

A People for His Name

Isaiah 43:1–21, Acts 15:12–21

When God saves a person, he doesn't leave him to flounder alone by himself; he grafts him into his covenant people, his church. The apostle James refers to this in our New Testament text this morning when he says, "Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name." Notice his reference to "a people." God visits the Gentiles to take out of them "a people"—not myriads of solitary, isolated individuals. Americans value rugged individualism, so it may be hard for us to grasp this. So let me state this again. James states that God's purpose in extending his grace to the Gentiles was "to take out of them *a people* for His name." God's purpose in saving the Gentiles was to incorporate them into the church of Jesus Christ, to graft them into his covenant people. They who all their lives had dwelt in the wilderness of unbelief would now be ushered into the company of the church and the spiritual presence of the second Person of the Holy Trinity—Jesus, the divinely-appointed mediator between God and man. So the church was to be a *people*—singular.

Our Old Testament text uses the same language. You may want to flip back to Isaiah 43 for a moment. The section we read before the sermon concludes with God declaring, "*This people* have I formed for myself; they shall show forth my praise" (Isa. 43:21 KJV). Notice the exact language, for it is carefully stated and very expressive of the dynamic that exists within the visible church. "This people" is singular—a singular people, one church. On the other hand, the verb "they shall show forth" is plural. Here, as in the New Testament, is "one body with many members." What is the spiritual lesson? This: by God's grace we, individual saints, have been incorporated into the people of God, the covenant people. Our purpose as the church is to show forth the praise of the God who formed us for himself. As Peter would express it in his epistle, "Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, *a peculiar people*; that ye should show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light" (1 Pet. 2:9). Look at the way this singular people is described in our Old Testament text: "Israel," "Jacob," "*my sons*," "*my daughters*," "my witnesses," "my servants," "my chosen," "my people." Notice the repetition of the word "my." Out of all the nations of the world God takes a people and calls them his own—"my people"—not because of their deserving, but because of his divine mercy. All glory be to God! No one of us deserve mercy; we all were equally undeserving, but God formed us into his people. The church is God's special people. Let us consider three points this morning: a people, a tabernacle, a witness; first,

1. A people

Acts 15 is the account of the Jerusalem Council. The Judaizers had been teaching that it was necessary for Gentile converts to be circumcised and keep

Moses' ceremonial law. A council was called to debate the matter from the Scriptures and ascertain the mind of God. This church council gave a pattern for all church councils. Whether a major council of the whole church worldwide—such as the council of Nicaea or the council of Ephesus in ancient times—or a regional presbytery meeting such as the Presbytery of Michigan and Ontario two days ago, the purpose of all church councils is to ascertain the mind of God from the Holy Scriptures. Church councils have no warrant to promulgate doctrine on their own authority. They must not teach anything that is not explicitly taught in Holy Scripture or properly deduced from Holy Scripture. At the Jerusalem Council the apostle Peter gave a concise but eloquent speech arguing that since God had poured out his Holy Spirit on the Gentiles, as well as the Jews, purifying their hearts by faith, the only requirement for Gentiles seeking admittance to the church was faith in Christ alone. Jews and Gentiles both are saved through the grace of Christ—not faith *plus* circumcision and lawkeeping, or faith *plus* anything else.

After the apostle Peter was finished speaking, the freshly-returned missionaries Paul and Barnabas reported on their ministry in Asia Minor, and particularly on the “miracles and wonders that God had worked through them among the Gentiles.” Here, the intrepid missionaries reported to the whole church, recounting for the brethren how God had made Bar-Jesus, advisor to the Roman proconsul Sergius Paulus, suddenly blind—temporarily unable to see the light of the sun—because he had defied the God of heaven in seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith. There were other miracles as well. As the missionary duo ministered in the city of Iconium, God had borne witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands. Again in Lystra there was a crippled man, who had been in that pitiable condition from his mother's womb and had never walked, who listened attentively to Paul's preaching. When Paul saw that the man had faith to be healed, he commanded in a loud voice, “Stand up straight on your feet!” Instantly, the man leaped up and walked—a clear miracle. Later, when the crowds turned against Paul, they stoned him with stones, so that he appeared dead. After they dragged his corpse out of the city and left him for dead, the new disciples gathered around him and prayed for a miracle, and a miracle was granted: he “rose up”—the original indicates that he *stood up on his feet*—walked back into town, and the next day left with Barnabas for Derbe. Surely this was a heaven-sent miracle, for men and women who have experienced such severe trauma ordinarily need days and weeks to recover and regain the use of their limbs. We cannot rule out the possibility that Paul had also suffered trauma to the head, which well could have left him totally paralyzed and turned him into a virtual vegetable. My own father—also named Paul—six weeks before his sixty-fifth birthday was beaten on the head with a pipe in an alley in Detroit and left for dead. He suffered swelling and bleeding in his brain which robbed him of short-term memory and left him

unable to speak for a very long time. For the next five years, till the day of his death, he could not care for himself and was totally dependent on my mother. Miraculously, in the apostle Paul's case he fully recovered and became the great intellect and theologian of the first century, giving us books such as Romans, a masterpiece of logic and a veritable systematic theology, and Galatians, a cogent defense of the gospel. Paul's recovery was a miracle.

