

## Unexpected Hero

Acts 13:16-43

*“God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, as he promised.” (Acts 11:26)*

Acts 13 marks an important division in the book of Acts. From here to the close of the book, Luke narrows his focus to tell us about the missionary journeys of the Apostle Paul. By focusing on Paul’s journeys, Luke is rounding out the program of geographical expansion Jesus set forth in Acts 1:8—“You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

The passage we are studying this week (Acts 13:16-43) contains the first recorded sermon of the Apostle Paul. As a classic exposition of the Christian message (especially with a Jewish audience), it features three parts which are present also in his other sermons and writings. It is **(1)** rooted in an *unfinished story* with an **(2)** *unexpected hero*, and calls for an **(3)** *urgent response*.

### 1. An Unfinished Story (13:16-22)

The first quarter of Paul’s sermon is devoted to recapping events from Israel’s history, and the rest of the sermon is woven with quotations from the Jewish scriptures. Paul is concerned to point out that the Christian message is not the invention of something novel, but the fulfillment of something ancient, something God started a long time ago. Three features of this story stand out to us:

- A. It is a story about God’s breaking into history.** You can hardly miss the fact that, over and over again God intervenes in human affairs. Twelve verbs have God as their subject: He chose (17), made (17), led (17), carried (or “put up with,” 18), gave land (19), gave judges (19), gave a king (21), removed a king (22), raised up a king (22), testified (22), found (22), and brought a Savior (23).
- B. . . . to make promises . . . .** God’s intervention in human history is for a specific purpose: to declare his intention to enter a relationship with them, saving them from sin and death.
- C. . . . that were yet unfulfilled.** The fact that these promises were still unfulfilled was painfully obvious to Paul’s audience. Their release from Egypt didn’t release them from the bondage to their sin; their being settled in the promised land didn’t free them from the desire to be ruled by a king. Their kings—even their best one—proved to be a man of tragic and fatal flaws. Moreover, presently they were ruled by a distant Gentile emperor, not a royal descendant of David, as promised.

### 2. An Unexpected Hero (13:23-37)

Granted, the Jews were expecting some kind of hero, some kind of Messiah. They knew that it was because of their sins that they were under the rule of foreign nations. They were looking for a mighty Rescuer who would overthrow these enemies. But the last kind of hero they were looking for was one who would suffer and die, as Jesus of Nazareth had suffered and died. Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, however, showed that the prophecies and his life fit together like lock and key. He *had* to be the Messiah.

### 3. An Urgent Response (13:38-41)

The specific *response* Paul calls for is faith: “By [Jesus] everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses” (13:39); and the *urgency* is evident from Paul’s warning (“Beware, therefore, lest what is said in the Prophets should come about,” 13:40-41).

The fact that Jesus rose from the dead means that Jesus is not one religious option, but the divine King who offers forgiveness (13:38) and freedom from sin (13:39).

## Discussion Questions

1. Why is Paul concerned to show how the Christian message fits in with God's ancient promises?
2. Why is it important that the message about Christianity is rooted in historical events? How would you evaluate the following statement? "Christianity is good because it is *useful*, not because it is necessarily *true*."
3. Paul proclaimed Jesus as the one who "frees" (literally, "justifies") from sin anyone who believes (13:29). What can Jesus do that the law of Moses could not do?
4. The power of Jesus as the resurrected King includes not only forgiveness but also freedom from sin. This idea is present in Paul's reasoning in Romans 6:1-14. Read these verses and discuss how these truths must shape our view and actions with regard to sins we consider to be powerful and binding.
5. Paul is courteous, yet courageous and even confrontational, in his presentation of the gospel. Granted that he was speaking to Jews who were familiar with the Old Testament, what can we learn from the way Paul shared the Good News with others?