

Beware of Unbelief (Acts 13:40-45)^a

© 2017 Tony Garland^b

Context

1. **Paul and Barnabas visiting the synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia on what would later be known as Paul's First Missionary Journey.**
2. **As a visitor, Paul was asked if he had anything to share with his fellow Jews.**
3. **An brief refresh on the history of Israel, and its rejection of God's messengers.**
4. **Culminating in the crucifixion of the most recent messenger to Israel: Jesus of Nazareth.**
5. **Last time:**
 - A. Paul presented the "gospel in a nutshell" focusing on four words: Law, Forgiveness, Justification, and Belief.
 - B. Emphasized it is through "this man" (Jesus) that people may be justified before God.
6. **Today's passage - Paul warns of the consequences of unbelief.**

Passage (Acts 13:40-45)

[40] [Paul speaking], "Beware therefore, lest what has been spoken in the prophets come upon you: **[41]** 'Behold, you despisers, Marvel and perish! For I work a work in your days, A work which you will by no means believe, Though one were to declare it to you.'" **[42]** So when the Jews went out of the synagogue, the Gentiles begged that these words might be preached to them the next Sabbath. **[43]** Now when the congregation had broken up, many of the Jews and devout proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas, who, speaking to them, persuaded them to continue in the grace of God. **[44]** On the next Sabbath almost the whole city came together to hear the word of God. **[45]** But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy; and contradicting and blaspheming, they opposed the things spoken by Paul.¹

Paul's Warning Concerning Unbelief

1. **What has been spoken in the prophets: the minor prophet Habakkuk.**
 - A. "Look among the nations and watch— Be utterly astounded! For I will work a work in your days Which you would not believe, though it were told you. (Habakkuk 1:5)
 - I. God would raise up the Chaldeans and give Jerusalem and the surrounding nations into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, His servant.

- II. Unexpected; *I am raising up the Chaldeans . . . They are terrible and dreadful . . . They all come for violence* (Hab. 1:7-9).
- III. God's people were not above judgment. If they walked in the same pattern of unbelief as Israel in the days of Nebuchadnezzar—then judgment would befall them.
- IV. “Utterly astounded” in the OT passage is from תָּמַח [tāmah], meaning: to “be astonished, be astounded, be stunned, i.e., be in a state or condition of surprise as a reaction to a situation, either negative or positive, though in most contexts with a negative focus”²
- a. Describes the reaction to the unexpected arrival of judgment on the Day of the Lord (Isa. 13:8)
 - b. Describes the reaction of Joseph's brothers when, as second-in-command to Pharaoh, he had them seated in the exact order of their birth—something which appeared impossible for anyone else to know (Gen. 43:33).
 - c. One translation puts it this way: *Look at the nations and pay attention! You will be shocked and amazed! For I will do something in your lifetime that you will not believe even though you are forewarned.* (Habakkuk 1:5, NET)
- V. Paul is probably quoting Habakkuk because of the historical parallels: Habakkuk's message concerning the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon in the 6th century B.C. would be soon be repeated in the fall of Jerusalem to Rome in 70 A.D.
- a. God would allow “His house,” the glorious temple, to be destroyed.
 - b. God would allow pagan Gentiles to overthrow His chosen nation.

2. Characteristics of unbelief

A. “Despisers, scoffers” [ESV, NET]

- I. Greek term is καταφρονητής [kataphronētēs], meaning: “one despising, one who feels contempt”³
 - a. one who *scorns* or has *disdain*.
- II. Viewed from an assumed position of superiority. One who looks down upon.
- III. Too “intelligent” to believe such a “simplistic” notion.

B. Marvel/wonder

- I. Greek term is from **Θαυμάζω** [*Thaumazō*], meaning: to “be amazed, be in wonder, be astonished, be surprised”⁴
- a. Describes Moses’ reaction upon seeing the burning bush which was not consumed (Acts **7:31**).
 - b. Describes the future reaction of the people of the world during the coming tribulation when the beast’s deadly wound is healed (Rev. **13:3**).
 - i. Such an amazing, unexpected, and impressive development that it leads to global worship of the beast.
 - ii. Something so unlikely, it is considered miraculous.
- C. Disbelief, is founded in skepticism about 1) whether God *would* and, 2) whether God *could* do the what He has revealed.
- I. Whether God *would* . . . allow Israel to be taken captive . . . allow the Jews to be removed from the Promised Land . . . allow the Temple to be profaned and overthrown by pagans.
 - a. Wouldn’t these things contradict His character, His promises? (No: “read the fine print.”)
 - II. Whether God *could* . . . arrange a virgin birth . . . resurrect a man from the dead . . . destroy the earth in judgment.

