklegomai*, “elected,” v. [17](#)). He “made the people prosper” in Egypt (*hypsoō*, “exalted,” v. [17](#)). He “led them out” (*exagō*, v. [17](#)) of Egypt. He “endured their conduct,” or “cared for them in the wilderness” (v. [18](#)). He “gave the land of Canaan to them as an inheritance” (*kataklēronomeō*, v. [19](#)). He “gave” them judges (v. [20](#)). Upon their request he “gave” them Saul as king (v. [21](#)). Finally, he “made” (literally “raised up,” *egeiren*) David as king (v. [22](#)). No point is dwelt upon until we get to David. All the stress is on God’s mercy—his election of Israel, his exaltation of his people, his gift of an inheritance in the promised land, his gift of rulers and kings.

[13:22–23](#) The pace slows with David because this is the point Paul wanted to stress. God “raised up” David, a common Old Testament expression for God bringing forth a prophet or ruler to serve his people but also an expression for Jesus’ resurrection. The parallelism may not be accidental, for in a real sense David and the promises to him foreshadow the promise fulfilled in Christ. David was a special expression of God’s mercy, a man who fulfilled all God’s will for him, a man after God’s own heart. David also received a special promise from God, a promise of a descendant who would be God’s own Son and with whom he would establish a kingdom that would last forever. This promise was embodied in Nathan’s prophecy to David ([2 Sam 7:12–16](#)). It lies behind v. [23](#) with its reference to God’s promise. The promised descendant of David was Jesus the Savior. This promise to David had been the goal of Paul’s entire historical sketch. It would continue to be the main subject of Paul’s sermon as he showed how Christ fulfilled the promise.

[13:24–25](#) The verses dealing with John the Baptist are difficult to place on an outline of Paul’s sermon (vv. [24–25](#)). Should they go with the opening sketch of Israel’s history (vv. [16–23](#)) or with the section on God’s sending Jesus (vv. [26–37](#))? Does John belong with the period of Israel or the period of Christ? The very fact that John was placed between these two major sections of the speech emphasizes his transitional role. John was the eschatological messenger, the last in the line of Old Testament prophets, who heralded the coming of the Messiah. He was the link-figure, joining together the period of Israel and the period of God’s new community in Christ. The outline followed here places John with the section on Israel’s history because the structure of Paul’s speech seems to do so. The key is Paul’s address to his hearers (“brothers,” etc.). The speech contains three direct addresses (vv. [16](#), [26](#), [38](#)), and each seems to mark a transition to a major division in the sermon.

The references to Jesus’ being the “coming” one in vv. [24–25](#) may reflect the prophecy of [Mal 3:1](#), which looks to the sending of God’s messenger as a herald to the coming of the Lord. Contemporary Judaism interpreted [Mal 3:1](#) messianically, and throughout the New Testament John is depicted in this role of the herald, the forerunner of the Messiah Jesus. John’s message and his baptizing were both aimed at the repentance of the people in preparation for the coming Messiah (cf. [Mark 1:4](#)). John’s denial that he was the Messiah and his statement that he was unworthy to perform even the slave’s task of untying the “coming” one’s sandals (v. [25](#)) is found in all four Gospels (cf. [Matt 3:11](#); [Mark 1:7](#); [Luke 3:15f.](#); [John 1:27](#)). Here in Paul’s speech it appears in wording that is closest to that of John’s Gospel (cf. [John 1:20f.,27](#)). Quite possibly Paul’s listeners in the synagogue of Pisidian Antioch had heard about John the Baptist. A few years later Paul encountered a group of the Baptist’s disciples even further to the west in Ephesus ([Acts 19:1–7](#)). Paul wanted his hearers to see John’s role in its proper perspective. John was in every way subordinate to the one whose coming he proclaimed. But he was a first bold *witness* to the coming of the Messiah.

THE PROMISE FULFILLED IN CHRIST (13:26–37). [13:26](#) There may be a distant echo of [Ps 107:20](#) in v. [26](#). In any event, it is a key verse, linked directly with the reference to God’s sending the promised “Savior” Jesus in v. [23](#). That had been the whole point of the opening section of Paul’s sermon—God’s mercy to Israel from the patriarchs to David, especially as epitomized in the promise to David that he would send a descendant whose kingdom would have no end. Now that promise had been fulfilled in the Savior Jesus; now that message of salvation had been sent. Jesus *was* the Son of David; it was above all to David’s own people, the people chosen in Abraham (v. [17](#)), the Jews, that God had sent the Messiah and the message of salvation in him. Paul addressed a synagogue consisting of Jewish listeners and devout God-worshipping Gentiles who identified closely with the Jewish faith and looked to the promises given to Israel. The tragedy of this speech would be that the Jews, the very ones to whom the Messiah had first been sent, would ultimately reject this message of salvation ([13:45f.](#)).

