

Acts 13:13–25

Introduction

George Santayana was a philosopher, essayist, poet, and novelist (*d.* 1952). Even if you've never heard of him, you almost certainly know this aphorism: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."¹

We will come back to this theme in a bit. Meanwhile, turn to Acts 13:13 ff.

Paul, Barnabas, and John Mark have left Cyprus—an island in the middle of the Mediterranean—and sailed northwards to what is modern day south-western Turkey.

The group moves inland after landing at Perga. After covering over 120 miles inland, they arrive in a town called Antioch and there they visit the synagogue on the Sabbath day. Paul is courteously allowed to speak after the reading from the Scriptures of the Old Testament. What follows is Paul's sermon, comprised of vss 16–41 in 3 parts:

1. a sketch of OT history (16–25),
2. God's ultimate provision in Jesus Christ (26–37), and,
3. an invitation (38–41).²

Today I'll cover just the beginning first 1/3rd, up to vs. 25. I'll do this under two headings:

1. What is Paul doing?
2. Why is Paul doing it this way?

Explanation: What is Paul Doing?

¹ From "The Life Of Reason," Volume I, "Reason in Common Sense," Chapter 12, *Flux and Constancy in Human Nature*.

² Lane T. Dennis and Wayne Grudem, eds., *The ESV Study Bible*, Accordance electronic ed. (Wheaton: Crossway Bibles, 2008), paragraph 20298. https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESV_Study_Bible#20298.

We don't know what text was read. Perhaps it was like the text from Joshua we read this morning,³ or some other similar place in which the history of God's people was briefly reviewed.

In any event, Paul calls on both ethnic Jews and those who are converts (God-fearers) to listen. In 9 verses, Paul covers nearly 2000 years of history from the time of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob/Israel to John the Baptizer. Interestingly, that's just about the same time span as that between the time of Christ and today.

So, what is Paul doing?

Historical Review

One thing that Paul is doing is simply reviewing history. That much is obvious.

Sermon Introduction

But he's doing something else. Don't forget the context of these verses: this is a sermon. Paul is setting the stage for what he is about to say about Jesus in later vss. In order to do that well, Paul is building a point of contact with his hearers.

- See, I believe in the same God you do.
- And see, I believe that this God has ordered history in such and such a fashion.
- Therefore, what I am about to say about "this salvation"—as he calls it in 26—makes sense in the light of the historical facts on which we agree.

In a sense, Paul is getting his hearers to start nodding their heads in agreement with him, so that they will also agree with him when he starts talking about Jesus.

Summary

This first section is very important for Paul's preaching of the gospel later in chapter 13, where he will point them toward Jesus.

Paul is laying a logical groundwork for his sermon. He's establishing a point of contact and agreement. But why is he doing it this way?

³ One of the congregational readings for this particular Lord's Day was Joshua 4:1–7, a mini-Deuteronomic review of Israel's history.

That leads us to our next point.

Interpretation: why is Paul doing it this way?

We cannot know exactly what Paul was thinking as he began speaking, or why. Perhaps the Scripture read on that Sabbath day prompted him. Or perhaps, as a skilled and experienced apologist by this time, he found that starting with a common understanding of mutual history worked well in getting the attention of his hearers. We just can't be certain.

Why is Paul giving this review?

It's not as if he is probing an obscure aspect of the OT scriptures. Quite the opposite. If anything, he is stating very obvious historical truths on which he and his hearers all agree.

Paying closer attention to the text, we can see what information Paul highlights as he speaks in these 9 vss.

Demonstrating (Some of) God's Character and Attributes

- 17: *Chose* our fathers: election
- 17: *Made* the people great and with *uplifted arm* he *led them out* of Egypt: power
- 18: *Put up with them* in the wilderness: patience
- 19: *gave* them their land as an inheritance: faithfulness
- 20: all this took *about 450 years*: again, faithfulness
- 22: *raised up* David ... a man after God's heart, after removing Saul, a man *not* after God's heart: mercy, since the asking of a king was a rejection of God
- 23: *brought to Israel a Savior*, as he promised: sovereignty

All of these references explicitly say something about who God is, what he wants, how he functions.

- Does God remember us, even though we languish under Roman rule? Yes!
- Does he still expect obedience to his commandments? Yes!
- Will he keep his word? Yes!