3. Declared

- A. *Though one were to declare it to you* (Acts **13:42**).
- B. Declared before the fact.
 - I. God originally predicted it in the Scriptures.
 - II. Refusal to accept prophecy/prediction—although God has declared in advance.
 - III. Surprise and astonishment when it finally comes about.
- C. Declared after the fact.
 - I. God’s servants, such as Paul—and I dare say ourselves—continue explain what God has done and declare it to each successive generation.
 - II. Refusal to respond to God’s messengers in each successive age.
- D. God has gone out of His way to communicate to the world, to explain the requirement, motivation, historical context, and purpose of His plan.
- E. In the judgment, the scoffers will be without excuse.

Grace - The Sticking Point

1. **Not just about unbelief.**
2. . . . **Paul and Barnabas . . . persuaded them to continue in the grace of God (Acts 13:43).**
3. **What is grace?**
 - A. Grace can be thought of as the flip side of mercy.
 - B. Mercy: *not getting what you do deserve*: bad things.
 - C. Grace: *getting what you don't deserve*: good things.
 - D. Dictionary definition: "The free and unmerited favor of God, as manifested in the salvation of sinners and the bestowal of blessings."⁵
 - E. Bible dictionary adds, "Grace . . . rules out all human merit. It requires only faith in the Savior. Any intermixture of human merit violates grace."⁶
4. **If grace provides good things we don't deserve, what's the problem?**
 - A. Grace subverts human merit: it undermines attempts to establish one's self-righteousness through good works and proper behavior.
 - B. Paul tells us, *Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt* (Rom. 4:4).
 - I. Works righteousness is antithetical to grace because any reward in response to works is merely payment due for what has been *earned*.
 - II. Grace cannot be earned—or it is no longer grace!
5. **Grace is an insult to those who believe in their own righteousness.**
 - A. As Paul said about his fellow Jews, *For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God* (Rom. 10:2-3).
 - B. Accepting God's grace requires *submission*—admitting our neediness.
6. **Not only does grace insult our self-righteousness, in our view, God's grace goes too far.**
 - A. Even if we are happy for God to extend grace to *us*, we are offended by the extravagance of God's grace toward *others*.

B. Jesus used a parable to illustrate our unwillingness to accept God's grace.

I. Parable of landowner who, at various times of the day—some early, some late in the day—hired laborers to work in his vineyard.

II. At the end of the day, He paid them all the same wages—regardless of how long they had worked.

III. The complaint: *These last [men] have worked [only] one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day* (Mat. [20:12](#)).

IV. God's response: . . . *is your eye evil because I am good?* (Mat. [20:15](#))

C. How many can accept when God grants a serial killer, after a lifetime of crime, entrance to heaven in response to genuine repentance in the last minutes of his life?

7. Scoffing and disbelief are aided and abetted by the desire to retain a modicum of self-righteousness.

8. If you are paying attention, you will notice that, frequently, disbelief is often a guise for the willful rejection of grace.

Jewish vs. Gentile Reactions

1. Notice the Jewish/Gentile distinctions in the passage

A. Not all the Jews who heard Paul rejected his message: “many of the Jews . . . followed Paul and Barnabas” and were “persuaded . . . to continue in the grace of God” (Acts [13:43](#))

B. Nevertheless, it seems evident that most rejected what he had to say — which becomes the record of history throughout the Church Age to our day.

2. The hardened rejection of Jesus by His own is also a theme found in the gospels

A. The Jews—those who *should* know better—by and large reject Jesus.

I. Those with greater revelation bear greater responsibility to respond appropriately.

II. Yet history documents a consistent pattern of refusal to believe — remember Paul's review of Israel's disobedience in the previous verses (Acts [13:16-31](#))?

B. The Gentiles—considered to be “in darkness”, in ignorance, without the law, or Torah—respond and accept Jesus.

C. Example 1

- I. A centurion [a Gentile] sends to Jesus to heal his servant. Before Jesus arrives, the centurion sends word of his faith that Jesus could heal at-a-distance.
- II. *When Jesus heard these things, He marveled at him, and turned around and said to the crowd that followed Him, "I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!" (Luke 7:9)*

D. Example 2

- I. Jesus stated, "The men of Nineveh (Gentiles) will rise up in the judgment with this generation [of Jews] and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah" (Mat. 12:41)
- II. He continued, "The queen of the South [a Gentile] will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon" (Mat. 12:42)
- III. Jesus was greater than Jonah and greater than Solomon — the Gentiles had responded to the lesser, but the Jews rejected the greater: their own Messiah.

