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**When the Main Thing is Missing...**  
**Acts 13:14-52**

When the main thing is missing...what tends to come off is always a bit superficial. Go to the concert of our favorite singer and finally after a half hour delay you are told that the lead singer is sick and won't be performing tonight. A back up group tries its best to fill in but it's not even close to being the same thing. Ever gone to a birthday party and the guest of honor doesn't show up? People are looking around at each other trying to make the best of it but in the back of their minds they ask "so what's the point here?" It's like admiring a beautiful car that is straight and dent free, polished and shining. The interior upholstery is in mint condition. But you step in and turn the key and absolutely nothing happens. Not even a click, click. So you open the hood and look in to discover a large empty space. There is no engine. Simply not there. What's the point? It may look good from the outside but if the main thing is missing...its just a decoration.

I think we often leave the main thing out of our lives. I do it without even thinking about it. I do it because most of the world around me leaves out the main thing. We who are believers ought to be the ones who keep the main thing in the frontal lobes of our minds, but we don't. We miss it. We don't understand. We have become conditioned to ignore the presence and influence of the main thing and so we come to church and act like we really do know what the main thing is but then we live the rest of the week like practical atheists not really believing that the main thing in all of history, all of the world, all of our homes and life and work and school is God. Sadly, I think there are pastors who have forgotten what the main thing is in their preaching and sermons get reduced to a moralistic message that seeks not to offend or disturb and

in their efforts to be sensitive to the seeker they point them to a message that is gospel light. Tastes great but its less filling and certainly unsatisfying. We foolishly think at times that we are the main course and God is a side dish. We live in a age that does not believe that God is the main thing of life. He is not the napkin to wipe our stuffed mouths with. He is not the appetizer of coconut fried shrimp. He is not the small dinner salad kept conveniently separate from the meal sized plate. Folks God is the main meal. He is the meat and potatoes of life. He is all satisfying, all fulfilling and anything less is simply not worth talking about. People outside of the church don't get it and certainly wont get it if we in the church never bother to discuss events that are happening and deal with their most important connection. Namely their connections with God and His purposes. When the main thing is missing then one can only be superficial at best whatever it is.

Certainly we have grown to expect our communications and media and education systems to be superficial because they fail to deal with their connections to God and His purposes. Most news reports are superficial because they blatantly ignore any connection to God and His purposes. History books we read are almost all centered on men. Men who have done great or terrible deeds. Men like Hitler and George Washington, Winston Churchill, Benjamin Franklin. Men with charisma who left their mark on the world. But the books tend to leave out the greatest player in history, in fact they tend to leave out the main thing. And when that main thing is left out, it lacks the focus, the purpose, the drive and motivation, the impact. That it should. I think we have missed it that God is the main thing today and it shows because we don't live like it. I think this problem is not new and they missed it back in the New Testament times as well.

Turn to Acts 13. Paul the apostle preaches his first recorded sermon here. As I read it I want you to be listening for something. You will notice it is not a self-help feel good sermon that is trying to help out

man. This sermon goes out of its way to present history with God being the main thing, the prime mover and influencer in history. For the believer, this must be true that we affirm God's work in history. For most of us, it seems easy for us to see God at work in ancient history past. But folks that same God is at work right now in present history. We need to open our eyes to God at work and join His program or we will simply miss the main thing.

Paul and Barnabas are on the first missionary journey. They left from Antioch and sailed 130 miles to the island of Cyprus they preached the word of God. The governor of the entire Island came to belief in Jesus. The trip was not without conflict and difficulty as we know Paul became ill and John Mark lost heart and returned back home. Paul and Barnabas continue up into the mountainous region of another town called Antioch but one in the Psiaidian region, Bible calls it Psidian Antioch. As was their God directed strategy, they went to the Jews first. Best place to find Jewish people who are spiritually interested is the Synagogues. So we find that they have gone into the Jewish synagogue and sat down in a pew. On a normal Sabbath it was customary to have two readings of scripture one from the law and one from the prophets. After that the people attending were invited to give extemporaneous expositions of what was read. Paul didn't come rushing in with his gospel guns blazing. He went in sat down until he was invited to stand and speak. And so he took up this opportunity and preached about the main mover of history. I will READ what is probably a condensed version of Paul's sermon Acts 13;14-41.(READ)

