

Grace Church Roanoke, Virginia

Dr. Jack L. Arnold

Lesson #33

## ACTS

Eternal Life: Of God or Man?

Acts 13:42-52

Probably the most perplexing problem for all of mankind is, "Is there life after death?" The average life span for a person is about seventy years and then he dies. Death seems to be so final. Is there any hope for existence beyond the grave? Does death end it all?

The Bible tells us that because all men are created in the image of God, they have an inkling that there is some kind of after life. God, who is eternal, created man with an eternal soul, and the Bible does teach that all men have eternal existence but not all will have eternal life. Since all men are sinners, which was the result of Adam's fall the image of God in every man has been marred by sin, and his spiritual perception has become blurred. However, there is enough of God's image left in every man to tell him that this life does not end it all. There is something beyond the grave. This is evident in all the great world religions which have some kind of understanding of existence past what we know as human life. Even the atheist and communist, who believe that man is just an animal of the highest order and think that when man dies this ends existence, have thoughts about life after death, but they suppress this truth because of the hardness of their sinful hearts. Whatever concepts men may have about life after death have been corrupted and perverted, but they do innately sense there is something beyond the grave. The Bible teaches that all men will experience eternal existence but not all men will experience eternal life. Eternal life can only be possessed by those who have received Jesus Christ as personal Lord and Savior. "And this is eternal life, that they may know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent" (John 17:3). It is impossible to have eternal life apart from Jesus Christ.

If there is eternal life, then the search for this life is the most significant quest a man can undertake. If there is eternal life, where is it located and how can it be possessed? Hopefully, this message today will help us answer these questions.

### OBVIOUS HUNGER FOR ETERNAL LIFE (Acts 13:42-44)

"And as Paul and Barnabas were going out, the people kept begging that these things be spoken to them the next Sabbath." -- Paul had just preached a dynamic sermon to the Jews, Jewish proselytes and Gentile God-fearers who attended the synagogue at Antioch in Pisidia. Paul reviewed the history of the nation of Israel from the exodus to the reign of King David, putting emphasis upon God's sovereign choice of the fathers of Israel and the nation of Israel. He told how Jesus Christ, the Messiah, Savior and King sprang from David's seed and that He would reign upon David's throne forever. Paul spoke of the announcement of Christ's coming by John the Baptist. He told of the crucifixion of Christ for sins and the resurrection of Christ from the dead. Then Paul explained how Jesus Christ can give the forgiveness of sins and how a person

can be declared righteous in God's sight by trusting in Jesus Christ as personal lord and Savior. Finally, Paul warned them of the certainty of eternal judgment if they refused to accept Christ as Savior and bow down before Him as King. This sermon of Paul's was powerful because he told it like it really is. He did not hesitate to speak of God, sin, law, justification, forgiveness, repentance, faith and judgment. Paul was no compromiser, no "yes man," no backslapper. He was a flaming evangelist who preached the truth of the gospel uncompromisingly, and God blessed his faithfulness. Furthermore, Paul did not hesitate to speak openly about the sovereign election of God of the nation of Israel, which included the passing by of all the other Gentile nations. This, of course, raised the theological question, "Why did God choose Israel and pass by all the other nations?" In spite of all the problems election may generate, Paul did not hesitate to show that the salvation of Israel had its origin in the choice of God. Paul did not seek to change Christianity so as to make it acceptable to men, but he sought to be faithful to God so as to change the world by the preaching of the gospel, letting the chips fall where they will.

When Paul finished the message, some who heard were urging or begging that Paul and Barnabas come back on the next Sabbath and preach the very same thing again. They were hungry to hear more, because the Greek mystery cults, the Roman pagan religions and the dead, sterile Judaism they knew were not answering the basic questions about life after death. The message of eternal life in Christ Jesus was so exciting that they wanted to hear more.