One might ask, why all this emphasis on miracles? Is there something wrong with twenty-first century preaching, where we don't see such dramatic miracles happening? These are good questions. But the answer is simple—here were two missionaries who walked on foot for many miles, carrying all their worldly possessions. We are used to seeing missionaries preaching from their Bibles. But the Bibles of Paul and Barnabas's time were huge handwritten scrolls written on long sheets of parchment or papyrus—definitely not portable. Paul and Barnabas lived in an oral culture and had hidden God's word in their hearts—the best place for the word to be! Moreover, at the time of their ministry the Bible was still incomplete. As Paul would later write to Timothy, “from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. . . . I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ . . . Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine” (2 Tim. 3:15, 4:1–2). Or as Peter would write, “We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed . . .” (2 Pet. 1:19). The “holy Scriptures” and the “more sure word of prophecy” to which the apostles referred was the Holy Bible. But the canon of Scripture was still incomplete at the time of Paul's missionary journeys, so miracles were necessary to demonstrate the preacher's apostolic authority.

Christians are supposed to hide God's word in their hearts and be living epistles, “known and read by all men” (2 Cor. 3:2). The preacher of Christ in our day doesn't need to do miracles to validate his ministry; his job is to rightly divide the word of truth which God has sent forth, and which will not return to him void, but will accomplish the purpose for which he sent it.

After Paul and Barnabas finished declaring the many miracles and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles, the room at the Jerusalem Council was abuzz. The church rejoiced to hear how God had brought the Gentiles to faith. But when the assembly grew silent, the apostle James got up to give a speech: “Men and brethren, listen to me: Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name. And with this the words of the prophets agree.” Here was his thesis: God had visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for his name. But James not only made an assertion, he backed it up from Scripture. He continued: “And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written . . .” Remember that the purpose of church councils is to

ascertain the mind of God from the Holy Scriptures? If you pay close attention to what is going on here, you will see what I mean. Here were Peter, Paul and James—apostles all—debating a vexing question that was dividing the church. The three of them could have gotten together, sought the mind of God and declared God’s will with divine authority. The church would have been duty-bound to receive it. The apostles’ decision would have been as authoritative as the New Testament books of 1 Corinthians, 1 Peter or James. But they didn’t do this! Instead, they convened a church council—what we call the Jerusalem Council—and the apostles and elders together searched the Scriptures and determined the mind of God. This is what church councils are supposed to do: search the Scriptures and determine the mind of God.

But notice once again the point of James’s argument: “Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them *a people* for His name.” God would take out of the Gentiles a people for his name. The new converts would be incorporated into various congregations of the visible church. Elders chosen by upraised hand would be ordained as shepherds guiding their congregations. The new converts would not be like TV viewers sitting in their homes and tuning in to programs that they personally liked, or like consumers choosing the products they personally wanted to buy. Rather, they would be gathered into worshiping congregations of God’s people and join with the whole church in showing forth God’s praise.

This was James’s thesis, but he had to prove that this was not just his personal opinion. Was this really the teaching of Scripture? Yes! He went on to argue that “with this the words of the prophets agree.” This brings us to our second point,

2. A tabernacle

James cites Amos 9:11–12, quoting it thusly: “After this I will return and will rebuild the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will set it up.” The text quoted by James refers to “the tabernacle of David”—a clear reference to Old Testament Judaism. In the Hebrew the word for “tabernacle” is the same word used for the rude hut constructed by the prophet Jonah when he sat outside Nineveh to wait for its destruction. This “hut” is a fitting symbol for what had happened to David’s monarchy by the time of the first century. As one commentator observes, “If the family of David no longer dwells in a palace, but in a miserable fallen hut, its regal sway must have come to an end.”¹ Indeed, in the first century, Israel had lost its monarchy and was under the domination of the despised Romans.

But Amos foresees a day when the miserable, fallen hut of Israel would be built up *spiritually*. Though the kingdom of Israel had fallen on hard times, *spiritual*

¹ Keil and Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament*, <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/amos/9-11.htm>

Israel—the believing remnant, the church of Jesus Christ—would be built up. Christ would build his church, and the gates of hell would not be able to prevail against it. He would empower the apostles’ preaching such that Gentiles would be called to faith and incorporated into the church.