Did you notice anything in Paul's sermon that was presented as a main thing? In a word...God. I cor 15:1-3 Paul wrote, "Now I make known to you the gospel which I preached...by which you are saved. I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures and that He was buried and that He was raised on the third day." Paul is very clear, simple direct message that is

both good and news to the ears of the listener. Here are the terms in which I preached to you.” No ear tickling. No clever word choice and fancy metaphors. Straight up the good news. Here is history written with God as the main thing. God at work in history to bring salvation to mankind. Paul reminds the people listening in the synagogue that day in Psidian Antioch that God is behind all of history and that implies God must be involved in all the present history in the making as well.

v.17 God chose our fathers. God made them great even during a difficult stay in Egypt. At His providential timing it was God who led them out of Egypt. V18 In the desert it was God who put up with them and all their whining and complaining. I'm glad my God is patient and puts up with me in my desert wanderings. V.19 God fights on my side. He did it when destroying the seven nations in Canaan land. He gave them land. V.20 He gave them judges. V.21 He gave them kings the most famous was a guy who was far from perfect but had a heart for God. He understood what God was doing in the world, namely that God would raise up one of his offspring. A messiah. God came to earth in the form of a man. Holy Spirit implanted in Mary's womb a divine seed. God in the flesh...a Savior who is Jesus. V23 God did all this. John predicted it. King David even predicted it in His song writing. Acts 13:35 quotes David's words in Psalm 16. It can't be referring to David himself because we know that he died and his body underwent decay. But David understood what God was going to do and points to the One whom God would never allow to die and whose body would never undergo decay. One whom God would raise up and a stamp of God's approval would prove this One whom salvation comes to the people of the world. Paul preaches the people, the eyewitnesses have seen what God has done in Jesus. He fulfilled the promised salvation v.33. This is really good news.

Jewish leaders missed it. They failed to see what God was doing down through history. They instead made themselves the main thing. They were all about money and power and control. They were stuck on

what they had to do. They were consumed with making sure other people stuck to their lists of does and don't to get right with God. They didn't have God heart desires at the center of their thoughts and so they missed it. They missed it badly. V27 "recognizing neither Him nor the utterances of the prophets which are read every Sabbath." They were so consumed with themselves they simply missed it. Even though the truth of the word was read every Sabbath day, they didn't even understand their own Bible. And they so failed to keep God the main thing in their life that when God did come along and do something incredible, not only did they miss it. If they were prone to that happening to them...then so are we. We can get so caught up in our stuff, even things that looks good and churchy and religious that we miss God and forget that He is the main thing. I have watched churches get so involved and caught up in building programs that they forget who is the main thing. I have seen people so intent on building up their ministry that it becomes their ministry and they leave out the main thing and God is relegated to an appetizer, a side dish instead of the main thing. When we get so caught up in our opinions, our ideas, our control, our rights and our power we miss can miss what God is doing. God did something powerful in Jesus Christ and the Pharisees totally missed it. In fact they went so far as to fight against it and beat it and ended up killing God's son and nailing him to a tree.

I am stuck by this first recorded sermon by Paul that he keeps God the main thing of His sermon. In doing so he challenges the people who hear it to place God as the main thing in their life. For if God is not the main thing, then everything else becomes superficial and devoid of meaning. The message that we are entrusted with is both good and it is news and that good news must remain centered on God. Don't miss it.

So Paul lays it all out. God did all this. So we have to ask ourselves, am I going to be with God on this or fight against him? Am I going embrace what God has done in Jesus? This is it. Key verse in 38.

“Through him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through Him everyone who believes is freed from all things, from which you could not be freed through the law of Moses.”

Now we are pretty accustomed to hearing things like that. Some of us have heard that so often for so long that it has become so much Christian elevator music. But for the original listeners what Paul has just preached is a shocking statement. It shattered their thinking. Here were men who honored the Law of Moses. They worked very hard to follow the 10 commandments and they viewed the Law as some of the greatest words God had ever given to men. They were trying their best to obey them but realized they often failed...but still they thought that the way to God was to obey the ten commandments. To do good. To do the works for God. Try your best to be good and then maybe you could squeeze a smile out of God. But now Paul comes along and stand up in the middle of their church service and declares that just being good will never be enough to make it. They will never find acceptance from God in that way. I cannot be accepted by God on the basis of being good. What that does is place me back in the position of it being all up to me. If my position before God is based on my ability or inability to be good then I've just made me the main thing...and not God the main thing. The law, the ten commandments don't help acceptance a bit, because no matter how hard I try, I can't do it. The law serves to expose my inability and condemns me. It exposes my need for a savior and that is what the gospel is given.