"Now when the meeting of the synagogue had broken up, many of the Jews and of the God-fearing proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas, who, speaking to them, were urging them to continue in the grace of God." -- These two missionaries, Paul and Barnabas, received an immediate hearing from some of the Jews and many of the Gentiles who converted to Judaism. These seekers were intensely interested in what the missionaries had to say, and, at first, the people became followers of Paul and Barnabas. Notice that the missionaries urged these people to continue in the grace of God. This may mean that they had trusted in Christ and were to continue in the grace way of salvation, or it may mean that they had not yet received Christ but were to continue seeking the grace way of salvation. Notice, carefully, that Christianity is all about the grace of God. It is what God gives a man and not what man gives God. A Christian should always be striving to understand the grace of God in a deeper and more meaningful way.

During the week, Paul and Barnabas were probably meeting in homes or gathering in the market place so people could hear more about Christ.

"And the next Sabbath nearly the whole city assembled to hear the Word of God." -- The news that a person could have the forgiveness of sins and eternal life spread like wildfire all through the city of Antioch. Let's face it, if a man can have eternal life, and know it and be assured of it, that is the greatest message to hit planet earth. The next Sabbath, also, the whole city turned out to hear more about Jesus Christ and the way of salvation. Notice carefully what was preached to these people. Paul did not preach social issues, although slavery was a way of life in the Roman Empire, for half the empire were slaves to the other half. Paul did not preach philosophy, although the Romans and Greeks loved to philosophize. Paul talked about God, sin, Christ and salvation and the people turned out to hear the message. Whenever any preacher in the twentieth century has the nerve to preach this same message Paul preached, a crowd will

usually gather.

What do you suppose went through Paul's mind from the first Sabbath to the next Sabbath? I suppose there must have been some real prayer offered up. As John Knox cried out, "Lord, give me Scotland or I die," do you suppose Paul and Barnabas cried out, "Lord, give us Antioch in Pisidia or we die?" I can assure you, when Paul came to this next Sabbath, his adrenalin was flowing and a fire burned in his soul to preach the gospel. Apparently, there was not a vacant space in that whole synagogue. It was packed, and Paul had a captive audience.

#### OBJECTING TO ETERNAL LIFE (Acts 13:45-47)

"But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy, and began contradicting the things spoken by Paul, and were blaspheming (reviling)." -- The message of salvation, forgiveness of sin and eternal life in Christ did not go over with everyone. The majority of the Jews rejected Christ. These Jews could not stand the message of Christ or the popularity of these missionaries.

Things were "popping" in Antioch of Pisidia. Whenever the gospel of Jesus Christ is preached, powerful forces are at work. The gospel cannot be preached without things happening. Men always make some kind of response to the truth of Christ. They either accept Christ or reject Him. The Gospel cuts like a knife through the hearts of men. It awakens; it hits with an impact and it divides men. Men have to decide one way or the other. They either decide for Christ and follow Him, or they decide against Christ and react violently to the truth of Christ. Some want Christ and cry out for salvation; others refuse Christ, turn away and harden their hearts. The Gospel of Christ, when preached, leaves no neutrals. This kind of reaction was predicted by Christ.

"Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I came to SET A MAN AGAINST HIS FATHER, AND A DAUGHTER AGAINST HER MOTHER, AND A DAUGHTER-IN-LAW AGAINST HER MOTHER-IN-LAW; and A MAN'S ENEMIES WILL BE THE MEMBERS OF HIS HOUSEHOLD" (Matt. 10:34-36).

It is possible today for a whole community to be stirred by the gospel of Christ. Perhaps a person may get saved, have a changed life, speak openly for Christ, and begin to make restitution for sins by paying off debts, righting wrongs, admitting to a crime or something of this nature. This arouses interest and people are ready to listen. But it also arouses envy and hatred, for it strikes at cultural barriers, prejudices, personal privileges and religious bigotry. There is always a reaction.

"And Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and said, 'It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; since you repudiate it, and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold we are turning to the Gentiles.'" -- It was the pattern of the missionaries to go into a city and preach the gospel first to the Jews in accordance with the divine plan. "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Rom. 1:16). When the Jews rejected, then the message was given to the Gentiles. Notice it says these Jews counted themselves unworthy of eternal

life. This does not mean that the Jews who believed were worthy of eternal life, for no man is worthy of salvation, because all are sinners. What this means is that by their act of rejection the Jews condemned themselves. By their rejection, they passed sentence on themselves, showing they were unworthy of eternal life. Furthermore, by their rejection, they were unworthy to have the offer of salvation made to them again. They turned away and trampled the love of God underfoot; they judged themselves, passed sentence on themselves, that they were utterly unfit for the gift of salvation in Christ Jesus. When the Jews rejected the message, the Apostles turned to the Gentiles with the message of salvation in Christ.

