**Beware of God**

(Acts 13:40-47)

By Pastor Ricky Kurth

As we begin, I feel I should warn *you* to beware of leaving things in your car in plain sight. Last week someone gave me two tickets to a Green Bay Packers football game, and I left them in my car while shopping. Sure enough, when I came back to my car, someone had bashed in my window—and left me two more tickets.

Speaking of telling people to beware of things, here in our text in Acts 13, the Apostle Paul is preaching a message in the synagogue in Syrian Antioch, and he decides to close his message by telling those unsaved Jews to beware of something:

**“Beware therefore, lest that come upon you, which is spoken of in the prophets;**

**“Behold, ye despisers, and wonder, and perish: for I work a work in your days, a work which ye shall in no wise believe, though a man declare it unto you” (Acts 13:40,41).**

Now first of all, did you notice that the word *prophet* in verse 40 is plural? That means Paul’s warning them about something that a *couple* of prophets talked about. The first quote is from Isaiah 29, a prophecy that we’re going to look at in its context. It begins:

**“…the LORD hath poured out upon you the spirit of deep sleep, *and hath closed your eyes…”* (Isaiah 29:10).**

That’s a prediction of how God shut the eyes of the Jews after they crucified the Lord and stoned His prophet Stephen. How do I know? I know because a *fuller* quote of that verse reads:

**“…the LORD hath…closed your eyes: *the prophets and your rulers,* the seers hath He covered” (Isaiah 29:10).**

As I’m sure you know, it was Israel’s rulers in Jerusalem who slew the Lord and forced God to blind Israel by closing their eyes. Paul just finished reminding these Jews in Antioch about that a few verses earlier:

**“…they that dwell at Jerusalem, and their rulers, because they knew Him not, nor yet the voices of the prophets which are read every sabbath day, they have fulfilled them in condemning Him.**

**“And though they found no cause of death in him, yet desired they Pilate that he should be slain” (Acts 13:27,28).**

With all of the “they”s there, Paul is telling those Jews I Antioch, as it were, *“You’re* not to blame for the death of our Messiah! Why should you remain blind just because those Bozo rulers of yours rejected Christ?” And then he went on to tell them about Christ and invited them to believe on Him.

But don’t get the wrong idea when Isaiah said that *God* closed their eyes. God never closes *anyone’s* eyes *to keep them from believing the gospel.* He closed the eyes of the generation of Jews who rejected the Lord because they *didn’t* believe the gospel.

If you’re not convinced that Isaiah is talking about the Jews of the Lord’s generation, take a look at Matthew 13:15, where the Lord *quotes* Isaiah 29:10 and *applies it* to His generation:

**“For *this* people's…ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes *they* have closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, *and should be converted…”***

Do you see why Isaiah said that God closed their eyes. He did that *in response* to what *they* did. They didn’t want to understand the gospel, so they closed their eyes to it lest they should understand it and be converted.

So when *Paul* quotes Isaiah 29 here in our text, he’s warning those Jews *in Antioch* not to close *their* eyes to the gospel like their rulers had. He knew the Jews he was addressing that day were familiar with the entire chapter, and he was praying they’d get the point.

Now let’s consider the specific verse that Paul was quoting:

**“Therefore, behold, *I will proceed to do a marvellous work among this people,* even a marvellous work and a wonder” (Isaiah 29:14).**

So what’s the “work” that God was talking about doing that would make the Jews *marvel* at it? Well, we find out by comparing the words of the *other* prophet Paul was quoting:

**“…I will work a work in your days which ye will not believe, though it be told you. *For,* lo, I raise up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, *which shall march through the breadth of the land,* to possess the dwellingplaces that are not their's” (Habakkuk 1:5,6).**

That little word “For” there means that the work that Habakkuk was telling the Jews to beware of was God’s work of raising up the Chaldeans to *conquer* Israel because of their rebellion against God. And the “Chaldeans” were otherwise known as *Babylonians.* Chaldean was the language they spoke in Babylon.