Paul is preaching news to them that is good because He tells them that God has found a way to accept me even though I'm not good enough in myself. And that way is through Jesus Christ. Forgiveness of sins brings freedom v.38-39. That word freedom is the same word used elsewhere for justification. Paul's book of Romans so often preaches justification by faith.

What does it mean to be justified? Certainly it means that our sins are forgiven by God, but it also means a lot more than that. It means that God forgives us in such a way that His holiness, honor and justice and integrity are still kept pure. If my sins were forgiven just because I came and asked God to forgive because he is full of grace and loving...which He is...but if that was all God's forgiveness were based on, it would terribly soil God's justice and honor and purity if he doled out forgiveness without justice being fulfilled. So God had to find a way that preserves His honor and righteousness and at the same time is freed up to lavish on us His love and grace and mercy. God found that way through Jesus. He laid all the guilt and sin on his very own son Jesus. It's at the cross we find hope and love and peace. But God looks down at the cross and sees justice, honor, purity and righteousness. For no one at the cross can point a finger at God and say, "You let off those people who are guilty." We get pretty excited when we recognize an injustice. One child gets an extra piece of candy. The guy speeding past you gets away and you are pulled over for the traffic ticket. Just sit and watch a football game with me. When those refs miss a bad call I rise up with a sense of Justice. Make it right! God made it right ultimately in Jesus on the cross and even though we see great injustice on this earth God the righteous judge will one day make it perfectly right. It may not be righted until the judgment seat...but justice will be served.

To all who believe in Jesus there is forgiveness of sins. I then can be justified and freed from sin. God's love is then free to pour out onto me. I'm accepted fully. That love can then begin to heal all my hurts and pains and wounds. God did all that for me.

The fruit of God's forgiveness is freedom. If the Son shall set you free you shall be free indeed. Freedom is the measure of the power of the gospel. Have you been freed? Has the word of forgiveness liberated you from fear? Guilt? The past? So that we can love others well? So that we can love Him as we ought to? So many of us have constructed prisons of

our own making. We are haunted by past hurts. We think we can never be good enough. We think we could never do enough to deserve the acceptance of God. When we do that we have failed to make God our center focus and main thing in our life. We so long for His approval and yet we find that freedom when we find God. When we lose sight of God we lose sight of freedom. When we keep the main thing the main thing. When we keep God at the center and focus of our lives and believe that God's plan to bring us freedom centers around what God has done granting us forgiveness through Jesus then we are full, satisfied. God has found a way to love me by virtue of nothing I have done but by what Christ has done for me. Point of decision. Do I believe and accept that and live in the freedom of the love or do I reject it and turn away? Look at v. 41 If I reject then I put myself in serious danger.

Main point of Paul's sermon? Keep God the main thing. And God plan of salvation for us is in Jesus. Its not about me doing more good things. Its receiving forgiveness in Jesus and then experience the fruit of forgiveness, the freedom God offers. Paul has opened up the kitchen door in this sermon to spill out the aroma of spiritual food. Are you hungry or full? If your hungry for the freedom and forgiveness the God has to offer in Christ. Here it is. By faith accept the truth. Are you full? Have you already received that forgiveness and are enjoying its fruit of freedom? Then show others that the goods news is good-news.

Paul and Barnabus preach this gospel news and the people are hungry to hear more. V42 the people beg them to come back the next week and tell them more on the next Sabbath. V.44 Next Sabbath nearly the whole town shows up to hear the word of God. The Jewish leaders saw the crowds that came, they get number envy and start to criticize and repudiate and rip on them, all because they see the numbers as a threat to their power and position and thinking.

v.47 Paul and Barnabus say, "I gave you Jews the first shot at hearing the gospel. That's the way the Master wanted us to serve it up.

Jews were to be a light to the rest of the world as those who followed God, but if you are going to reject the good news message then we are going to take it to those people who are ready to listen. For salvation is not exclusive to a certain group of people or nationality or skin color. God has elected, appointed chosen as many as He pleases. V48.

v.50 the Jews didn't like it. The prominent women hackles were raised. The leading men of the city they drove Paul and Barnabus out of their area. I was struck when I read this that the crowds of people are so fickle, just a week earlier they turned out in droves to listen to their preaching and now they are getting run out of town on a rail. It reminded me of Jesus. One week he is riding into Jerusalem before the cheering masses people shouting Halleluiah , God save us. Salvation has come. Laying coats and palm leaves to cushion his way. And then the very next week probably many of the same people shouting in the courthouse square. Let him be crucified. Kill him.