James cites God’s word to Amos: “I will return and will rebuild the *tabernacle* of David, which has fallen down.” In the little suburb where I went to church as a boy there were three Baptist churches within a single mile along I-75: Calvary Baptist, First Baptist and Tabernacle Baptist. The name “Tabernacle Baptist” is still popular; a quick internet search identifies perhaps a half-dozen such churches in Michigan, including Grand Rapids, Battle Creek, Detroit, Saginaw. But what was the tabernacle? It was the portable sanctuary in which God dwelt among the people of Israel in the desert. Later, it was set up in various locations in the land of Canaan. The tabernacle served as a visible reminder of God’s presence among his people. The God of heaven “tabernacled” among men. Later, John would write in his gospel, “the Word became flesh and *dwelt* among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). The word for “dwelt” is literally “tabernacled.” The God of heaven—the true and living God, the Creator, the God who redeemed his people in the person of Christ—became man and dwelt among his people. This is the meaning of the word *tabernacle*. The church is special because God dwells here. This can be said of no other human institution. The church is the special dwelling place of God on earth. The church is a tabernacle, the special dwelling place of God.

We ought to recognize God’s special presence in the church. The church is qualitatively different from every other human gathering. In the church, Christ ought to get all the honor. Nothing that we do ought to distract from Christ. The church is not the place to honor anyone else other than the Lord Christ. Furthermore, we, his people, ought to *behave* in the church. Paul wrote, “that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15). The church is not a playground; it is a place of worship. Our behavior in the company of God’s people should never distract from Christ. *Christ* must get all the attention. The church is a *people*, and a *tabernacle*; thirdly, it is

3. A witness

God promises, “I will rebuild the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down.” Why does he do this? Notice the purpose clause; it is very important. “So that the *rest of mankind* may seek the Lord, even all the *Gentiles* who are called by My name, says the Lord who does all these things.” God’s plan all along was to reveal himself to the Jews, so that the Jews, in turn, would be a witness to the Gentiles. The gospel is the Good News—good news for all mankind. The good news begins with bad news: the whole human race fell in Adam. We are sinners. We are

spiritually dead—dead in trespasses and sins. Our natural inclination is to sin. All of us sin. We are born sinners, and from birth our whole focus is on ourselves; from birth we are idolaters. From the time we first begin to act, we assert ourselves—*our* needs, *our* wants, *our* desires. God’s law requires that we love God supremely and seek his glory at all times. We are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind and all our strength. Whatever we do, we are to do it to the glory of God. As children we throw temper tantrums. We assert: “It has to be done *my* way!” We do not love our neighbor, and we do not love the God who created us. In our minds, the only person who matters is ourself. If it were not for the Bible, if it were not for the example of Christ, we would maintain that such behavior is normal. Only the fittest survive—it’s every man for himself. If I don’t look out for myself, no one will. I’ve got to live—I’ve got to live for myself. But the whole premise of such thinking is a lie.

The gospel reveals that God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself. Way back in eternity past the God of heaven determined to create mankind and save a people for himself—a people who would be his worshipers and sing his praises eternally. The God who is, exists in three Persons—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Father *conceived* the plan of salvation, the Son *executed* the plan of salvation, and the Spirit *applies* the plan of salvation. The Father sent his Son into the world. The Son accepted the assignment and voluntarily came into the world to save sinners. The Father and the Son sent the Holy Spirit to regenerate his people by faith and bring them into the fellowship of the Triune God. God revealed himself progressively, not all at once. The Bible is the story of that progressive revelation. God chose Abraham the Hebrew. He called him out of Ur of the Chaldees. He said, “Get out of your country, from your family and from your father’s house, to a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:1–3). Right from the beginning it was God’s intention that the knowledge of himself that he revealed to Abraham the Hebrew would be made known to all the families of the earth—that is, to the Gentiles. Israel was not to keep the knowledge of the true God and his gospel to itself; it was a message that should be shared with the world. Israel was to be God’s witnesses to the ends of the earth.

Sadly, Israel failed. Israel kept the knowledge of God to itself. Israel took pride in its ethnicity, and in its special relationship to God. It took pride in its circumcision, its ceremonies, its special privileges, its uniqueness, and it did not want to share that with the nations. Israel had the light; it was content to let the nations walk in darkness. But God would not give up his plan. With the coming of Christ he would rebuild the fallen tabernacle of David which lay in ruins. He

would set it up. The Jews would lose their unique status. The day came when Christ would go out of the temple for the last time, when he would say, “See! Your house is left to you desolate; for I say to you, you shall see Me no more till you say, ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!’ ” When Christ would *go out* and *depart* from the temple,² when he would establish a new people of God from the ruins of the old. When he would say, “I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” The church today fulfills God’s purpose of old. The church is to be a witness, showing forth God’s salvation to the ends of the earth.

The gospel is good news—the best news anyone could ever hear. It is your privilege, O church of Jesus Christ, to share this gospel. Share it with your family, share it with your friends. Share it with your neighbors and with people you meet on the street. Invite people into your homes. Show them hospitality. Show them the love of Christ. Tell them about Christ. Here is the Savior of the nations, the Savior of all people. Here is the One who died to save his people, the One who came to earth to bring us to heaven.

The church is a *people*, a *tabernacle*, a *witness*. May it ever be! Amen.

² Matt. 23:8–24:1