3. Jealousy

- A. *Almost the whole city came together to hear the word of God (Acts 13:44).*
- B. . . . *when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy (Acts 13:45).*
- C. *I say then, have they stumbled that they should fall? Certainly not! But through their fall, to provoke them to jealousy, salvation [has come] to the Gentiles (Rom. 11:11).*
- D. The Jews could not stand the idea that the despised, unclean, Gentiles were finding favor from the "Holy One of Israel."
- E. Here I stand some 2,000 years later and 6,700 miles from Jerusalem as a Gentile, proclaiming the truth of this Jewish Book—the Bible—and with a better understanding and closer relationship to the God of the Jews than the vast majority of Jews living today.
- F. How might orthodox Jews feel hearing a Gentile believer in Yeshua pronounce *The Shema*?

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד [š^ema´ yiśrā`ēl Yahweh `ēlōhênû Yahweh eḥād] (Deu. 6:4)

בָּרוּךְ שֵׁם כְּבוֹד מַלְכוּתוֹ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד [bārûk šēm kābôd malkûtô l^e´ôlām wā`ed] (Ps. 72:19 with additions)⁷

"Hear, O' Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. Blessed [be His] glorious name. [May] His Kingdom be forever and ever."

4. How did the majority of Jews react to Paul's message?

- A. With joy, humility, and repentance?
- B. Being filled with *envy*, they *contradicted*, blasphemed, and *opposed* the things spoken by Paul (Acts [13:45](#)).
- C. As John the Apostle explains, *He [Jesus] came to His own [the Jews], and His own did not receive Him* (John [1:11](#)).

Jewish Opposition to Jesus

1. Clarification

- A. The earliest Christian church was overwhelmingly Jewish.
- B. However, as time progressed, the majority of the Jews rejected Jesus.
- C. This isn't so much about Jews vs. non-Jews as it is about Judaism vs. Christianity. In particular, those Jews who continue to reject their own Messiah: Jesus of Nazareth.

2. Judaism assumes it has a better understanding of the OT.

- A. This seems obvious—why wouldn't they?
- B. The Old Testament is *their* book - it is a record, to a large degree, of the history the Jews, written by Jews, painstakingly preserved for millennia by Jews.
- C. It is written in the Hebrew language. And where do we find the world's foremost experts on Hebrew?
- D. The Jewish culture is steeped in the teachings, traditions, feasts, and special days based on the Old Testament.
- E. What chance have Gentiles in gaining an "inside scoop" on this most Jewish of Holy Books?

3. Unbelief and blindness

- A. This would all be true except for one small, but very important detail: *there are significant spiritual influences at work behind what is seen with the natural eye.*
- B. The Bible reveals a connection between unbelief and blindness: *blindness follows unbelief as night follows day!*
- C. Great intelligence, devoid of faith in what God has revealed, develops into foolishness culminating in judicially-imposed darkness.

D. Unbelief in what God has revealed results in a judicial blinding such that those who are supposed experts have their reasoning faculties degraded.

E. Isaiah describes the process:

I. *Pause and wonder! Blind yourselves and be blind! They are drunk, but not with wine; They stagger, but not with intoxicating drink. For the Lord has poured out on you The spirit of deep sleep, And has closed your eyes, namely, the prophets; And He has covered your heads, namely, the seers. The whole vision has become to you like the words of a book that is sealed, which men deliver to one who is literate, saying, "Read this, please." And he says, "I cannot, for it is sealed." Then the book is delivered to one who is illiterate, saying, "Read this, please." And he says, "I am not literate." Therefore the Lord said: "Inasmuch as these people draw near with their mouths And honor Me with their lips, But have removed their hearts far from Me, And their fear toward Me is taught by the commandment of men, Therefore, behold, I will again do a marvelous work Among this people, A marvelous work and a wonder; For the wisdom of their wise men shall perish. And the understanding of their prudent men shall be hidden" (Isaiah [29:9-14](#)).*

F. We find this same principle in Paul's letter to the Church at Corinth:

I. *For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, And bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent." Where [is] the wise? Where [is] the scribe? Where [is] the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men (1Cor. [1:18-25](#)).*

G. And so we have this startling result which explains the sad evidence all around us of great intellects groping and stumbling in the darkness:

- I. *Hebrew scholars* - unable to understand their own Holy Book, the Old Testament.
- II. *Highly-trained scientists* - conclude that life arose from non-life by chance and that the incredible intricacy and design within the universe came about by a giant explosion.
- III. *Great legal minds* - confused as to whether a fetus is a person deserving protection from premeditated murder.