But if you know your Bible, you know that the Babylonians conquered Israel 1500 years *before* Paul quoted that warning. So why would he quote Habakkuk to warn the Jews in Antioch in his own day to beware of something that happened 1500 years earlier?

The answer is that a lot of those Old Testament prophecies had *two* fulfullments: one that happened in the Old Testament, and another that would happen much later. For instance, Jeremiah 51:44 says,

**“…the wall of Babylon shall fall…”**

Now Babylon fell 2500 years ago! But Babylon is going to rise again in the Tribulation. It’s going to be the church of the Antichrist. And it’s going to fall again, as John predicted when he wrote:

**“…with violence shall *that great city Babylon be thrown down…”* (Revelation 18:21).**

As a matter of fact, Nebuchadnezzer, the *king* of Babylon, was a type of the Antichrist.

So in quoting those prophets, Paul was not telling them to beware of *Nebuchadnezzar.* He was telling them to beware of the man Nebuchadnezzar typified—the antichrist. He was sayhing to them, “You need to get saved, or you will get left behind at the rapture, and you’ll have to *face* the antichrist in the Tribulation.”

But now, while that answers the question of what Paul was warning them about, it doesn’t explain why he would tell them that the antichrist they needed to beware of was something they wouldn’t believe, even though a man was declaring it to them. I mean, there were plenty of warnings about the antichrist and the Tribulation in the prophets. Why did Paul think those Jews would have trouble believing something that their own prophets said would come?

To answer, let me give you a fuller quotation of what Habakkuk said:

**“Behold *ye among the heathen,* wonder marvelously: for I will work a work in your days which ye will not believe, though it be told you. For, lo, I raise up the Chaldeans…which shall march through the breadth of the land, to possess the dwellingplaces that are not their's” (Habakkuk 1:5,6).**

Habakkuk was warning Jews who lived far *away* from Israel, out among the heathen Gentiles. When Jews *out there* heard God say he was going to let Nebuchadnezzar conquer *Israel,* they’d be tempted to think: “Well, *we* don’t live in Israel. We’re safe out here among the heathen. So the Chaldeans won’t conquer *us* when they conquer Israel!”

But did God let Nebuchadnezzar just conquer *Israel?* No! God let him conquer *all* nations—all those heathen nations that had *Jews* among them! And Paul is *quoting* Habakkuk to warn the Jews in Antioch that *Antichrist* isn’t just going to conquer the nation Israel. He’s going to conquer *all* the nations—including *Syria,* the nation of Antioch! Paul is telling them, “Just because it was your rulers who rejected Christ and not you, don’t get the idea that God won’t chasten *you* with the antichrist along with your rulers. Just because you’re 800 miles from Israel, don’t find it hard to believe that you’ll be judged if *you* don’t believe, just as God is going to judge your rulers because *they* didn’t believe!”

And there was something *else* that those Jews in Antioch would find it hard to believe. It was something that Jews in *Isaiah’s* day *also* had trouble believing. And that was that God would use a *Gentile* like Nebuchadnezzar to do His will and chasten them. Do you know what God *called* the king of Babylon? Jeremiah quotes Him as saying,

**“I will send and take all the families of the north, saith the LORD, and Nebuchadrezzar the king of Babylon, *My servant,* and will bring them against this land, and…against all these nations round about, and will utterly destroy them” (Jeremiah 25:9).**

God actually called Nebuchanezzar *“My servant.”*  Those Old Testament Jews would have found it hard to believe that God would allow a Gentile like Nebuchadnezzar to serve Him, even though men were *declaring* it to them—men like Jeremiah, Isaiah and Habakkuk.

And *Paul* was quoting those prophets here in our text because the Jews in Antioch were finding it heard to believe what *he* was declaring to them—that God was now using Gentiles to do His will *in the dispensation of grace!* He was telling them that *the Gentiles* were now God’s servants, and the Jews who had been God’s servants *for 2,000 years* were *no longer* His servants. Paul knew they’d find *that* pretty hard to believe as well.