[13:27–28](#) Verses [27–31](#) tell the story of Jesus’ rejection, death, and resurrection in the basic kerygmatic form already familiar from Peter’s speeches earlier in Acts. The people of Jerusalem, and especially their rulers, did not recognize Jesus as their God-sent Messiah. What they did to him was done in ignorance (cf. [3:17](#)). And yet, in condemning him to death, they unknowingly fulfilled the prophecies that the Messiah must suffer and die (cf. [Luke 24:46](#); [Acts 3:18](#)). The irony of it all was that they were the very ones who should have understood who Jesus was, who read those very prophecies in their synagogues every sabbath (v. [27b](#)). Paul highly compressed his summary. His reference to their finding no real legal basis for the death penalty (v. [28a](#)) recalls Pilate’s protest of Jesus’ innocence (cf. [Luke 23:4](#); [Acts 3:13](#)).

[13:29–30](#) Verses [29–30](#) complete the gospel summary, noting that the Jews of Jerusalem fulfilled all that the prophets had written concerning his suffering and death. Like Peter, Paul referred to Christ’s crucifixion as hanging on “a tree” ([5:30](#); [10:39](#); [Gal 3:13](#)). His compression of the story is particularly evident in his referring to “their” taking him down from the cross and laying him in the tomb, which could be taken to refer to the Jews of Jerusalem. The reference is, of course, to Joseph of Arimathea ([Luke 23:53](#)) and Nicodemus ([John 19:38–42](#)). The removal of the body and its placement in the tomb underlines the full reality of the death of Christ. He was dead and buried (cf. [1 Cor 15:4](#)). This heightens the contrast with the next statement: God raised him from the dead. The emphasis on the burial also prepares for the explanation of [Ps 16:10](#) in vv. [34–37](#). It is the contrast between the seeming defeat of the cross and the victory of the resurrection so familiar in Peter’s speeches: “*You killed him but God raised him*” (cf. [2:24](#); [3:15](#); [4:10](#); [5:30](#); [10:39f.](#)).

[13:31](#) The kerygmatic portion of Paul’s speech ends with the familiar reference to the apostolic witness (cf. [1:8](#); [2:32](#); [3:15](#)). It is striking that Paul did not include himself among these witnesses. But here it was not just the resurrection he wished to emphasize but the entire Christ event, embracing the journey from Galilee and the witness to his crucifixion (cf. [Luke 23:49](#), [55](#); [Acts 1:13f.](#)) as well as the whole forty-day period of his resurrection appearances ([Acts 1:3](#)). Above all the Twelve could attest to these events (cf. [Acts 1:21f.](#)). But another “witness” to these things was the testimony of the Scriptures. To these Scripture proofs Paul now turned.

[13:32–33a](#) Just as Peter’s sermons to the Jews relied heavily on Old Testament texts that were shown to have their fulfillment in Jesus, so now in vv. [32–37](#) Paul turned to the Scriptures to demonstrate that Jesus is the Messiah who fulfilled the promise to David. In that generation (“to us their children,” said Paul) God accomplished his promise to David. This he did by “raising up” Jesus. The expression “raising up” could be connected with God’s bringing Jesus onto the stage of history. It is the same verb (*egeiren*) used in v. [22](#) for God’s “raising up” David as king (“made ... king”). In the immediate context, however, the emphasis is on the resurrection of Jesus. By the *resurrection* of Jesus, God demonstrated that he had truly accomplished his promise by bringing forth the Son who abides forever.