4. With time, Paul would become very cognizant of this blindness of his fellow-Jews.

- A. *What then? Israel has not obtained what it seeks; but the elect have obtained it, and the rest were blinded (Rom. 11:7).*
- B. *For I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own opinion, that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in (Rom. 11:25).*
- C. *But their minds were blinded. For until this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament, because the veil is taken away in Christ. But even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart. Nevertheless when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away (2Cor. 3:14-16).*
- D. *As the most famous Jewish Rabbi of history explained: . . . if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in you is darkness, how great [is] that darkness! (Mat. 6:23)*

5. Examples of this judicial blindness from our own day.

- A. Exhibit A - Rabbi Tovia Singer on what the New Testament records concerning Jesus' use of Psalm 110.⁸

I. The Gospel of Matthew records:

- a. *While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them, saying, "What do you think about the Christ? Whose Son is He?" They said to Him, "[The Son] of David." He said to them, "How then does David in the Spirit call Him 'Lord,' saying: 'The LORD said to my Lord, "Sit at My right hand, Till I make Your enemies Your footstool" '? "If David then calls Him 'Lord,' how is He his Son?" (Mat. 22:41-45)*
- b. The main point: If David's offspring would never have existed without David, how could the patriarch refer to one of his descendants as being "Lord" over him?
- c. The answer: David's promised offspring is the virgin-born incarnation of God, Jesus Christ.

II. Concerning this passage in Matthew, Rabbi Tovia opines:

- a. ". . . the above conversation could not have occurred, this narrative has been replayed over and over again in the imagination of countless Christians for nearly two millennia. . . ."
- b. Concerning the phrase "The LORD said to my Lord" - a representation of "Yahweh said to my *adonai*":
- i. He disavows that the word "Lord" in the phrase "my Lord" within this passage could refer to a divine being—higher than David himself.

- ii. He flatly states, “the Hebrew word adonee never refers to God anywhere in the bible.”
 - c. There you have it — from a Jewish expert: the New Testament is wrong, this interchange between Jesus and the rabbis could never have taken place! Case closed!
- III. *Except . . .* the simplest word study of the Old Testament words involved reveals Rabbi Singer is all wet!
- a. The Rabbi says “the Hebrew word adonee never refers to God anywhere in the bible.” Really? One wonders which Bible the Rabbi has in mind? A small sampling from the Hebrew Old Testament shows otherwise. Listen to the use of adonai in the following passages:
 - i. “Lord of Lords (*adoney ha adoniyim*)” (Deu. [10:17](#));
 - ii. “Behold the ark of the covenant of the Lord (*adonai*) of all the earth” (Jos. [3:11](#));
 - iii. “The Lord (*adonai*) of all the earth” (Jos. [3:13](#));
 - iv. “For this day is holy to our Lord (*adonai*)” (Ne. [8:10](#));
 - v. “and do all the commandments of the Lord (*adonai*)” (Ne. [10:29](#));
 - vi. “Oh LORD (*YHWH*), our Lord (*adonai*), how excellent is thy name in all the earth” (Ps. [8:1](#));
 - vii. “The hills melted like wax at the presence of the LORD (*YHWH*), at the presence of the Lord (*adonai*) of all the earth” (Ps. [97:5](#));
 - viii. “Tremble thou earth at the presence of the Lord (*adonai*), at the presence of the God (*elohay*) of Jacob” (Ps. [114:7](#));
 - ix. “... our Lord (*adonai*) is above all Gods (*elohim*)” (Ps. [135:5](#)).
 - b. Contrary to the Rabbi, the Hebrew term *adonai* refers to God many times!
 - c. If the Rabbi can be so wrong about this basic fact, one wonders how we can trust anything else he has to say?
- IV. How can this be? How can this man who knows Hebrew much better than me and who is steeped in the Old Testament be so profoundly and completely wrong?
- a. Well, the Rabbi which Rabbi Singer rejects explained it: *If . . . the light that is in you is darkness, how great [is] that darkness!* (Mat. [6:23](#))

B. Exhibit B - The Jewish Study Bible on Isaiah [53](#)

- I. Isaiah [53](#) describes, in great detail, the ministry of a suffering servant.
 - a. His death pays for the sins of the people.
 - b. His death appears to be at the hand of God

c. There is great pathos in his apparent unwillingness to defend Himself, His willing acceptance of his fate.

d. After dying, He appears to live again.