Now we’re not told how those Jews liked hearing all of that, but we know the Gentiles liked it, for Luke goes on to tell us,

**“And when they had fulfilled all that was written of him, they took him down from the tree, and laid him in a sepulcher” (Acts 13:42).**

Now Gentiles weren’t allowed *inside* the synagogue. But they *were* allowed to hang around *outside,* and listen in through the windows. And they were liking what they were hearing—*especially* what Paul told them in verses 38,39, verses we looked at in our last lesson. Let’s consider them again:

**“Be it known unto you therefore, men and brethren, that through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins:**

**“And by him all that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses.”**

Those Gentiles *really* liked that part, for the reason they hadn’t converted to Judaism and become proselytes was probably due to the fact that those unsaved Jews were telling them that they had to keep the law of Moses—the 10 commandments—*to be saved,* and they knew they *couldn’t* keep it. So after hearing Paul tell the Jews that theycould be saved *without* the law, they invited Paul to speak those same words *to them* the following sabbath day.

But now, we know that *some* of those Jews must have liked what they heard and believed on the Lord, for verse 43 of our text says:

**“Now when the congregation was broken up, many of the Jews and religious proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas: who, speaking to them, persuaded them to continue in the grace of God.”**

Some of those unsaved Jews got saved by grace, along with some of the proselytes—the Gentiles who had converted to Judaism, but were just as unsaved as the Jews who converted them! But when they got saved by grace, Paul told them all to *continued* in God’s grace, and not go back to the law like the Galatians did later.

But look what happened the following sabbath:

**“And the next sabbath day came almost the whole city together to hear the word of God” (Acts 13:44).**

Well, that certainly sounds like an awful lot of Gentiles! I’m sure Paul and Barnabas were happy to see such a good turnout. But the Jews who didn’t believe on the Lord weren’t quite so happy to see that good turnout, as we see as we read on:

**“But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy, and spake against those things which were spoken by Paul, contradicting and blaspheming” (Acts 13:45).**

Now what you’re seeing here is the same thing we saw earlier in this chapter in Acts 13:6-12. In that passage, a Jew who refused to get saved tried to keep a Gentile from getting saved. When we went through that passage in an earlier study, I mentioned that it was a type of what unsaved Jews would *continue* to do throughout the remainder of the Book of Acts. We certainly didn’t have to wait long before seeing that typical story acted out, did we?

Well, up until now, Paul’s been speaking to those Jews in a very deferential manner. But when those unsaved men started *blaspheming,* the gloves came off, and Paul quit beating around the bush:

**“Then Paul and Barnabas waxed bold, and said, It was necessary that the word of God should first have been spoken to you: but seeing ye put it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, lo, we turn to the Gentiles” (Acts 13:46).**

Here it is important to point out that the way those Jews judged themselves unworthy of everlasting life was by not believing the gospel and getting saved! You see, in God’s eyes, we’re *all* unworthy of everlasting life. But you can *become* worthy of it by believing.

But why does Paul say that it was *necessary* to go to the Jews first with the word of God? Well, take a close look at the first word of the next verse:

**“For so hath the Lord commanded us, saying, I have set thee to be a light of the Gentiles, that thou shouldest be for salvation unto the ends of the earth” (Acts 13:47).**

That word “For” there means that Paul is telling those Jews *why* it was necessary for him to go to the Jews first, then turn to the Gentiles if the Jews didn’t believe. He was quoting Isaiah 49 to explain it.