[13:33b–34](#) Paul quoted three Old Testament texts that establish Jesus as the one who fulfills the promise. The first is [Ps 2:7](#), a psalm that already in contemporary Judaism was applied to the Messiah and was itself based on the Nathan prophecy of [2 Sam 7](#). God said to the Messiah: “You are my Son; today I have become your Father” ([Acts 13:33](#)). To what does “today” refer? In the context Paul seems to have been implying the day of Jesus’ resurrection. Jesus was indeed the Son of God from all eternity and recognized as such throughout his earthly life ([Luke 1:35](#); [3:22](#); [9:35](#)). But it was through the resurrection that he was exalted to God’s right hand, enthroned as Son of God, and recognized as such by believing humans. It was through the resurrection that he was declared Son of God *with power* ([Rom 1:4](#)). Paul’s second Old Testament text, [Isa 55:3](#), also relates to the Nathan prophecy of [2 Sam 7:4–17](#): “I will give to you the holy and sure blessings promised to David.” It is somewhat more difficult to determine the exact purpose of this quotation in the total argument, but Paul gave a key in introducing the verse by saying that it established that God raised Jesus from the dead, never to decay. The “holy and sure” blessings to David are God’s promise that he would establish in his descendant an eternal throne, a kingdom that would last forever (cf. [2 Sam 7:13, 16](#)). But God’s promise was not fulfilled in David, who did not himself enjoy an eternal reign.

[13:35–37](#) The final Old Testament text, [Ps 16:10](#), is quoted in v. [35](#) to establish this. The text of the psalm refers to God’s Holy One who will not suffer decay. Peter also cited this same text in his Pentecost sermon ([Acts 2:25–28](#)). Paul applied it in much the same fashion. David could not have been speaking about himself in the psalm because he died, was buried, and his body decayed (v. [36](#); cf. [2:29–31](#)). Only the one whom God raised from the dead escaped death and decay. Paul’s argument had come full circle. Only by virtue of the resurrection of Jesus were the promises to David fulfilled. Jesus is God’s Holy One who saw no decay. He is the one who received the sure and holy promises to David. He is the Son of God whose throne is forever. Paul’s witness was now complete. Apostles and Scripture attested to the resurrection of Jesus in fulfillment of the promises to David. It now only remained for his hearers to accept him as the promised Savior (v. [23](#)).

APPEAL TO ACCEPT THE PROMISE ([13:38–41](#)). [13:38–39](#) With the third address to his Jewish “brothers” in the synagogue, Paul turned to the final and most important part of his sermon—the call to repentance. Throughout the sermon he had appealed to God’s constant acts of mercy. Now he offered God’s greatest act of mercy, the forgiveness of sins through Jesus. The next statement, which is a fuller explication of the forgiveness of sins, could hardly be more Pauline: “Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses” (v. [39](#)). “Through him” recalls Paul’s favorite phrase, “in Christ.” “Everyone who believes” is reminiscent of Paul’s constant emphasis on the sole necessity of faith in Christ. Justification was his favorite term for describing the saving work of Christ. It is a law-court term and carries the idea of being acceptable to God. Through faith in Christ, one is “put right with God” and becomes acceptable to him. The idea is that the law of Moses could never serve as a basis for acceptability to God. Only in Christ is one truly “justified,” forgiven of sin, and acceptable to God.

[13:40–41](#) Having begun his appeal with an invitation, Paul concluded with a warning. His warning took the form of a quote from [Hab 1:5](#), which originally had warned Israel of King Nebuchadnezzar’s rise to power and the threat of an invasion from Babylon if the nation failed to repent. In the present context the threat seems to be that God would once again have to bring judgment upon his people if they failed to accept the mercy and forgiveness now offered to them in Jesus. If they continued in their rejection, they would be rejected. It is remarkable how quickly Paul’s warning came to bear. In the ensuing narrative, Habakkuk’s prophecy was once again fulfilled—among the Jews of Pisidian Antioch, as they rejected the words of salvation. God did something they would never have dreamed of—he turned to the Gentiles.

(3) The Sermon's Aftermath [13:42-52](#)

[13:42-43](#) Paul's synagogue audience was at first favorably impressed by what he had to say. On first sight vv. [42-43](#) seem almost to be doublets, but they probably are best viewed as sequential. At the conclusion of the service, as they were all exiting, the congregation urged Paul and Barnabas to return for a further exposition on "these things" the next Sabbath (v. [42](#)). At this point they expressed a somewhat detached interest. When next Sabbath arrived, they would become anything but detached. Others in the congregation showed a genuine interest in the witness of Paul and Barnabas, following them and talking with them as they left the synagogue (v. [43](#)). Among these were both Jews and "devout converts." The latter were undoubtedly proselytes, Gentiles who had become full converts to Judaism. Other Gentiles in the congregation had believed in and worshiped God but had not yet undergone the rites like circumcision, which would qualify them as converts (cf. vv. [16](#), [26](#)). Some of these also may have been among this group who showed a keener interest in Paul and Barnabas's testimony. The two missionaries urged them to continue along the path they had started and to remain open to the grace of God (v. [43b](#)).