This verse tells us three basic principles concerning salvation. First, that men are condemned because they are sinners and rejecters of Christ, for by nature they desire to turn from the truth. Men are responsible to believe in Christ but will not come to Christ. “And you are unwilling to come to Me, that you may have life” (John 5:40). The unsaved man's will is obstinate, his understanding is darkened, his affections are corrupted. Because of his sinful nature, man does not want to come to Christ. How then can a person who does not want Christ come to Christ? There must be a sovereign drawing of God to bring a man to Christ. “No one can come to Me, unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day” (John 6:44). The important thing to note is that these Jews condemned themselves because of their unbelief and rejection of Christ. Second, when men deliberately and solemnly reject the offer of God's mercy, they become increasingly more hardened by their rebellion. Third, when sinners are hardened and spurn the Gospel, it may be the duty of preachers to turn their efforts to others where they may have more success.

A farmer would not be wise to labor long and hard on a rocky, barren, sterile soil, when there is near him a rich and fertile valley that will abundantly reward the pains of his cultivation. Unless God tells him to do so, it is unwise for a Christian to minister continually to men who reject his message of Christ when there may be other men who will more readily accept the Gospel.

“For thus the Lord has commanded us, ‘I HAVE PLACED YOU AS A LIGHT FOR THE GENTILES, THAT YOU SHOULD BRING SALVATION TO THE END OF THE EARTH.’”  
-- Paul quoted from Isaiah 49:6 which in that context, is a reference to the coming Messiah who would be a light to the Gentiles. What is the point? If Christ is the light to the Gentiles and salvation to the end of the earth, then Christians are commanded to go and take that light of the Gospel to the end of the earth so that men may be saved.

#### ORDAINED TO ETERNAL LIFE (Acts 13:48)

“And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; . . .” -- The Gentiles in that audience were happy, joyful and thrilled to hear about salvation for Gentiles in Christ. There was real electrifying excitement in that synagogue, for these Gentiles were beginning to understand that forgiveness of sins and eternal life were for them as well as the Jews. They also glorified the Word of the Lord. How did they glorify the word of the Lord? They believed in Christ, responded to the message of Christ that He died for their sins and was raised from the dead for their justification. They believed the message, they responded, they put their trust in the Savior whom the message proclaimed, even Jesus Christ.

Thus they glorified the Word of the Lord.

“... and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.” -- Among those Gentiles who heard Paul and Barnabas preach, those who were appointed (ordained) to eternal life believed. This verse stresses the sovereignty of God in a man's salvation. Do not turn this sentence around. It does not say, “And as many as believed were appointed to eternal life,” but “as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.” They believed because they were appointed eternal life. It is interesting that the New English Bible translates this, “And those who were marked out for eternal life became believers.” The Phillips translation says, “As many as were destined to eternal life believed.”

This verse seems to clearly teach God's sovereign purposes in granting eternal life to certain ones who believe in Christ. Yet, some dear Christians recoil at the thought that God appoints some to eternal life and these only trust Christ. Christians who question the sovereign purposes of God in salvation seek to explain away this passage by saying that when a person believes he is ordained to eternal life, but this is neither exegetically correct or theologically accurate. Other doubters try to soften any predestinarian tendencies and play down the word “appoint” so as to make it mean “dispose, incline or determine.” They then read it like this, “And as many as had been disposed (inclined, determined) to eternal life believed,” making it man's determination rather than God's choice. The problem with this position is that the Greek word for “appoint” is tasso which is a military word which means “to draw up in order, arrange in place, assign or appoint.” This word tasso is used seven times in the New Testament (Matt. 28:16; Luke 7:8; Acts 15:2; Acts 22:10; Acts 28:23; Rom. 13:1; 1 Cor. 16:15) and each time it means “appointed” not “disposed” or “inclined.” Furthermore, when tasso is used in relation to God's activity, it refers to His sovereign appointing or ordaining. Paul uses tasso in Romans 13:1 when speaking about human government and says, “For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established (ordained, appointed) of God.” Therefore, the word tasso in Acts 13:48 must refer to God's sovereign appointment of some men to eternal life who believe in Jesus Christ because of this appointment.