And frankly, that makes a lot of grace believers nervous, for they know that *nothing* Paul did was predicted in the Old Testament, because he was part of God’s *mystery* program, not His *prophetic* program. So before we look at Isaiah 49, let me remind you of something that James said when he first heard about Paul’s new mystery ministry among the Gentiles:

**“…to this *agree* the words of the prophets…” (Acts 15:15).**

James said, “What Paul is doing doesn’t *fulfill* the prophets, but it *agrees* with the words of the prophets.” That is, what Paul was doing didn’t *contradict* what the prophets predicted would happen, it was in keeping with it. The prophets predicted that *somebody* would go to the Jews first, and then turn to the Gentiles when the Jews didn’t believe. So let’s consider some verses in Isaiah 49 to learn who Isaiah was talking about. The chapters starts out by saying,

**“The LORD hath called me from the womb…and He hath made my mouth like a sharp sword…And said unto me, Thou art my servant, *O Israel”* (Isaiah 49:1-3).**

Here the prophet is speaking prophetically about *true* Israel, *saved* Israel, some people who would live sometime in the future. He was speaking about the “little flock” of the Lord’s followers (Lu.12:32), and specifically the 12 apostles. God drew *them* from the warm, safe womb of the Jews religion, and put a sword in *their* hands—the sword Paul called

**“…the sword of the Spirit, *which is the word of God”* (Ephesians 6:17).**

The Lord drew the 12 out of Judaism and put the word of God in their hands!

But didn’t the Lord do all that for Paul as well? Paul told the Galatians,

**“I…profited *in the Jews' religion*…But…God…separated me *from my mother's womb,* and called me by His grace" (Galatians 1:13-15).**

God drew Paul out of the warm, safe womb of the Jews religion, and put the sword of the Spirit in *his* hand as well! So while Isaiah was talking about the 12, what he *said* about the 12 agreed with what we now know to be true about Paul.

Look what *else* Isaiah said about the 12:

**“The LORD…hath made me *a polished shaft;* in His *quiver* hath He hid me” (Isaiah 49:1,2).**

Now you know what a *quiver* is. It’s that tube-shaped thing that archers wear on their back to keep their arrows in. Of course, archers in those days couldn’t buy their arrows from *Archers R Us.* They had to make their *own* arrows, and then polish the shaft if they wanted the arrow to fly straight. This too is a reference to the 12 apostles. Psalm 127:3-5 says,

**“Lo, children are an heritage of the LORD: and *the fruit of the womb* is His reward. *As arrows are in the hand of a mighty man;* so are children of the youth. Happy is the man that hath his *quiver* full of them: they shall not be ashamed, but they shall speak with the enemies in the gate.”**

I know those verses are talking about “children,” but that’s what the Lord called the 12 in John 13:33:

***“Little children,* yet a little while I am with you…”**

The 12 became children of God, the fruit of the womb of Judaism, when the Lord called them *out* of the womb of Judaism, like a baby comes out of the womb when it’s born. The Lord then polished the 12 into the arrows that He’d need them to be.

But wasn’t all that true of Paul as well? Wasn’t he a child of God? Didn’t he speak with God’s enemies in the gate, as Psalm 127 talked about? The gate is where the leaders of government met in those days, and Paul spoke to governmental leaders like Festus, Felix and Agrippa—just as the 12 spoke to God’s enemies in the gate of *Israel’s* rulers in the earlier chapters of Acts.

But why did Isaiah call the 12 a “hidden” arrow? Well, if you know the New Testament well, you know that the Lord started out His ministry in Jerusalem, but it quickly became apparent that the rulers in Jerusalem were going to *kill* Him instead of *receiving* Him. At that point, He took the 12 *out* of Jerusalem, and went around preaching in the towns and cities *outside* of Jerusalem. There they were *hidden* from those murderous rulers in Jerusalem.

But Paul was *also* a hidden arrow, for he was part of the mystery, and what did Paul say about the mystery in Ephesians 3:9?

**“…the mystery…from the beginning of the world hath been *hid in God.”***

So being a hidden arrow is something *else* that Isaiah said about the 12 that agrees with what we now know about Paul.