Faith lesson for us here in the context of keeping God the main thing. Making sure God is the main thing in our life ought to affect the entire way we view the events or life. Every circumstance in life ought orbit around the ever present sun of God presence. Here in this ministry context we see that Paul and Barnabus are not allowing people to knock them off course. The circumstances do not cause them to fear that God has somehow fumbled the ball or tripped up. When I keep God the main thing and it will help me on task whether or not my life or ministry looks like success or failure. One week the whole town is turning out to listen to Paul and Barnabus. Wow. This must really be the Lord moving in power! Maybe...I think the big numbers were largely curious folks interested in hearing something shocking and new. Churches may draw big numbers...but that doesn't mean they are all there with a spiritual hunger for following God. We may have a big beautiful building but that doesn't mean that our church is full of health and loving each other and bearing the fruit of righteousness. Healthy things will grow. God wants

our church to grow and multiply. I know that...I just want us to realize whether God blesses us in growth or not, we must keep God the main thing. It must be about Him. The danger of failure is obvious. If things appear to be going poorly. If budget isn't being met. If attendance is dropping off. If you are rebuffed by a co-worker. If I get laughed at by a family member for talking about Jesus. Ridiculed because I walk out of a movie that flaunts evil. Snickered at because I lose business do to my honesty and integrity in business. You might be tempted to thinking that God doesn't care and has turned his back on you. No. God does not stop working. He hasn't fallen asleep even when difficult times come into you life. God is still the main thing in the apparent success and apparent failures of our life. It is possible to experience the filling of the Spirit and the joy that is brings whether life is bustling with success or your getting rocked out of town. V.52 They were run out of town fleeing for their lives and yet continually filled with joy and the Holy Spirit."

How were they able to do that? I am so much more able to do that when I affirm God as the main thing, the prime mover of my life, and keep the main thing the main thing. How do we do that when it's so easy for us to practically forget about God when we walk out of church? We must make sure that we are aware of how God intersects every aspect of our lives. The cynic might say "Oh that's just religion. You can't expect me to include God in everything I do. Its not religion. Its reality. It is seeing and believing that God is the main actor in the events, all the events of life. He made it all. He owns it all. He works in it all and guides it all. Without God there is not purpose to life. Unless you assume a God, the question of life's purpose is meaningless, superficial.

We must begin to see everything in relation to God. A young boy may ask, "How do I do that?" What are the purposes of God behind me learning math, or English or grammar or spelling? Can there be Christian spelling? How can I think in such a way that God remains the main thing in my spelling? Say a boy says "What should I learn to spell

words the ways everyone else does?” That seems like a whole lot of work? Why can’t I just spell words the way I want to?” The one who has placed God as the main thing in his life would answer. “Well, if you spell your own way, you won’t be able to communicate as well with others and it will put barriers in the way of having your ideas understood and accepted. The boy then responds, “Why should I care about having my ideas accepted?” Now here is where the divergence takes place between the one taking God into account and the one leaving him out. Most of the world would respond by saying “if you are not able to communicate, you won’t succeed in business, you won’t make as much money, you won’t be able to interact relationally. Your self-esteem will suffer. That’s all at the superficial level because it leaves out the reality of God the main thing.

This is an answer for those who recognize and live out God as the main thing. “You should care about communicating first because you are created in the image of God and God is the great communicator. Second, you have something incredibly important to communicate regarding the truth about God and what He has done in Jesus. God is a God of order and beauty, not chaos or anarchy and not even spelling anarchy.

This is not a sermon about spelling, it’s a sermon about keeping God the main thing in my life. Here is my practical challenge for you this week. Think of one activity you do during the week. However, mundane; cooking dinner; taking out garbage, balancing the check book, paying bills, driving the kids to school, playing a soccer game. Watching a football game on TV. Here’s your assignment. I want you to think through how to take God into account in the midst of doing that activity. I want to think through how I am going to keep God the main thing even in the most mundane of activities. At dinner table each night I want you to present an activity and trace how God is the main thing in that event for those who are Christian. If you live alone call a friend and share your thoughts. Dad’s you’re the spiritual leader in the home, take the lead. One a night for the whole week, then I want to hear some of them next

Sunday. For when the main thing is missing...life can get pretty superficial.