Furthermore, there is some evidence from the papyrus Greek manuscripts that the word tasso used in its participle form means “to inscribe” or “to enroll.” It is used in one version of the Old Testament in Daniel 6:12 to say, “Hast thou not signed (tasso) a decree?” The idea, then, is that certain individuals are written down by sovereign decree in God's book and these people will receive eternal life. Jesus Christ told His disciples to rejoice because their names were written in heaven. “. . . but rejoice that your names are recorded in heaven” (Luke 10:20).

Some anonymous theologian wrote the following words:

Election, having once pitched upon a man, will find him out and call him home wherever he be. Zacchaeus, out of cursed Jericho; Abraham, out of idolatrous Ur of the Chaldeans; Nicodemus and Paul, out of the college of the Pharisees -- Christ's sworn enemies, Dionysius and Damaris, out of superstitious Athens. In whatever dung hill God's jewels be hid, election will both find them out there and fetch them out from thence. “Rejoice,” our Savior cried, “Rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”

Acts 13:48 is a very powerful verse for it tells us that eternal life is attained by God's grace and not by works. God is sovereign and is actively working to grant men eternal life. It is not man who seeks God, but God who seeks man. When men believe in Christ, they are simply responding to the activity of God who is already working in them to enable them to believe. When the whole issue is boiled down to its lowest common denominator, the question is whether salvation is of grace or works. If man's faith is looked upon as meriting eternal life, then salvation is of works because faith is an activity of the human mind and will. However, if faith in Christ is the result of God's sovereign appointment, then salvation is of grace for it is a total gift. "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast" (Eph. 2:8, 9). No man can boast anything about salvation but can only thank God that it has been granted to him. No human merit has anything to do with a man's salvation. Does salvation then exclude faith? Is faith unimportant? Does faith just come automatically? No, faith is the means God has ordained to bring about man's salvation and a man will never be saved until he places faith in Christ. Notice that Acts 13:48 says, "As many as were appointed to eternal life believed."

II Thessalonians 2:13 says, "God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth." Ephesians 2:8 says, "By grace through faith you have been saved." No man can be saved and understand his election until he believes in Christ, and he is one hundred percent responsible to trust Christ. Man's inability never cancels his responsibility, and if any man wants to trust in Jesus Christ, he may, because God is working so as to place that desire in the human heart.

Another observation about Acts 13:48 is that it says, "As many as." It does not say, "As few as." There will be multitudes in heaven. It does not say, "The majority of those who had been appointed believed," for not one of God's appointed ones will ever perish. "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them; and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of My hand" (John 10:27, 28). It does not say, "The church was appointed of God and those who believe are part of the elect church." No, it speaks of individuals, persons who are appointed to eternal life.

The words "as many as had been appointed to eternal life" raise the practical question, "How can I know I am among the elect?" The Bible makes it clear that all who believe in Christ have eternal life. "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him" (John 3:36). If you trust in Christ for salvation, then you know you are among the elect for the elect are appointed to eternal life. Election (appointment) takes place in the eternal counsels of God; election becomes a reality in a person's experience when he trusts in Jesus Christ. Remember, the elect trust Christ and those who trust Christ are the elect.

No one completely understands the sovereign workings of God. I confess to you I do not know how God works, but I know He does work. He does not cancel out human responsibility, but underneath and above and all around a person's decision to trust Christ is the sovereignty of God, working His wonderful purpose in a human soul.

When my son, Mark, was going through a terrible rebellious stage in high school, he wanted

nothing to do with Christianity. He was unsaved and had hardened his heart to Christ. One time I was talking to him about his need of Christ, and he wisely turned my own theology on me. In a very arrogant voice he said, "If I am among the elect, I will believe. If I'm not one of the elect, I won't believe. So just get off my back." I remember I looked him square in the eyes and said, "You are right. If you are among the elect you will believe in Christ, but just remember you will burn in hell for all eternity if you do not trust Christ as your personal Lord and Savior." Mark was responsible to make his own decision for Christ.