- Does he have the ability to keep his promises? Yes!
Paul is reminding us all about who God is.

Demonstrating (Some of) Our Character and Attributes

At the same time, Paul is demonstrating some of *our* attributes and character. That list isn't very encouraging.

- 17: *God* made us great and led us out, not we ourselves: weakness
- 18: God *put up with* us during the 40 years in the wilderness: fickleness and fear.
- 20: God gave *judges*. Do you know why? Because immediately after Joshua's death, God's people failed to keep his commandments and they needed leaders to keep them on track. Forgetfulness.
- 21: God gave a *king*, acceding to their demand to be just like the nations around them. And they got a king just like the nations around them: Saul. Rebellion.
- 24: John the Baptist *proclaimed repentance*: because of the wickedness of God's people.

All of these references explicitly say something about us.

- Are we sufficient in ourselves? No!
- Are we constant and faithful? No!
- Do we know what is best for us? No!
- Do we need to repent of our sins and wickedness? Yes!

Setting the Stage for His Purpose

Paul is setting the stage for what is to come: the invitation to believe in Christ. In these 9 vss he has more than adequately demonstrated that God's people *need* salvation and God is *able* and *willing* to *provide* it!

Think about it this way. If his hearers were prepared to see and believe what God *had done*, then perhaps their hearts would be prepared for what God *will do* for them in Christ.

Application

George Santayana was a philosopher, essayist, poet, and novelist (*d.* 1952). Even if you've never heard of him, you know something he famously wrote:

Progress, far from consisting in change, depends on retentiveness. When change is absolute there remains no being to improve and no direction is set for possible improvement: and when experience is not retained ... infancy is perpetual. *Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.*⁴

Ignorance is not bliss, brothers and sisters. Santayana is saying that without the lessons of the past, we remain in a constant state of ignorance. Each generation is condemned to start learning from the beginning. As he puts it, "infancy is perpetual".

Paul is recounting Israel's well-known history for the same reason. As he wrote to the Romans:

For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.⁵

This is why I'm encouraging you all to go back to the basics.

For us, the Old Testament is elementary school. The gospels are high school. The epistles are bachelor's level work and the book of the Revelation is a Ph.D.

What if I merely asserted something about God; say, that God is sovereign, and said it as a bare proposition. Wouldn't you ask: what do you mean? In what way? Give me an example! How can I do that without informing you about the history of his ways with his people?

Or what if, in a time of despair and hopeless I merely said: God is merciful and patient. I doubt very much that you would be able to just think: "O well, that's different then! I'll be fine!" But if I point you to the Psalms ... that would be different.

⁴ Emphasis mine. From "The Life Of Reason," Volume I, "Reason in Common Sense," Chapter 12, *Flux and Constancy in Human Nature*.

⁵ Romans 15:4.

My job, calling, and my desire is to equip the saints — that's you all — for the work of ministry — that's whatever you do out there.

In our reformational history and practice, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Ten Commandments are among the most elementary bits of knowledge that the Christian *child* ought to know before they are confirmed. Unfortunately, many (or most) Christian *adults* don't these most basic elements of the faith. Any substantial knowledge about such things as a whole book of the Bible, or an integrated overview of redemptive history have somehow become things only for the domain of the pastor or academic, not the normal Christian.

Statistics support this sense. A survey 'On Religion and Public Life' showed that the average American (not Christian!) could answer 16 out of 32 basic questions (i.e., 50%) about the Bible correctly.⁶ Those who did better than 50% were, in this order,

1. atheists / agnostics,
2. Jews,
3. Mormons, and (finally!),
4. evangelical Protestants, who on average were only able to answer 17.6% of the questions correctly.

We can and must do better than this!

Take notes!

Open your Bibles!

Ask me questions!

- Xnty not a religion, but a relationship.
- In Eden, walked with God!
- Now we are by nature of the enemies of God: Rom 5:10, James 4:4
- None righteous, not even one: Rom 3

⁶ Pew Forum Trust, published 28 September 2010, www.pewforum.org/2010/09/28/us-religious-knowledge-an-overview-of-the-pew-forum-survey-results-and-implications.

- “Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses.” (Acts 13:38–39)