Look what else Isaiah said about the 12:

**“The LORD…said…Thou art My servant, O Israel, *in whom I will be glorified”* (Isaiah 49:1,2).**

Now frankly, if I were one of the 12 apostles and I knew that was written about me, I’d ask God, “How are You glorified in me? The Jews *rejected* me when I told them about Your Son?” And believe it or not, that’s pretty much what Isaiah *predicted* they’d say! After the Lord said He’d be glorified in the 12, we read their response:

**“Then I said, I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nought, and in vain” (Isaiah 49:4).**

Doesn’t that sound like something one of the 12 might say after the Jews responded to their preaching by stoning Stephen?

Do you know how Isaiah predicted the Lord would *answer* them?

**“And now, saith the LORD that formed me from the womb to be His servant, to bring Jacob again to Him, *Though Israel be not gathered, yet shall I be glorious…”* (Isaiah 49:5).**

God told the 12, as it were, “I’ll be glorified in you even though Israel refused to be gathered.” But how was that supposed to happen? Well, it *didn’t* happen *back then,* I can tell you! But it *will* happen someday in the kingdom, as Isaiah went on to talk about when he quotes God as saying:

**“It is a light thing that thou shouldest be My servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel: *I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles,* that thou mayest be My salvation unto the end of the earth” (Isaiah 49:6).**

God is saying that He’d be glorious when someday He raised the 12 from the dead in the kingdom and used them to not only restore Israel, He’d *also* make them a light to the Gentiles too! It’s in the kingdom that salvation is going to reach the ends of the earth under the ministry of the 12. So *they’re* the ones who were supposed to turn to the Gentiles, and be a light to them in the kingdom, after Israel *rejected* the Lord 2,000 years ago. Isaiah went on to say just that:

**“Thus saith the LORD…*to him whom the nation abhorreth*…Kings shall see and arise, princes also shall worship, because of the LORD that is faithful… *In an acceptable time have I heard thee,* and in a day of salvation have I helped thee” (Isaiah 49:7,8).**

God’s telling the 12, “The nation of Israel *abhorred* you, but in the kingdom Israel’s rulers are going to *receive* you, and then you can turn to the Gentiles so *they* can receive you too!”

But God wasn’t about to wait for the kingdom to give light to the Gentiles. He made *Paul* a light to the Gentiles in the meantime. That’s why Paul quoted that verse about the 12 being a light to the Gentiles, and applies it to himself. It was yet *another* thing that Isaiah said about the 12 that we now know to be true about Paul.

Paul *also* quoted what Isaiah said about an “acceptable time” in II Corinthians 6:2:

**“He saith, *I have heard thee in a time accepted,* and in the day of salvation have I succoured thee: behold, *now* is the accepted time…*now* is the day of salvation”**

Isaiah said that the acceptable time to turn to the Gentiles and see them get saved will be in the kingdom. *Paul* says that the acceptable time to turn to the Gentiles and see them get saved is *“now,”* in the dispensation of grace! Salvation will go to the ends of the earth in the kingdom after God raises the 12 from the dead and makes them a light to the Gentiles *according to prophecy.* But in the meantime, salvation *has* gone to the ends of the earth through Paul *according to the mystery.*

Now that didn’t *fulfill* Isaiah’s prophecy, but it sure *agreed* with what God planned to do all along—save the Gentiles through the ministry of a Jew—a Jew like Paul.

But now that Paul is with the Lord, *we* are God’s light to the ends of the earth! And if you have some unsaved loved one in your life whom you’ve told to beware of hell and get saved, only to notice that he or she didn’t seem all that *scared* of hell, you might want to try doing what Paul did in this passage and warn them if they don’t get saved, hell is not the only thing they need to worry about. If they miss the rapture, they’ll be left behind for the antichrist and the Tribulation!

Over the many years I’ve been saved, I’ve noticed that sometimes people are more afraid of the beast than they are of hell! I think it’s because they can’t conceptualize a fire that burns forever without burning up the people in it, but they *can* conceptualize not being able to buy food without the mark of the beast.

Of course, some say we shouldn’t try to scare people into getting saved, but as a famous preacher said many years ago, it’s better to be hell-*scared* than hell-*scorched!*