II. If we *really* want to understand the meaning of this passage, surely the Jewish experts can help us, no?

III. So, expectantly, we turn to the *Jewish Study Bible* to read the notes

One of the most difficult and contested passages in the Bible . . . these fifteen verses have attracted an enormous amount of attention from ancient, medieval, and modern scholars. In particular the identity of the servant is vigorously debated. Many argue that the servant symbolizes the entire Jewish people. The passage, then, describes the nation's unjust tribulations at the hands of the Babylonians . . . as well as the nation's salvific role for the world at large. Others maintain that the passage describes a pious minority within the Jewish people; this minority suffers as a result of the sins committed by the nation at large. . . . Other scholars argue that the servant in this passage is a specific individual [we are getting warmer] . . . Targum and various midrashim identify the servant as the Messiah [bingo!], but this suggestion is unlikely since nowhere does . . . Isaiah refer to the Messiah, and absence in belief in an individual Messiah is one of the hallmarks of . . . Isaiah's outlook . . .⁹

IV. How is it that so many Jewish experts—down through history—are unable to find the most famous Jew of history in this passage?

a. The answer is found in the first verse: *Who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?* (Isa. 53:1).

b. Beware of unbelief!

c. This suffering servant Himself warned: *If . . . the light that is in you is darkness, how great [is] that darkness!* (Mat. 6:23)

C. And so it continues to this very day: the Church recognizes Jesus as Messiah, while Judaism remains unable to find Him in their Holy Book, all the while opposing Christianity and claiming that we are twisting and misrepresenting the Old Testament text!

6. **The ongoing, vociferous opposition and blasphemy of unbelieving Jews toward Jesus and Christianity, experienced by Paul and Barnabas in the passage before us, earned Judaism a title so harsh it would never be found on my lips except that my Lord, even their own Messiah, used it of them: *the Synagogue of Satan* (Rev. 2:9; 3:9; cf. John 8:31-47).¹¹**



SpiritAndTruth.org Scan Code[©]

Endnotes:

1. [Acts 13:40-45](#), NKJV
2. [Ref-0618](#), #9449
3. [Ref-0617](#), #2970
4. [Ref-0617](#), #2513
5. *New Oxford American Dictionary*, 3rd ed.
6. [Ref-0185](#), s.v. Grace
7. “Originally the verse was simply *Baruch shem k’vodo l’olam*, “Blessed be His glorious name [forever]” (Psalm [72:19](#)), but in time two words, *malchuto* and *va’ed*, were added.” — <http://www.oztorah.com/2011/10/baruch-shem-the-2nd-line-of-the-shema-ask-the-rabbi/>
8. For additional background, see [Q219 : Rabbinical Avoidance of Jesus](#)^d.
9. [Ref-0934](#), 890-891
10. [Ref-0126](#), 166
11. “They assembled and planned their assault on the church, putting themselves at the disposal of the devil to carry out his will. They may have claimed to be the assembly of the Lord . . . , but in heaven’s eyes these people were not true Jews, but emissaries of the prime adversary of God and His people, the devil or Satan.”¹⁰

Sources:

- Acts 13:40-45** Unless indicated otherwise, all Scripture references are from the *New King James Version*, copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.
- Ref-0126** Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation_1-7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1992). ISBN:[0-8024-9265-7](#)^e.
- Ref-0185** Merrill F. Unger, R. K. Harrison and Howard Frederic Vos, *New Unger’s Bible Dictionary* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1988).
- Ref-0617** James Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages With Semantic Domains : Greek (New Testament)*, electronic ed. (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997).
- Ref-0618** James Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages With Semantic Domains : Hebrew (Old Testament)*, electronic ed. (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997).
- Ref-0934** Adele Berlin, Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Jewish Study Bible* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004). ISBN:[0-19-529751-2](#)^f.

Links Mentioned Above

- a - See http://www.spiritandtruth.org/teaching/Acts_by_Tony_Garland/44_Acts_13_40-45/index.htm.
- b - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org/id/tg.htm>.
- c - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org>.
- d - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org/questions/219.htm>.
- e - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org/id/isbn.htm?0-8024-9265-7>.
- f - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org/id/isbn.htm?0-19-529751-2>.