#### OPENLY PREACHING ETERNAL LIFE (Acts 13:49)

"And the word of the Lord was being spread through the whole region." -- A strong belief in the sovereignty of God did not kill the zeal of these first century Christians. In fact, it enhanced it. They did not reason that since some are appointed to eternal life that they should stop witnessing, stop praying, stop exhorting men to believe and stop trying to win men to Christ, for what will happen will happen. No, they saw the positive side of election and realized that God was moving to save men. They understood that God supernaturally works to save men and that divine appointment to salvation guarantees that some will come to Christ. Therefore, they preached the Word everywhere, trusting God to bring results. They knew and understood that when the gospel is preached, souls will be saved. Knowing this truth, they were committed to spreading the Word.

A few months ago, Don Tipton, one of our elders, asked the Session to state in one paragraph or less what we thought the basic goal of Grace Church is. I sat down the next week and said Grace Church had two goals. One was evangelistic and the other educational. Here is what I came up with concerning the evangelistic goal of Grace Church: "The evangelistic goals of Grace Church are to propagate the gospel of Christ in its purest biblical form to the maximum number of people by any and every appropriate means so they will hear the truth of Christ and have an opportunity to trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior."

#### OPPOSITION TO THE MESSENGERS OF ETERNAL LIFE (Acts 13:50-52)

"But the Jews aroused the devout women of prominence and the leading men of the city, and instigated a persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district." -- Who stirred this persecution? It was the religious Jews who were filled with envy and jealousy. When the Jews could not prevail against the missionaries in debate, they went behind the scenes and gathered the religious women, probably women Gentile proselytes, who in turn had influence on the Roman authorities in the city. This was a first century Women's Liberation Front and they formed an organization called WAC (Women Against Christians). They were very effective and the officials had the missionaries run out of the city of Antioch.

"But they shook off the dust of their feet in protest against them and went to Iconium." -- Christ commanded his followers to dust off their feet when persecuted. "Even the dust of your city which clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you; yet be sure of this, that the kingdom of God has come near" (Luke 10:11). They were to break off relations with any group that expelled them, not allowing even the dust of that area to cling to them, continuing on to another place. The missionaries understood that it was Christ they were rejecting and not them,

and they felt it necessary to move on to spread the gospel in some new region. “The one who listens to you listens to Me, and the one who rejects you rejects Me; and he who rejects Me rejects the One who sent Me” (Luke 10:16).

“And the disciples were continually filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.” -- This may refer to Paul and Barnabas, but it probably refers to the disciples left behind in Antioch of Pisidia. Even in the midst of persecution, these Christians were experiencing the power of the Holy Spirit and Christ's joy in the midst of suffering.

This little seed church in Antioch was alive with spiritual power and the people were filled with joy. They were not filled with envy but were filled with the Spirit of the living God. There was excitement among these Christians. This church was hot and not cold. They were enthused about Christ and they sought to serve Him in adverse circumstances. This was not a dead church but a virile, awakened and throbbing group of Christians.

This reminds me of the story of the old preacher who wrote a short poem to his congregation to be read immediately after his death. It said, “When I die, please shed no tears, For I will be no more dead than you have been for years.”

## CONCLUSION

Will you reject Christ and judge yourself unworthy of eternal life, or will you accept Christ, proving you have been ordained to eternal life? If you reject, you have condemned yourself. If you accept Christ, it is because of God's grace and appointment of you to eternal life before the world began. The question of why does God choose some and pass by others is not nearly as complex a problem as why does God choose anyone for no one deserves salvation.

How can you know if you are among the elect? Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. If you have questions about divine election, stop wondering whether you are among the elect and just humbly accept Christ as your personal Lord and Savior. Christ will never turn one sinner away who truly trusts Him as personal Lord and Savior.

Remember, if you refuse to come to Christ, if you turn from the Savior who can give you the forgiveness of sins, if you reject the Lord who can grant you eternal life when He freely offers it to you, then you are without excuse. You have judged yourself unworthy of eternal life and have condemned yourself. But if you will receive the Savior, bow before the King, open your heart to the Messiah, believe in the Christ, you shall have eternal life and you will come to understand that you were appointed to this eternal life from the eternal counsels of God.